

BEST

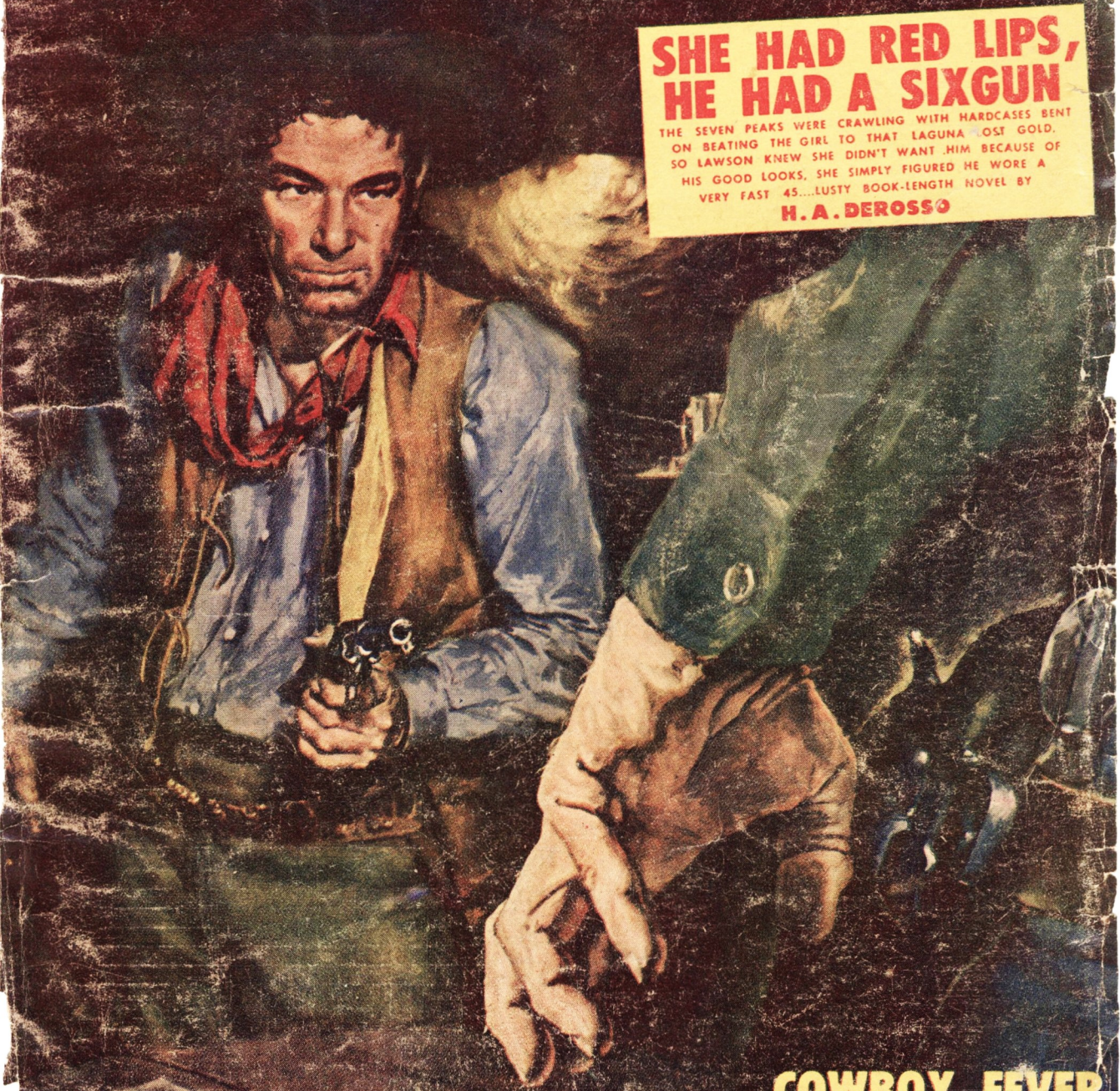
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WESTERN

**SHE HAD RED LIPS,
HE HAD A SIXGUN**
THE SEVEN PEAKS WERE CRAWLING WITH HARCASSES BENT
ON BEATING THE GIRL TO THAT LAGUNA LOST GOLD.
SO LAWSON KNEW SHE DIDN'T WANT HIM BECAUSE OF
HIS GOOD LOOKS, SHE SIMPLY FIGURED HE WORE A
VERY FAST 45...LUSTY BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL BY
H.A. DEROSSO



THE BEST OF THE WEST
NOVELS...NOVELETS...SHORT STORIES

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VOL.
5
NO.
6**BEST
WESTERN**JUNE
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FEATURING THE BEST WESTERN NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

★ ★ LUSTY BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★

SHE HAD RED LIPS, HE HAD A SIX-GUN 4

by H. A. DeRosso

He was a gunfighter and he could never run away from that and gunfighters had a way of dying at the end of a gun. It was that, ironically, the girl liked about him, he was sure — the only thing she liked about him . . .

★ ★ 2 GREAT NOVELETS ★ ★

COWBOY FEVER S. Omar Barker 44

The kid wasn't loco, he just craved the wild, free life of the open range

THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW William Vance 54

No more owlhoot for him, Bud wrote, no-siree. But Mel winced anyway, because his rambunctious kid brother had vowed that two or three times before

★ ★ 4 THRILLING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

THE TOWNTAMERS John Lumsden 35

Bums, trail bums, that's all they were, but just because they could shoot a gun, everybody made heroes of them

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The sheriff calculated that Jim's Winchester was empty—but the fact was that Jim still had one shot left in the rifle

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★ ★ ALL-TIME GREAT EPIC OF THE WEST ★ ★

THE MAN-BREAKER Wayne D. Overholser 72

Trouble was Claney's business, but this Ute Springs ruckus bore the brand of more than boomtown hate and fury. For Claney knew the bushwhack patterns that trouble took, and plain cold courage like he saw in the pretty cowgirl from Durango would never stand up here

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SHE HAD RED LIPS, HE HAD A SIX-GUN

CHAPTER

1

"The Name Is Steve Lawson"

HE RODE out of Stan Rafael at sunrise and headed toward the mountains which were called the Seven Peaks. He had never been in them nor did he know or care what lay beyond them. Life was that simple and aimless for him.

He rode a blaze-faced, white-stockinged bay and he sat in the saddle

with the ease and grace of a born horseman. All that he possessed in the world lay in the roll tied to the cantle of his saddle. He had no roots and no hope of ever sinking any. He had only a talent with a gun and it was knowledge of this that had turned him, of late, so bitter.

From what he could see of the mountains, they would be desolate and barren, but this did not interest nor deter him. He was accustomed to solitude and though he did not like it, he still welcomed it. For in solitude there was no greed and hate, no scheming and conniving, no gunsmoke and death.

He was a lonely man but, unlike most such, he was not a dreamer. Once he'd had dreams but that had been in the long and ancient past while the illusions of the world still blinded him. Then his eyes had opened. He saw ruthlessness and brutality and became a part of these himself.

So the dreams had shattered. Only a tormenting whisper of their memory remained...

He was twenty-seven years old but he felt as though he had lived three

He was a gunfighter and he could never run away from that and gunfighters had a way of dying at the end of a gun. It was what, ironically, the girl liked about him, he was sure — the only thing she liked about him . . .



THE SEVEN PEAKS WERE CRAWLING WITH HARD-CASES BENT ON BEATING THE GIRL TO THAT LAGUNA LOST GOLD, SO LAWSON KNEW SHE DIDN'T WANT HIM BECAUSE OF HIS GOOD LOOKS — SHE SIMPLY FIGURED HE WORE A VERY FAST .45 — LUSTY BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL by H. A. DeROSSO

He waited till all of them had passed the pine. Then he jumped the bay out behind them, his .44 leveled and ready.



times that long. He was tired, not of living but of a way of life. It was his inability to change this that angered and embittered him.

He was an inch short of six feet. His shoulders were wide and powerful but his waist and hips were slim. Years in the saddle had done this and had left his legs slightly bowed. The skin of his face was burned a dark brown by wind and sun. The color of his eyes verged on green. They looked cold and wary as if he were perpetually on the alert, and he was actually, for he rather expected to die someday from a bullet in the back. His nose was long and aquiline. The shape of his mouth indicated that he seldom smiled.

The hat on his head was a black, high-crowned stetson with a crease in the front and the brim curled up at the sides. He left his flannel-lined denim jacket unbuttoned, and under this he wore a black, double-breasted shirt. His trousers were brown, the legs tucked into high-topped plain black boots. His spurs were plain steel affairs with small rowels. And around his waist he wore a shell belt filled with .44's and in the holster at his hip rode a black-handled Colt Frontier sixshooter with a seven-and-a-half inch barrel. This and the Winchester in the saddle boot under his leg were the tools of his trade.

His name was Steve Lawson...

On a rise of ground he reined in the bay to rest the animal. As was his custom he took this opportunity to study his backtrail. He hooked a leg about the saddlehorn and took out the makin's and while he built a smoke his glance scanned the country.

His eyes narrowed when they spied the riders in the distance. There were two horsemen and a third animal which was apparently a pack horse. They seemed to be following in his wake and Lawson's eyes narrowed still more. He finished rolling the cigarette and popped it in his mouth and scratched a match to the tip.

The riders came on.

HE THOUGHT of the men he had killed and the enemies he had made and how sure he was of the way he would die. For an instant his mind

wondered if this would be it but the riders were too open and direct in their approach. They were heading for him but hostility did not seem to be their intent.

He sat and smoked and waited. He felt a little troubled for he had wanted to be alone. People meant conflict and conflict for Lawson meant violence and death. So he watched and waited while a small dislike slowly built up in him.

As the riders started up the rise, Lawson took his leg from around the saddlehorn and fitted his foot carefully in the stirrup. Without his being aware of its doing so, his right hand loosened the .44 in leather. Then he went on waiting, all wary now.

Not until the riders were quite close did Lawson see that one of them was a girl. This gave him a small start. She was dressed in men's clothing and it was not until she was near enough for him to make out her hair done up in a bun on the back of her neck that he knew this was a woman. On the moment, a sense of uneasiness passed over Lawson. He could not understand why.

The two reined in their mounts and sat their saddles, staring at Lawson. There was something more than passing interest in their glances. The looks were too studied, too frankly appraising to be mere curiosity. They seemed to be trying to stare into the depths of his soul.

This interpretation irritated Lawson. A small flare of resentment burned in him but he overlooked it and said nothing. There apparently was nothing to fear from these two.

The man was old. The hair that stuck out under the brim of his hat was as white as snow. The skin of his face seemed drawn tight as parchment against the bone. The eyes looked tired and sad but a drive still burned in them. The hands which he had crossed over the saddlehorn were withered, the blue veins stood out prominently. The color of his face was not good. Merely staring appeared to tire the old man. After a while, his head drooped and his shoulders sagged. He seemed to go to sleep in the saddle.

With the girl, however, the intensi-

ty of her stare seemed to increase as she went on studying Lawson. There appeared to be something chill and even forbidding in the way she gazed at him. It was as though she were trying to take him apart bit by bit. She seemed particularly interested in the hang of the .44 at Lawson's hip. This was nothing unusual. He encountered it wherever he went, for his calling was obvious enough. However, this interest coming from her unsettled him. He did not like it.

He gave her the eye right back but this did not perturb her. He saw that she was quite attractive. Her hair was blue-black in color and her face had a deep tan. She had high cheekbones which produced a permanent squint to her hazel eyes. Her red mouth had a long upper lip that curved down gracefully at the ends. Her chin had a cleft in it.

She was wearing a cream-colored, flat-crowned stetson and a fringed buckskin jacket. Under this she had a red flannel shirt open at the throat. She wore blue jeans with wide cuffs at the bottoms of the legs. Her spurs were silver-plated and had large rowels. There was a cartridge belt about her waist. The belt supported a cedar-handled .38-40 Bisley.

SHE WAS the first to speak. "You seem to be headed toward the Seven Peaks," she said. Her voice was low and throaty but very soft. "Are you going into them?"

Lawson nodded.

"Will you be going all the way through them?" she asked. "As far as Laguna perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Lawson.

"Laguna's our home," she said. "Have you ever been there?"

Lawson shook his head.

She paused a little, as if she were giving a final, quick consideration to something. Then she said, "Will you ride with us as far as Laguna?"

The question took Lawson by surprise. He did not know what to make of it. He said slowly, "I usually ride alone."

"Couldn't you make an exception this time?" she said. Some of the coldness seemed to go from her. There was almost a touch of pleading in her

tone but the hardness in her eyes belied this. "We're all going the same way. You wouldn't be put out about anything. We'd be company for each other. It's a long and lonely way through the Seven Peaks."

"I might change my mind," he said. "I might decide not to go to Laguna."

"Do you have somewhere else to go?"

Lawson shrugged. He said nothing.

He thought her eyes narrowed a trifle. "Would you go with us if I paid you to?"

He did not answer right away. Again that feeling of puzzlement came over him. Her offer sounded innocent enough but he could not shake the impression that there was more to it than appeared. "Why would you pay me for a thing like that?" he asked.

She made a barely perceptible nod toward the old man who was still slumped in the saddle. "My father isn't well. We're anxious to get to Laguna because of that. I—we'd both feel better if there was a man along with us."

Lawson was thinking about something. He was enough of a skeptic to suspect everything. It seemed that deceit and conniving were all that he encountered in the world of late. He did not like to think this of the girl and the old man but that was how his nature was bent.

"You followed me out of San Rafael," he told the girl. "Is this why?"

She did not attempt to deny it. She merely nodded.

"Couldn't you find any one in San Rafael to ride with you?" asked Lawson looking directly at her.

Before the girl could speak, the old man roused himself. His head lifted and he said, "There was no one in San Rafael we could trust." His voice was soft but tired, as though it carried all the burdens of the world.

A brief smile, touched with wryness, framed Lawson's mouth. "And you think you can trust me?"

"We do."

"Do you know who I am?"

Neither one of them said anything. However, Lawson had the feeling that they were aware of his identity. He

said, "The name is Steve Lawson."

They didn't say anything to this either. It was as though they were ill at ease and, as a result, speechless. Their attitude angered Lawson.

"Haven't you heard of me? I'm Lawson, the gunfighter." Shame and distaste were mixed up with the anger in him now.

The old man sighed. "We've heard of you," he said slowly. "We've heard that you're a killer and that your gun is for hire but we've also heard that you're a fair man. I pride myself on being a judge of men, Lawson. I know we can trust you."

"As I said, we'll pay you," the girl broke in. "One hundred dollars now and another hundred when we're in Laguna."

LAWSON looked at her with a hard narrowing of the eyes. "Isn't that rather high?"

"It's worth it to us."

"Does my gun come into it?"

"Of course not." She said it too quickly and she colored a little. Her eyes wavered and then averted, but she pulled them back angrily and fixed him with a rigid stare. Her lips had thinned. "Well, are you coming with us?"

Lawson shifted his glance and looked at the old man. His head had slumped again and he seemed to be sleeping once more. Soon the long sleep would come to him but it was as though he could not have it soon enough. Nothing else appeared to matter to him, only the sleep.

Lawson was turning it over in his mind. Reason and logic told him not to have anything to do with this but his heart argued otherwise. If he did not know himself better, he would have said it was pity and compassion. However, these emotions were alien to him, he felt. He was a killer and feelings like these could not be a part of his nature. So he attributed his decision to the fact that he was lonely and the girl was attractive.

"What are your names?" he asked.

"My father is Jeff Mason," she said.

"I'm Ardis Mason."

"Give me the hundred dollars," he said, "and we'll get started..."

The old man was dying. That much Lawson realized when they camped that night. Death might not come for several days or even weeks but its touch was on the old man. He knew it, too. He seldom spoke and then never much. He would speak a little and then withdraw within himself as if holding communion with the death that would soon possess him. Some strange reserve kept him going. He was in no condition to travel but he persisted at it with a stubbornness that Lawson was forced to admire.

He tried to figure out what it was that kept the old man in the saddle when he should be in bed, waiting for the death that was on its way. Then Lawson remembered that Laguna was the old man's home. He probably wanted to die there, in his house and in his bed. It was this that kept him on his feet. However, Lawson doubted if the old man would reach Laguna alive.

When they made camp, the girl first of all spread some blankets for the old man. He lay down on these and closed his eyes and dropped off. At times he appeared to stop breathing. He would lie there as still as in the grip of death. Then, after a while, his breast would begin to move and the breath would flutter softly through his lips.

Lawson gathered some dried mesquite and built a fire. The girl made some broth. She roused the old man and he sat up while she fed him the broth. Then she made some bacon and beans for herself and Lawson. The old man ate a few beans. Then he lay down and went to sleep again.

Lawson stayed awake a long while that night. In one way he envied the old man who slept so steadily. His work in the world was about done. The vicissitudes of living no longer troubled his brain. He had the peace of mind that Lawson could not find.

Lawson could understand why the girl and the old man wanted someone along. What he could not explain was why they had selected him. Despite what they had said, he knew they could have found someone in San Rafael to accompany them. Lawson could not get over the feeling that they wanted him because of his gun.

However, he could not see what use they would have for it unless they had a large sum of money with them and were fearful of robbers. But if this were the case, then he was a menace to them, too, for his name and reputation were hardly reassuring.

He was still trying to puzzle the thing out when he finally fell asleep. . . .

CHAPTER

2

Riders

THEY WORKED steadily upward the next day. The land was lonely and empty of habitation. Jackpine and juniper clung to the slopes and pitches and huddled in forlorn bunches in the canyon bottoms. Overhead the sky was a brassy blue out of which the sun shone incessantly. Now and then a gust of wind blew, flinging grit into their faces.

They stopped twice that day to give the old man a chance to rest. He would lie on his blankets and close his eyes and fall instantly asleep. However, he would soon rouse himself of his own accord and insist that they proceed. Lawson marveled at the old man's tenacity. He was almost fanatic in his insistence that they keep going. It was as though death were hard on his heels and he was trying desperately to outrace it.

Late that afternoon they came upon a spring that gurgled out of a slit in a wall of rock that made up the shoulder of a hill. It was still an hour to sundown but the old man was tired and Lawson suggested that they make camp here since both water and wood were available. The old man considered this a while, thoughtfully. Then he agreed.

Lawson gathered wood and built the fire while the old man lay on his blankets and slept. When the fire was going, Lawson retired to one side and sat on a rock. The horses were staked out and for a while he smoked and watched the animals as they grazed. Then he discovered that his eyes were following the girl more and more.

In these two days she had never spoken to him unless it was necessary. The old man, too, had been taciturn but with him it was weariness rather than anything else. Lawson was think-

ing he might just as well have been alone for all the conversation he got out of these two. However, he did not mind it too much. It was his habit of late to talk very little.

The girl had a graceful way of moving about and Lawson found that he rather enjoyed watching her. In his mind there was a yearning for something like this to tie him down, to give him roots, but he was enough of a realist not to build dreams any more. Fate had him cut out for a killer and a bullet in the back, nothing more.

There was something about the girl that disturbed him. He could not quite explain what it was. He did not mind that she did not care to talk to him. This was something more, it had to do with an impression he was beginning to have of her. He had the feeling that she was cold and purposeful and he found himself not wanting her to be like this. He could not say that she was heartless. She was gentle and attentive about her father and it was evident she loved him very much. But outside of this her attitude was one of gelid hostility.

Again she made the broth first of all and fed it to the old man. Then came the bacon and beans for her and Lawson. When she went to wash the tin plates and cups, he knew the impulse to offer to dry them. But he put the urging aside. He seated himself on the rock and built another smoke.

THE SUN went down behind one of the peaks and the shadows thickened quickly in the low spots although the highest crests were still bright with sunlight. A vulture circled lazily and patiently overhead and Lawson watched it a while. When he lowered his glance, he saw the two riders come over a rise.

They headed directly for the camp. Lawson saw the girl bend down and shake the old man's shoulder. He came awake very quickly, sitting up and turning his head to watch the two who were riding in. There was something of apprehension about both the old man and the girl.

Lawson pinched out his smoke and tossed it away. His eyes narrowed as the two came in. He saw that they were a man and a woman and they were both covered with dust as if they

had come a long way. They reined in and dismounted. The man stretched and groaned with weariness. Then he said:

"Dolly, get me a drink."

The woman had started to untie the roll behind her saddle but she stopped this and dug into the pack until she came out with a tin cup. She walked over to the spring and filled the cup and brought it over to the man who was still stretching. He grabbed the cup and drank without looking at her, then tossed the cup on the sand. The woman went back to the roll and removed it from the cante.

The man stretched some more and sighed loudly as if from exhaustion. "Dolly," he said, "spread my blankets. I'm tired."

She untied his roll and placed it on the ground and unrolled the blankets. Then she began to unsaddle the horses. The man stretched once more, then he walked over to Lawson.

"Evening, friend," the man said with a big smile. "Nice fire you got there. Mind if my wife uses it to cook me some chow?"

Ardis Mason said, "There's lots of wood about. Build your own fire."

The man's smile died. One brow lifted archly and he turned his head to look at the girl. "Pardon, miss?" he said softly.

"You heard me," said the girl. "Build your own fire."

The man lifted a hand and began scratching at the stubble on his cheeks. He looked like he couldn't believe what he had just heard. "You ramrodding this layout, miss?" he asked.

"I am."

The man brought his head around and looked at Lawson again. "Is that right, friend?"

"She's the boss," said Lawson.

The man shrugged. "Well, have it your way," he said. He turned and walked back to where his blankets were laid out. "Dolly," he said, "scrape up some wood and build a fire. Be quick about it. I'm hungry."

He lay down on the blankets with his head on his saddle and placed his hat over his eyes. In a moment, he seemed to be asleep. The woman worked without a pause. She gathered

wood and got a fire going. Then she got the coffee pot on and after that began with a frying pan.

"Dolly," the man said querulously without taking the hat from his face, "ain't you got chow ready yet? I'm hungry."

The woman said nothing. Lawson saw her lips tighten and he thought her hand trembled as she stirred the beans in the pan. Her face in the gathering twilight looked tired and worn. Once it must have been very pretty, Lawson thought, but now it was lined with weariness and hopelessness. He could understand how this had come about.

AT LAST the beans were ready and the woman put some in a plate and carried it to her husband. She said, "Will." Just the one word but he came to and sat up, putting his hat back on his head. He took the plate and put a spoonful of beans in his mouth.

"Dolly," he said, voice complaining, "you've burned them again. Ain't you ever gonna learn to cook?"

The woman said nothing. She sat down a little distance from him and began to eat. She did not seem to have much of an appetite.

The man ate in great mouthfuls and with much smacking of the lips and belching. When he was through, he wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. "Dolly," he said, "give me some coffee."

Without a word, she put her plate aside and poured a cup of coffee and carried it over to the man. He drank it with immense gulps and sighed with pleasure. He said, "get me another one."

When he had drunk this, he seemed satisfied. He exhaled his pleasure again and felt in his pockets until he came out with a pipe. The woman gathered up the plates and cups and carried them over to the spring for washing. The man knocked the dottle from his pipe and tamped it with tobacco. He put the pipe in his mouth and sucked on it loudly.

"Dolly," he said, "give me a light."

She left her washing and went over to the fire where she got a lighted stick. She carried this to her husband and lit his pipe. When he began to

blow great clouds of smoke, she returned to her washing.

Lawson watched all this with mounting distaste. He told himself it was none of his business but still the dislike was very strong in him. He glanced now at the Masons and saw that the girl was sitting very close to her father. The old man still sat upright on his blankets. The torpor was gone from him. He looked vigilant and even a little fearful.

The man at the other fire rose to his feet and came over to Lawson. The man was a big fellow, standing about six foot two and weighing over two hundred pounds. He had a large head and a wide, bland face. He gave the impression of being indolent and careless but a look at his eyes quickly dispelled this. They were alive and bright with a sly, cruel cunning.

His clothing was soiled and worn. He looked and smelled like a saddle tramp. Apparently, he cared for nothing that he wore except the sixshooter at his side. It was a big Remington .44-40 and it was superbly cleaned and oiled as to be in top working condition. Lawson did not miss this in his appraisal of the man.

THE MAN came to a halt on slightly spraddled legs in front of Lawson. The fellow took a deep drag on his pipe and blew out a great cloud of smoke. It was all but dark now and the firelight cast reddish reflections against the tawny beard stubble on his cheeks.

"My name's Niven, friend," he said. "Will Niven. That's my wife over there. Name's Dolly. A good woman," he said as if in sober reflection.

Lawson said nothing. He stared up at Niven through slightly narrowed eyes.

Niven looked down at his pipe which he was holding in his hand. "I didn't catch your name, friend."

"Lawson."

One brow of Niven's went up. "Lawson?" he said, obviously surprised a little. "Steve Lawson, the gunfighter?"

Lawson nodded. There was the taste of gall in his mouth.

"I've heard about you," said Niven. "You're quite a boy with a gun, aren't you?" He uttered a soft laugh. "I sure

wouldn't want to tangle with you. No, sir!"

Lawson said nothing. He was thinking that he could never outrun his reputation. Wherever he went it followed him like some evil nemesis.

Niven took another drag on his pipe. "We seem to be going in the same direction, Lawson."

Lawson kept his peace.

Niven uttered that soft laugh. "You going all the way through the Seven Peaks? To Laguna maybe?"

"Maybe," said Lawson.

"Why don't we travel together?" said Niven. "We're going the same way. How about it?"

"I don't think so," interrupted Ardis Mason.

Niven turned his head and looked at the girl. Lawson glanced that way, too. She sat beside her father, seemingly all tense, her face strained. Her voice, however, had sounded cold and unafraid.

Niven stared at her a while. Then he shifted his glance back to Lawson. Niven's face appeared amused and slightly incredulous.

He jerked a thumb at the girl. "Is she really rodding this roundup, Lawson?" he asked.

"I follow her orders," said Lawson.

"Oh?" said Niven. He turned his head and looked at the girl again. He appeared to be turning something over in his mind. At last he said, "What's the harm of us going on together, miss? These mountains are terribly lonely. There isn't a town or a ranch anywhere. You and Dolly—my wife—would be company for each other. The time would pass twice as fast if you had another woman to talk with."

ARDIS MASON'S lips compressed. The old man, too, was staring at Niven with a patent wariness. The girl shook her head. "The three of us are all the company we need. You go your way, Niven. We'll go ours."

Niven spread his hands. "I don't get it," he said. "You can't be afraid of me. You've got Lawson along, and me," he gave that soft laugh again, "why I hardly know which end of a gun to hold to shoot it."

Lawson's eyes dropped to the well-maintained Remington at Niven's

side. The feeling began to grow in Lawson that here was a really dangerous man.

Lawson said quietly, "I think you better go back to your fire, Niven."

That brow of Niven's arched up once more. His features pretended fear but he still could not quite keep the amusement from showing faintly in his eyes.

"All right, Lawson," he said. "I won't argue with you. No, sir. Not with the great Steve Lawson. I'm smarter than that." He turned and tipped his hat to the Masons. "Well, good night," he said. "I'll be turning in."

He walked away, yawning and stretching. Without a word or look at his wife, he lay down on his blankets, rolled them tightly about him and in a few moments his snoring was audible...

Lawson awoke three times that night and each instance he found either the girl or the old man awake and the fire tended to. The Nivens' fire had gone out. He could make out the vague shapes of the two rolled in their blankets. They both seemed dead to the world every time Lawson woke up but still either the girl or the old man was wakeful and apparently on guard. Lawson looked at them each time he roused and they were aware that he was awake but they attempted no explanation. He did not ask for any. He just went back to sleep, puzzled and troubled by this apprehension that possessed both the girl and the old man.

Lawson was quite sure now they had not told him the truth why they had hired him...

He awoke the fourth time at the crack of dawn and found the girl up. The old man was sleeping heavily, his breathing making a soft, sighing sound. The girl threw more wood on the fire and then put the coffee pot on. The noise she was making roused the Nivens.

Lawson went over to the spring and washed up. Then he went and checked the horses. When he came back, the Nivens had their fire going again.

Niven did not approach them until after he had eaten. While his wife was

saddling their horses and getting their packs together, Niven walked over to the Masons' fire. He spread his hands over the flames.

"Kind of crisp this morning," he said to no one in particular. He gave an exaggerated shiver. "Chills a man right to the bone."

NO ONE said anything. Niven went on warming his hands, turning them over and over with a studied preoccupation. After a while, he said, "Well, miss, you change your mind?"

"No," said Ardis Mason.

"Oh, come now," Niven said with a trace of irritation. "Why be like this? We're both headed the same way. Why don't we go along together?"

"How do you know we're headed the same way?" said the girl. "You don't know where we're going."

"You're going through the Seven Peaks," said Niven.

"There's more than one way through them."

"You're on the trail to Laguna."

"Is that where you're going, Niven?"

"That's right."

"Well, we aren't going to Laguna," said Ardis Mason.

Niven was silent. For a moment he appeared very thoughtful as he stared down at the fire. Then he turned his head and laid a long and deliberate look on the girl. There was a wary respect in his eyes as he stared at her.

"You're a sharp one," he murmured as if to himself, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "I like that." He studied the girl a moment longer, then turned his attention back to warming his hands.

"Aren't you going to move out?" asked Ardis Mason. Her lips were thin with suppressed anger.

Niven's brow lifted and he glanced at Lawson. "Looks like I'm not wanted here," Niven said.

"That's right," said Lawson.

"Well, thanks for the use of the fire," Niven said dryly. He turned and strolled away. His wife was up on one of the horses. Niven mounted the other. Once in the saddle, he turned and laid a narrow, calculative look on Lawson and the Masons. Then Niven touched his horse with the spurs. Trailed by his wife, he rode off.

When the Nivens were out of sight, the girl heaved a sigh of relief. The old man, too, seemed a little more at ease. He said, "Let's be moving on."

Lawson said, "What's this all about?"

Something in his tone brought the girl around sharply. The old man was slower in reacting but he came around also. The two of them stared queringly at Lawson.

"I don't quite understand you," the girl said stiffly. Her eyes looked wary.

"Why were you scared of Niven?"

"We didn't trust him."

"Why not?"

The old man said, "You know what Niven is, Lawson. He didn't fool you any more than he fooled us."

"How do you know I'm not fooling you? How do you know you can trust me?"

The old man sighed. "I just know, Lawson. You're that kind of a man."

"Why did you hire me Mason?" asked Lawson.

"To ride with us as far as Laguna," said the girl.

"Why pay me two hundred dollars for that when Niven would have gone along for nothing?"

"That's just the point, Lawson," the girl said with a small show of exasperation. "We can't trust just anybody. Why do you think Niven rode off without molesting us? Now you know why we hired you."

"Because of my name and my gun?"

The girl colored slightly. "That's right," she said in a steady tone. Her eyes caught his and held, defiantly.

"Why would Niven want to molest you? asked Lawson.

"Niven's a saddle bum. You know that. We—we've got a little money with us. He'd have taken it from us."

"Is that all you've got?"

The girl seemed to tense and withdraw warily. Her glance turned gelid and guarded, her lips thinned. For a moment she did not speak. She appeared to be thinking very hard about something.

At last she said, "Just what do you mean by that?"

"You're keeping something from me and I don't like it."

"You've been told all you need to know."

"You're keeping something important from me," he repeated again, "and I don't like it."

"Trust us, Lawson," the old man said. His voice sounded desperate and urgent. "Please trust us. We don't have anyone else. If I was just a few years younger, I wouldn't be begging this of you. But I'm an old man and I've lost my pride. Will you trust us, Lawson?..."

CHAPTER

3

Three More

IT WAS THE middle of the morning when the feeling came to Lawson that they were being followed. He reined to a stop on a height of ground and gave a look down their backtrail but nothing showed. The land appeared desolate and empty, yet the feeling persisted in Lawson that something was back there. He thought of the Nivens and supposed it was them. This conjecture stirred a small, mean anger in him.

He became aware that the old man and the girl were staring at him fearfully. He was going to ask them something but then he remembered the evasiveness he always got from them. So he said nothing.

They started on again. The crests and peaks of the mountain range reared all about them. There was nothing pleasant or reassuring in the lay of the land. This was barren country, devoid of any promise that might have tempted people to settle here. The graze was sparse, vegetation was far from plentiful. There was only the monstrous, inanimate loneliness of the peaks as they thrust up sullenly and defiantly at the brazen sky.

The feeling that someone was following them would not leave Lawson. Although he had seen nothing so far to substantiate this intuition, it grew in him with a certainty which he could not deny. What nettled him most of all was that he did not know why they were being trailed. The Masons obviously knew but they were not telling him. This impasse made Lawson feel irritable and mean.

They moved across a small, open

plain and then started up the slope of a ridge which was not too steep. When they had gained the top, they reined in to breathe their horses. Their position afforded them a commanding view of the country they had just left.

The riders appeared in the distance, like notes on the surface of the land. There were three of them and they moved at a leisurely, steady pace which ate up the miles without fagging their mounts. It was the same pace Lawson and the Masons were using.

Lawson's lips tightened as he watched. The riders were too far off for any recognition. However, they couldn't be the Nivens unless they had been joined by somebody else. Lawson did not think this was the case. Will Niven had struck him as a man who worked alone.

Lawson turned his head and glanced at the Masons. The old man and the girl were staring at each other. Their faces were taut, their eyes held a certain measure of dread.

Lawson said quietly, "Are you ready to tell me now?"

The girl came to with a start. For an instant her eyes were wide and panicked. Then she recovered and that cold aloofness came over her again.

"Tell you what?"

Lawson nodded at the riders. "Why are they after you?"

"What makes you think they're after us?"

"Maybe they're going to Laguna, too," Lawson said dryly. "Seems like everybody's going to Laguna."

"We aren't the only ones with the right to pass through the Seven Peaks," said the girl. "Just because other people are riding through doesn't mean they are after us."

"Then should we wait until they catch up with us?"

"Oh, no, Lawson," she said quickly, and then flushed with mortification and anger.

The old man sighed. "Trust us, Lawson," he said.

RAGE MADE a path through Lawson's brain. "Haven't I been trusting you all along?" he cried. "Why do you think I've stuck around if it hasn't been because I trust you?

Isn't it about time you started to trust me? First it was the Nivens. Now there are three more. Isn't it about time you trusted me?"

The old man laid a look of appeal on the girl. Her lips tightened, however. That stubborn, purposeful glint came into her eyes. She shook her head.

"I've already told you everything, Lawson," she said. "Why don't you use your eyes and your brain?" Her voice broke a little. "Why don't you take a good look at my father?"

A bit of shame came over Lawson. The girl could be right. The old man did not have long to go and it was a far and lonely way through the Seven Peaks and there was no telling what one might run into in these desolate mountains. Still, the feeling would not go that she was withholding something, withholding it deliberately and selfishly.

"All right," he said, reining his bay around. "We can find out for sure if they're after us. But it'll take some hard riding." He looked at the old man, "Do you feel up to it?"

The old man tried to square his shoulders. His chin tilted. "Lead the way, Lawson."

They sent their mounts as fast as they dared down the other side of the ridge. When they reached level ground, they lifted the horses into a gallop, racing back in the direction from which they had come. The pound of the horses' hoofs was a drumming clatter and dust rose high behind them but Lawson was depending on the height of the ridge to conceal this from the three on the other side.

They came to an area where the ground was littered with weird rock formations, eroded by wind and time into awesome, eccentric shapes. Lawson gave a glance over his shoulder and saw that the old man was barely staying in the saddle. To his left, Lawson glimpsed a series of boulders so arranged as to form a barricade. He slowed the bay and rode over to this.

He jumped to the ground and caught the old man as he slid weakly out of the saddle. As Lawson lifted the fellow in his arms, the old man's

head dropped back and hung laxly, rocking with each step Lawson took as he carried the old man behind the barricade.

The girl led the horses behind the stones. Her face was pale and drawn with anxiety. With trembling fingers she untied the old man's blankets from behind his saddle and unrolled them on the ground. Lawson laid the old man on them. The girl had a canteen and she poured a little water in the old man's mouth. Lawson caught a glimpse of her eyes and the hardness was gone from them. They looked a little wet.

The old man swallowed some water and then his lids opened. He smiled weakly and fondly when he saw the stress on the girl's face. Then his glance swung to Lawson.

"I—I'm not as young as I used to be, Lawson," he said weakly.

"Rest a while," said Lawson. "You'll be all right."

"Won't they catch up with us?" asked the old man.

LAWSON got his Winchester from his saddle. He levered a shell into the breech. His eyes were cold. "We can't outrun them if they're really after us. This is as good a place as any to have it out with them. Save your breath, Mason. We might need you to shoot a gun later on."

He took a stand behind one of the boulders which reached almost to his shoulders. Behind him, he was aware of the girl giving the old man another swallow of water. Then the old man said he was all right. His voice sounded a little louder and stronger.

Lawson heard the girl walk back to the horses. When she returned, she took up a position behind the boulder next to Lawson's. Glancing that way, he saw that she had a carbine in her hands. She held it like she knew how to use it and something about her bearing suggested she would not be backward about using it. Again that feeling of puzzlement and uneasiness passed through Lawson. He could not understand why she should affect him this way.

The time seemed to pass with interminable slowness. The sun beat down from almost directly overhead. The surface of the stones became hot

to the touch. Beads of sweat gathered on Lawson's forehead. Sweat trickled hesitantly and stickily down through the beard stubble on his cheeks. His eyes began to ache he was watching so hard.

At last the riders appeared. They came into sight from around a tall, eroded spire of reddish rock. Lawson heard the girl suck her breath in audibly. The old man must have sensed that the riders had appeared for he sat up on his blankets, his breathing a loud, labored sound.

The riders were moving at a trot, heads bent as they read the tracks in the sand. When they came to where the tracks veered abruptly to the left, their heads lifted in unison and they turned their mounts that way. They pulled up the instant they spotted Lawson and the girl behind the barricade. The riders were perhaps fifty feet away.

A while they sat in their saddles, silent, unmoving, their glances intent on Lawson. The shadow of a vulture crossing overhead passed over the ground between them and the barricade. Finally, one of them moved his horse ahead a little, putting him a trifle to the fore of his companions. This one appeared to be the leader.

His teeth flashed as he put on a smile. It was too far to tell if it ever reached his eyes. "What's the big idea, amigo?" he called.

"No idea," said Lawson. "Keep moving."

The man uttered a puzzled laugh. "You've got us all wrong, amigo. We mean you no harm."

"Why are you following us?"

"We're not following anybody."

"Why did you follow us when we doubled back? You did that on purpose."

The man turned and looked at his companions. They exchanged no words but they seemed to have reached some agreement. They started walking their horses ahead.

"That's far enough," Lawson shouted. "Hold it!"

The riders came on.

LAWSON whipped the Winchester to his shoulder and fired. The slug slammed into the ground just in front of the leader's horse. The ani-

mal snorted in fright and shied. With a terrific jerk of the reins, the rider pulled him in, but he did not try to advance any more and neither did his companions.

The teeth came flashing again but it was more of a snarl than a smile this time. "You're mighty free and easy with your lead, amigo," the man said.

"Move on," said Lawson.

The fellow's eyes were busy searching the barricade and beyond. He could see the four horses. Now he rose up in his stirrups in an obvious effort to see behind the boulders. Lawson knew that the old man was not visible to the three.

Lawson kept his rifle pointing at the man. "Move on," Lawson said again.

"Who are you, amigo?" asked the man, teeth still showing. "I've never seen you before. I don't have any quarrel with you."

"Ride on."

The fellow's eyes were still seeking something. "We'll ride on, amigo," he said in a soothing tone, "but we'd like to part friends. Who are you? My name's Ellsworth, Dixie Ellsworth. This here is Wes Tyler and that's the Arapaho Kid. What's your name, amigo?"

Ellsworth was a slim, tall man with a black beard stubble ringing his mouth and framing his cheeks and jaw. A flop brimmed thonged black stetson shaded the upper half of his face, concealing the color of his eyes and the definite shape of his nose. He was wearing a black shirt with large white polka dots and over this a fancy brown and white calfskin vest. His trousers were brown corduroy and his boots had a lot of fancy stitching and his spurs were plated with silver. Around his waist he had two cartridge belts. Each belt supported an ivory-handled Colt .45 in a fancy hand-tooled holster.

The one whose name was Wes Tyler was a stocky, round-faced fellow in his early twenties. His face was clean-shaven and his complexion was the kind that turns a violent red rather than tans. His clothing was plain. The only concession he made to color was a yellow silk kerchief around his neck. His eyes had sought the girl

right off and had never left her once.

The one called the Arapaho Kid had been given that name gratuitously for he no longer was a youngster. The close-cropped beard ringing his face was peppered with gray and so was the hair which he wore long in the frontiersman's style. He wore buckskins so soiled they would have nauseated a half-witted hermit. Around his waist was a belt that supported a six-shooter on the right side and a Bowie knife in a beaded sheath on the left. Rather than boots he wore moccasins. All he lacked, Lawson thought, was a string of scalps around his neck.

Lawson heard the old man rise. Lawson never took his glance off Ellsworth but he was aware of the old man coming up and leaning against the rock beside him. A look of triumph crossed Ellsworth's face when he spied the old man.

"Do you know any of these men, Mason?" Lawson asked.

The old man did not answer. His breathing was a ragged, pain-racked sound.

Ellsworth's glance was fixed on the old man. The smile on Ellsworth's face was jeering now. "Mason?" he said, his tone politely baffled. "Is that your name? I knew some Masons once, back in Natchez. Any relations of yours?"

The old man did not speak. His head had slumped and he was standing upright only because he was leaning against and clutching the stone.

Lawson said, "You've had your say, Ellsworth. Ride!"

"You still haven't told me who you are, amigo," said Ellsworth.

Suddenly, Lawson had had enough of it. An insufferable wrath flashed across his brain. He aimed the Winchester and fired. The sound of it was a flat crack that went rolling in lingering echoes across the land. The hat whipped off Ellsworth's head. Had it not been for the chin thongs, it would have been whipped to the ground. Instead it hung down his back, a hole through the crown.

Lawson said, voice quivering with fury, "That's my name, Ellsworth. Now will you ride?"

The startlement drained slowly from Ellsworth's face. His mouth gave

a spasmodic twitch, his teeth showed in an angered grimace, his chest swelled, and then he had himself in hand again.

Tyler and the Arapaho Kid were taut in their saddles, their hands on the handles of their sixshooters. However, the girl had her carbine ready and the two looked at this and then at the Winchester at Lawson's shoulder and decided to do nothing.

"All right, amigo," said Ellsworth, his voice thin, "you win the first pot but there will be other hands. I promise you that."

He turned his horse and with a jerk of his head motioned Tyler and the Arapaho Kid to follow him. They rode off without once looking back. . .

CHAPTER

4

Fury

THE OLD Man was too sick to go any more that day so they camped where they were. They had water with them and Lawson went out and gathered up some dried jackpine for a fire.

The old man lay on his blankets but he did not sleep very much. He was restless. He kept changing the position of his arms and every now and then he would move his head from side to side as if something pained him very much, but he never made a sound of complaint.

The girl sat most of the time beside her father. She stroked his head and spoke soothingly to him when he was most restless. He would quiet down then and show her that fond smile. A little later, however, he would start to toss again.

The realization came to Lawson that the old man would not last more than a few days. He was going to suggest that they return to San Rafael but he felt it would do no good. Both the girl and the old man were too adamant about what they had in mind. And what that was, Lawson had no idea. They were not going to Laguna, that much he knew. Other than that he had not the slightest inkling of their intent except that it must be something crucial for them, else they would not insist on continuing this dangerous trip with the old man on the brink of death.

When nightfall came, Lawson suggested that the girl lie down a while. He would stay up with the old man, Lawson said. She stared at him a while out of narrowed, calculating eyes and he was surprised when she agreed. Thereafter, they changed off, taking turns sitting up with the old man and also on guard for Ellsworth and his companions.

The old man was restless until midnight. Then he dropped off into that deep sleep that at times was as still and as solemn as the sleep of death. He slept like this until after the break of dawn. When he awoke, Lawson asked him if he wanted to camp here another day. The old man said he was all right and insisted that they keep on going. . .

That day they made good progress. The old man seemed to have found a new reserve of strength. Lawson marveled again at the old man's tenacity. They stopped every now and then and Mason would dismount and lie on the ground but never for very long. he would lose it and the way his cards anxious to be on.

They saw no one that day. Every time they gained high ground, Lawson would call a stop and carefully study the country, but it was as empty as the most forsaken land in the world. They appeared to be the only living things in these mountains, except for a vulture overhead now and then.

In the middle of the afternoon the old man began to weaken. He still had the will but he could no longer conjure up any more strength. When they came to a tiny creek that was hardly more than a wriggle of wetness, Lawson called a halt. The old man protested that it was still too early but Lawson would not listen.

Three of the peaks lay behind them, they were in the shadow of the fourth, and it was still a long way to Laguna, Lawson thought, but he no longer believed they were headed there. He felt weary and all but beaten. After the old man had been bedded in his blankets, Lawson unrolled his own and lay a while on them.

He wondered what it was that had got him into this. He did not think it was softness because he was sure

there was nothing like this in him. It could not be pity or sympathy because he owed the girl and the old man nothing of these. They were hiding something from him, something that could very well bring about his death, and this lack of complete confidence in him made him irritable and angry. Still, when he thought about it long enough, he could not blame them. He knew what he was. In their eyes he could be little better than Will Niven or Dixie Ellsworth and his pals.

After a while, Lawson rose and went out to gather wood. There were pines and junipers growing about and he soon had enough for the night. By the time he was done with this, the old man was sleeping soundly.

THE SUN had just gone down when the horseman appeared. Lawson heard the sounds of the animal's approach and he jumped to his feet, drawing his gun. A blast of anger beat against his brain. Who was it this time he thought. He was getting good and tired of all these strangers riding in and him not having the faintest notion what it was all about.

The rider came out of the trees. He reined in in surprise when he spotted Lawson standing there with his .44 drawn. The girl was on her feet, also. Her face was tense and her fingers rested on the grip of the Bisley in the holster at her side. The old man, however, went on sleeping, breathing heavily.

The horseman was disconcerted only briefly. He recovered quickly and reached inside his coat and came out with a cigar. He placed this in his mouth and struck a match. His face was bland and unconcerned when he spoke.

"Put that gun away, boy," he said quietly. "I don't mean you no harm."

"Who are you and what do you want?" asked Lawson, his tone stiff and hostile.

The man took the cigar out of his mouth and studied the lighted end a while. He was a big fellow, big in the chest and arms and waist. He was wearing a brown suit complete with vest across which was strung a gold watch chain. The black tip of a holster showed below the edge of his

coat. His face was round and seemingly artless except for the evasiveness of his eyes. His mouth was framed by a rich brown mustache which drooped down around the edges of his lips.

He put the cigar back in his mouth and spoke around the smoke, his teeth showing white and strong. His eyes were on the old man. "The name's Cartwright, Homer Cartwright," the man said in his calm, unhurried way. "I'm a U. S. Government Marshal, boy." He turned back the lapel of his coat and gave Lawson a brief glimpse of a badge pinned there.

A sigh of relief came out of the girl but Lawson still stood there, gun in hand, eyes cold and unfriendly.

Cartwright gave a soft, little laugh. "You can put the gun away. I'm not after you, boy. Why, I don't even know who you are."

With a show of disdain for Lawson's gun, Cartwright dismounted. He walked over to the old man who was still sleeping, his mouth open and his breathing labored. Cartwright stared Lawson again. Cartwright's brows down a while, then turned and faced went up when he spied the .44 still in Lawson's hand.

"Don't tell me you're on the dodge, boy," said Cartwright. "You don't answer the description of anyone I'm after."

"What are you doing in the Seven Peaks?" asked Lawson.

Cartwright maneuvered the cigar to the other end of his mouth without using his hands. The cigar bobbed up and down when he spoke. "That's Government business, boy. I don't think it's any concern of yours." He made an annoyed gesture. "Why don't you put that gun away? I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to camp here for the night."

"Are you sure it will be just for the night?"

"Of course."

Lawson glanced at the girl and she shrugged ever so slightly. "All right," said Lawson, holstering his gun...

WHEN THE old man awoke, he seemed wary of Cartwright but not overly frightened. Cartwright did not try to force himself on the others. He seemed watchful and thoughtful, his eyes going every now and then

to the old man and studying him. Whether it was pity or some other interest was not apparent. Cartwright's features remained expressionless.

Again this night Lawson and the girl took turns sitting up with the old man. Cartwright rolled himself up in his blankets away from the others and slept the whole night through. He did not evince one hostile move but still there was something about the man that disturbed Lawson. He figured this thing was getting on his nerves.

Morning came and the old man awoke and was anxious to be on his way. While Lawson was saddling the horses, Cartwright walked over to him and beckoned him to follow. They walked until they were out of earshot of the girl and the old man. Here Cartwright halted.

He got out a cigar and worked it from one end of his mouth to the other. He did not light the smoke. His head was bowed and he gave the impression that he was thinking hard on something.

Finally Cartwright's head lifted and he put a veiled glance on Lawson. "These Masons," said Cartwright. "What do you know about them, Lawson?"

Lawson's mouth tightened. He said nothing.

Cartwright smiled a little. "You've been taken in, boy," he said softly.

Lawson's heart gave a hard hammer-stroke. "What do you mean?"

The cigar tilted upward as Cartwright bit down on it. "You ever hear of Big Jim Sabine?"

"Sabine?" said Lawson, wrinkling his brow. "Wasn't he an outlaw? I thought he was dead."

"He's dead all right," said Cartwright. "Him and his gang are all dead save for one man. Sabine worked a long time ago, twenty years to be exact. He rustled cows, robbed stage-coaches, raided towns. Him and his gang got quite a pile of loot together. I've never heard it estimated at less than a hundred thousand dollars in gold. Some guesses have put it as high as half a million. You following me, boy?"

The breath was tight in Lawson's

throat, some strange, unsettling excitement surged in him. "Go on," he said quietly.

"Big Jim's stake has never been found," said Cartwright. "Big Jim was killed when a posse caught up with him and his gang. Three of the gang were taken alive and sent to the pen. Two of them died there. The third one was pardoned not so long ago after serving twenty years. It's always been said that Big Jim Sabine's gold is hidden somewhere in the Seven Peaks. You still on the trail, boy?"

Lawson could hear his heart pounding. "Are you trying to say that Mason is that last member of Sabine's gang?"

"That's right," said Cartwright. "Only his name isn't Mason. It's McQueen, Jeff McQueen."

There was the galling taste of disillusionment in Lawson, and also hurt. The first sensation he could understand, the other puzzled him. He felt he should be angry and spiteful but not hurt.

The old wariness and skepticism stirred in him. He said, "If Mason, or McQueen, was pardoned, what's your interest in him?"

Cartwright winked. "I don't care about the man. It's Big Jim's gold I'm after."

"I see," said Lawson, eyes narrowing. "Aren't you with the government any more?"

Cartwright laughed softly. "Let's say me and the government parted company because of moral differences."

"What do you aim to do?" Lawson's tone was very soft.

"I'm not trying to do you out of anything, boy," Cartwright said grandly. "There's enough to split two ways. You could use another gun, you know."

"How do you mean?"

Cartwright paused a moment, chewing the cigar ruminatively. Then he said, "We aren't the only ones who know about McQueen and Big Jim Sabine's gold. Getting to it shouldn't be too hard if the old gent can remember where it's hid. But getting out of the Seven Peaks with it is going to be something else. I've heard about you, Lawson, but you're not that good."

However, the two of us should be able to handle anything that comes up."

"What about the McQueens?" Lawson's voice trembled a little.

"The old man won't last long. You know that," Cartwright said with calm indifference. "As for the girl, we can give her a horse and some grub and point her in the general direction of Laguna. Unless you've got some personal ideas about her." He winked and displayed a leering grin.

Lawson hit him then. The blow took Cartwright on the side of the face and sent him reeling back. The cigar flew from his mouth as he let out a short, sharp cry of alarm. Lawson stepped in and drove his left fist deep into Cartwright's middle. As the man gagged and doubled up, face twisted with hurt, Lawson smashed him on the jaw again. This one dropped Cartwright.

Lawson stood there, breathing heavily, feeling the hurt come into the knuckles of his right hand. Rage gnawed at the edges of his brain, rage started a quivering in the muscles of his thighs, but all of the rage was not directed at Cartwright.

Cartwright lay twisted over on his side, one hand still clutching his stomach. He shook his head and started to rise but when he was halfway up he stopped, resting on one knee. His head was bowed and he shook it some more. After a while, he rose the rest of the way. Only then did he look at Lawson.

There was a streak of dirt on one side of Cartwright's face. A muscle kept twitching one corner of his mouth and his eyes glowed with a malevolent directness. He took a prodigious breath and exhaled it before he spoke.

"You ain't out of Seven Peaks yet, boy," he said darkly. "Think on it when you've got nothing else to do..."

LAWSON stood there, watching Cartwright ride off. Only when the man had passed over a hill and out of sight did Lawson walk up to them. The old man was sitting on his blankets, an anxious and fearful look on his face. The girl, too, was staring with a worried inquiry at Lawson.

He could feel the surge and the

sweep of the wrath in him. He kept rubbing the knuckles of his right hand but he was not aware of doing it. He was aware only of the fury and that hurt which he could not explain.

He fixed a baleful glance on the old man and saw him shrink a little. He looked piteous, so old and withered and helpless and dying, but Lawson angrily brushed the sensation away. No one would know pity for him when it came his turn to die.

It was an effort for him to subdue the wrath. The strain thickened his voice. "Is your name really McQueen?"

The old man and the girl exchanged looks. A sadness entered the old man's eyes. He did not answer.

The rage swelled in Lawson. His voice rose almost to a shout. "I asked you if your name is McQueen?"

The girl answered. "It is."

Lawson shifted his glance to her. "Why didn't you tell me so in the first place? Why did you say your name was Mason?"

The girl hesitated. Then she said, "Mason is the name we've been using. We—we didn't want anyone to know who we are."

"Why didn't you want me to know?"

The girl paused, then glanced at her father. Neither one of them said anything.

"Were you afraid I'd take Big Jim Sabine's gold away from you?" Lawson said.

"We had to be sure we could trust you," said the old man. "We would have told you after a while."

"After how long a while? After you had the gold and were safely out of the Seven Peaks?"

The old man sighed. He bowed his head and appeared to become lost in thought. He did not speak. He looked lonely and forlorn.

The hurt was almost as strong as the rage in Lawson now. He turned his eyes back to the girl. "How much does a man have to do before you trust him?" he said. "Wasn't I entitled to know the truth? I laid my life on the line when I hired out to you but you wouldn't even tell me that. Did you think two hundred dollars was enough? Did you think that was all my life was worth?"

"You knew what was coming or you wouldn't have hired me. You knew the odds I'd be up against, you knew I could lose my life because of them, but you wouldn't tell me that. You offered me two hundred dollars. Is that your idea of the value of a man's life, Miss McQueen?"

The old man spoke. "We'd have cut you in, Lawson. You'll get your share. We didn't dare tell you until we were sure of you but you'll get your share. There's enough for you and my girl, Lawson."

"Are you saying that because you're afraid I'm going to quit you?" said Lawson. Anger and hurt were even in him now. "Do you think you can buy me with a promise? You never trusted me, not even after Niven and Ellsworth. What makes you think I'm going to keep on trusting you after all the lies I've had from you? You can have Sabine's gold. I want no part of it. You can even have your hundred dollars back," he shouted, digging into his pocket. He flung the coins on the ground.

Tears glistened in the old man's eyes. "We need you, Lawson. We're all alone and we need you bad. We need you to get that gold."

"You won't be alone for long," said Lawson. Through all the anger and bitterness there came a sharp ache to his heart. "The Seven Peaks are just crawling with riders who'll be glad to help you find that gold. I wish you luck with them..."

CHAPTER

5

The One Holding The Gun

THE MOUNTAINS seemed lonelier than ever to Lawson. It was as though he had been suddenly put down on an alien, long-forsaken world. He was accustomed to solitude but now it was beginning to disturb him. He tried not to think about it but there was nothing else his mind would hold.

He was headed in what he believed was the way to Laguna. Ahead of him he could see a notch between two of the peaks and he figured this was a pass which would carry him out of the mountain range. So he made for this, eager to be away from here, but somehow reluctant, too.

He tried to think on what he would do next, but there was nothing much that he could see. He was a gun-fighter and he could never run away from that and gunfighters seemed to have a way of dying at the end of a gun and he could not see anything different for him. All he could do was drift, a lonely, bitter man, until the day the fatal bullet finally caught up with him.

He had heard how some of his kind had died—shot in the back while sitting at a card table, holding aces and eights; or kicking and gasping away a life amid the dust and gunsmoke at the OK Corral in Tombstone; or dying miserably alone, a bullet through the heart, in a sheepman's house in Fort Sumner. That was the lot of his kind.

His life was all that he had in the world. It was inevitable that someday he would lose it and the way his cards were stacked he would lose it violently. Once he was dead, he would be gone without a trace left behind him, except for an inglorious remembrance now and then.

He was not afraid to die, even by violence. He had long ago become reconciled to that. What made him grave and sad was that he had contributed nothing constructive to the world. He had turned down the wrong fork while in his teens and never come back. The only thing he could say for himself was that he'd never killed another man without giving him an even break.

He thought of all the people he had known and discovered that very few of them had ever meant anything to him. The very nature of his existence did not allow him to be anything but suspicious and wary. The closest kinship he had experienced with anybody had been with the McQueens.

This realization angered Lawson at first. However, he could not deny its actuality, and after a while he accepted it like he accepted the way he would die. Now he knew the reason for the hurt that still lingered in him. He had been hurt because he had genuinely liked them and would have died for them and still they had not taken him into their confidence.

He thought on it a while more. Since someday he would die violently

he might as well die for something that was clear to him. Even though the only reciprocation he could expect was selfishness, this could not change the way his heart felt. Nothing could ever change that. Somehow, he did not feel so alone any more now that someone mattered to him even though he meant nothing to them. It lifted some of the misery from his heart. It made him think that if he had not lived well, at least he would die well. In the final summation, this was the most any man could do.

So, gently, he reined the bay around and started back...

HE DID NOT have much difficulty picking up their tracks. They were still plain in the sand. He followed them, an eagerness in his heart, but when they were joined by the signs of three other riders the eagerness was displaced by dread.

He told himself he should not be surprised. There was nothing else to be expected considering how things stood. The only reason the McQueens had not been taken before now was that he had been with them.

He stepped up the pace of the bay. Rage began to stir anew in Lawson. The fact that there were three of them would indicate that they were Dixie Ellsworth, Wes Tyler and the Arapaho Kid. Not only the odds but the character of the men made these the most dangerous of them all in Lawson's estimation.

He proceeded as fast as he could for he had to overtake them but he used caution, too. His only chance against them lay in surprise.

He came to where a palisade of stone reared upward. He studied it a while. This was a shoulder of one of the peaks and he saw where he could climb up to a shelf that would afford him a good look of the country ahead.

He dismounted and worked his way up. He was sweating profusely by the time he gained the shelf. He squinted his eyes and there far ahead he made them out. There were five riders and a pack horse.

He studied the lay of the land a little more and then he came down as fast as he dared. The bay was rested and he jumped into the saddle and

spurred it into a run. He sent the horse up the slide of a ridge and once over the skyline he ran the bay along the slope. From what he had observed of the country, he could get ahead of the others without being seen by staying on this side of the ridge.

He pushed the bay as hard as it would go. The others would be moving at a leisurely pace and Lawson figured he could overtake and pass them before the bay played out. Pines and junipers began to dot the ridge. The trees kept thickening all the way and Lawson's heart beat more confidently. He had seen the trees from the shelf and had realized it had to do to happen here.

The bay stumbled and almost went down but it recovered and kept on. However, it was tiring fast. It could not hold this pace much longer. He turned the bay back up the ridge and topped the crest in a grove of junipers that hid him from view. He kept going until he came to the edge of a clearing that made a long avenue down a hillside. He stayed prudently in the shelter of the trees while he looked.

Down below he saw them and his heart gave an exultant leap. They were coming up the hill unaware that he was up there. Reining the bay behind a pine, he drew his gun and waited.

The bay was blowing hard and he feared that this sound would warn them but now that the horse was resting the noise of its breathing quickly diminished. Soon it was barely audible.

AS THE riders drew nearer, Lawson saw that the old man rode slumped forward in an attitude of utter despair. Even the girl had lost her arch and gelid aloofness. She rode with her head lowered, looking nowhere but at the ground. It was as though she and her father had no more hope left in the world.

As Lawson had guessed, the other three riders were Dixie Ellsworth, Wes Tyler and the Arapaho Kid. They rode with a jauntiness that suggested they were already mentally spending Big Jim Sabine's treasure.

Lawson clamped his left hand down over the bay's muzzle so that it would

not whinny. Now that the moment was at hand, his heart was beating wild and hard, and sweat trickled warmly down the planes of his cheeks. He waited until all of them had passed the pine. Then he jumped the bay out behind them.

The girl and the old man were riding in the lead so that Ellsworth, Tyler and the Arapaho Kid were left at the mercy of Lawson's gun with no chance of using the girl or the old man as shields. The three heard the bay move and they whipped their horses around, their hands stabbing for their guns. Then they saw the .44 in Lawson's hand and the look in his eyes and on his face and they froze without drawing their weapons.

The girl stopped her horse and turned in the saddle. When she saw Lawson, a short, happy cry broke from her. This roused the old man and he halted his mount and then wheeled him around. Wetness glimmered in the old man's eyes when he saw Lawson. The old man's mouth worked but no sound emerged. Then his head dropped and he began to cry, softly.

Startlement and hatred glowered in the eyes of Ellsworth and his companions. Their hands remained clasped about the handles of their guns. They were three to one and Lawson knew this was the thought in all their minds. The odds were in their favor. At least one of them would survive a draw-and-shoot. He could not hope to get all of them.

"The other day, Ellsworth, you asked me who I was," he said quietly, although his heart pounded like mad. "The name is Steve Lawson."

They tensed and then looked at each other and he knew they had heard of him. When their glances came back to him, there was a new respect and wariness in them. They did not look so eager to have it out any more. However, their hands still rested on their guns.

An ugly wrath swirled in Lawson. "Come on," he said through his teeth, suddenly not caring what happened. "Come on and draw, if you feel lucky. Maybe one of you will be able to get me and then again you might not. Let's find out."

Ellsworth was the first to move. Slowly, carefully, his fingers curled

away from the ivory handle of his .45. Then his hand began to lift. When it was shoulder high, Tyler and the Arapaho Kid followed suit.

Lawson said through tight lips, "Get their guns, Ardis."

She responded with alacrity. She lifted the weapons from their holsters and then she reached out and got her Bisley .38-40 from where Ellsworth had shoved it into his waistband. She placed the Bisley in her holster and put the other guns on the packhorse. Then she got the rifles out of their saddle scabbards. She held them cradled in her arms and moved her horse back behind the three horsemen.

Lawson said, "Get down from your horses."

Ellsworth showed his teeth in a smile that was meant to be engaging. "Let's talk it over, amigo," he said. "I had no idea who you were. If I had, I'd have done different. Believe me, Lawson."

"Step down," said Lawson.

"Listen to me, Lawson," Ellsworth begged. "Do you know what this is all about? Do you know what's going on, Lawson?"

"I know about Big Jim Sabine's cache."

"Good. Then we understand each other," said Ellsworth. "You'll find me a fair man to deal with, Lawson. I'm not greedy. I'll give any man a square deal. I was in the pen with McQueen. That's where I got to know him. I got out before he did and then I waited for him to finish his time. I could have gone it alone, Lawson, but like I said I'm not greedy. I got Tyler and the Kid to give me a hand. We were to split three ways even. Throw in with us and we'll split four. There's enough for that."

"I don't have to bargain with anyone," said Lawson. "I'm the one holding the gun. Now step down."

Ellsworth's eyes narrowed. A spasm of rage contorted his features but then he got control of himself. "You want it all for yourself. Is that it, amigo?"

"It's possible," said Lawson. "Now step down before I blast you down."

Cursing savagely, Ellsworth dismounted. Tyler and the Arapaho Kid reluctantly did the same.

Lawson said, "We're taking your horses and guns on about a mile. We'll leave your guns and saddles there but your horses we're turning loose. We'll leave three canteens with the guns. You can get them and hike to Laguna if you're of a mind to."

Ellsworth's chest rose and fell with the fury of his breathing. "You can get the gold, Lawson, but after you've got it, you'll still have to take it out of the Seven Peaks. You're going to find that a mighty hard job to do by your lonesome."

"Let me worry about that," said Lawson. "You worry about getting to Laguna alive..."

CHAPTER

6

Confession

THAT NIGHT, when they camped, the old man lay on his blankets but he did not sleep. His eyes stayed wide open and he stared straight upward as though he were looking into a secret world of his own. He seemed lost in thoughts that were grave and momentous. It was almost like he was making a final review of all the things he had ever done.

When the girl came to feed him his broth, it was obvious that he did not care for it. She urged him to have some and, to please her, he swallowed most of it. However, he took it without appetite or gusto.

He refused to eat anything more and went back instantly to his wide-eyed, somber contemplations. He was thinking hard on something and he looked neither happy nor depressed. It was as though he were finally face to face with the long-awaited inevitable and he was accepting it with a calm and respectful dignity.

After the girl and Lawson had eaten and the plates and pans had been put away, the old man called the two. The girl went instantly to his side but Lawson hesitated. The old man saw this and called him again.

The girl was already kneeling beside the old man as Lawson came over. The girl's face was strained, fear made shadows in her eyes. It was apparent she knew, too, that the moment was at hand.

The old man motioned Lawson clos-

er and so Lawson dropped to one knee across from the girl. The old man stared a while at his daughter and then he showed her a smile to reassure her. The girl averted her face and bit down on her lower lip. The old man saw and he patted one of her hands a while. Then he turned his glance on Lawson.

"At the last one of the peaks, Lawson," the old man began, "you'll find a trail that doesn't seem to go anywhere. It looks like a narrow ledge that just winds around the mountain until it peters out halfway up the peak. There seems to be nothing on this peak, only stone and jackpine. But you take this trail, Lawson, and when you're over on the northern side of the mountain keep your eyes peeled. You'll find a cave there. The mouth is covered with jackpine growing all around it. You'll have to look real good if you don't want to miss it. Go in that cave, Lawson, and you'll find a pile of stones and dirt. Dig in these and the gold should be there."

Lawson said nothing. He just knelt there, feeling strangely humble and sad inside. He glanced once at the girl and saw that her face was still averted. A tear had rolled halfway down one cheek and halted there, like a glittering gem of sorrow.

"You see, Lawson," the old man went on, "I'm finally trusting you. It might have seemed like a long time to you but I had to be sure. Now I am sure and I'm not worried at all. I know you'll do right by my girl."

"You'd better get some sleep," he said gruffly. "You've got to do some riding tomorrow."

The old man smiled gently. It was obvious he knew better. However, he did not contradict this. He said, "There's enough gold for the two of you, Lawson. You won't want for anything the rest of your life."

"There's gonna be enough for three," said Lawson.

JEFF McQUEEN smiled again. There was something sad and wistful about it. He was silent a moment, thinking on something. The smile faded and a troubled look came into the old man's glance.

"Maybe it isn't right," he said, more to himself than to the girl and Law-

son. "I know how that money was gathered and I'd be the last to say that there was anything right about it. But it's all I've got. It's all I can leave. Time has run out on me. It's too late for me to start over again."

The focus of his eyes shifted and rested on Lawson again. There was pleading in the glance. "I'm not trying to make excuses, Lawson. I'm not trying to pretend to be something I never was. I rode with Big Jim Sabine. I was a rustler and a road agent. The things I did were all wrong. I put in twenty years in the pen but I'm not crying about it. I had it coming to me. Now that it's too late I see all the wrong things I've done. Maybe it's wrong, too, for me to turn that gold over to you and my girl. I'd like to turn it over to the law but there's my girl to think about. She's all I've got, Lawson."

Sweat stood out on the old man's brow. He was beginning to breathe heavily again and he paused a while to rest. Finally, he said, "She was five years old when I went to the pen, Lawson. Her mother died when she was thirteen. You can imagine what it was like for her, being a convict's daughter. She's had a rough time of it, Lawson. She's had to do things she'd never have done if she hadn't been a convict's daughter.

"I owe her something, Lawson. I owe her for the life she's had to lead because of me. I should have died two years ago, Lawson. but I wouldn't give in. There was all this gold in the Seven Peaks and I wanted to live long enough to get out of the pen and give it to my girl. That's the only thing that kept me alive the last two years. That gold can give my girl a new life."

He reached up and caught one of Lawson's hands. There was an urgency in the way the old man hung on and squeezed. "Look after my girl, Lawson," the old man said. "Look after Ardis. She's really a good girl, no matter what she might have done. She's had a hard time of it but that gold will make it up to her. I wish I could have left her a good honest name but it's too late for that."

All this talking had weakened the old man. He was breathing heavily, his face was pale with strain, his eyes

were luminous with pain. The girl reached out and stroked her father's forehead. He quieted then and smiled weakly at her.

Lawson said, "You'd better try to get some sleep." He rose to his feet and for a while stared down at the old man. Then Lawson said, "Don't worry, McQueen."

"Thank you, Lawson," the old man said, a catch in his voice. "Thank you."

He closed his eyes and appeared to drop off. He was restless for a long time, mumbling as if in delirium every now and then. However, at midnight he quieted. He lay very still and his breathing became low and measured. He never opened his eyes. A little after dawn, his breathing stopped...

CHAPTER

7

Dolly

THE GROUND was soft and in a little while Lawson had the grave dug. The girl had wrapped the old man in a blanket and sewed it together. Lawson carried the old man over and lowered him in the grave. Then he started to fill in the hole. The girl was sobbing softly.

Lawson did not try to comfort her. He thought it was best if she cried everything out. When he was through filling in the grave, he looked around until he found two reasonably straight sticks. He tied these in the shape of a cross and with a rock pounded it into the earth at the head of the grave.

The girl was still crying. She knelt with her face in her hands and her shoulders slumped. The sound of her sobbing was not very loud. It was a low wail but, nevertheless, it carried a strong measure of grief and anguish.

Lawson saddled his horse and the girl's. Then he carried the old man's saddle over and set it down at the head of the grave. He stood a while, staring down at the girl, wishing he could think of something to say but no words would come. The world seemed rather empty to him, also, and he had barely known McQueen. So he understood how it must be with her.

He was standing like that, looking at the girl, feeling sad and low himself, when he heard the sound of a horse behind him. Lawson whirled,

gun in hand, the hammer racked back. A snarl contorted his mouth and he was all set to begin blasting away when he realized it was not necessary.

It was the Nivens. They reined in sharply when Lawson came around with his .44 bared. A flicker of fright crossed Will Niven's face but its passing was very brief. His eyes were instantly bright and shrewd again and his voice was soothing when he spoke.

"Whoa now, Lawson," Niven said, spreading his hands away from his sides. "I don't mean you no trouble. Don't fight the bit like that, friend."

Niven's glance took in the grave and the girl who was still weeping, although the sounds were barely audible now. "Dolly," he said, "look after that poor girl."

His wife had already dismounted. She went over to Ardis McQueen and put both arms about the girl's shoulders. She tensed at the first contact and her head lifted sharply. Then Dolly Niven spoke quietly to her and the girl put her face against Dolly Niven's breast and sobbed softly.

Lawson still had his gun on Niven. Very carefully, Niven brought his left hand in and unbuckled his shell belt. The well-maintained Remington made a soft plop as it hit the ground.

"Now will you trust me, Lawson?" asked Niven. "You can have my gun if it will make you feel any better. Here, you can have my rifle, too," he said, drawing the weapon and dropping it to the ground.

"What are you doing here?" asked Lawson. "Why have you followed us?"

Niven sighed. "I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you again that we happen to be headed in the same direction you are?"

"We're not going to Laguna," said Lawson.

"Neither are we, friend."

"Then what are you doing here?"

Niven sighed again. There was something exaggerated about the sound. "If you don't want us, Lawson, we'll ride on by ourselves. But let me tell you this. That poor girl needs a woman with her now. She needs a woman's company and comfort real bad. Are you going to deny it to her?"

There was truth in what Niven said, Lawson had to admit. However, he

could not bring himself to trust the man.

"You've got my guns," Niven said when Lawson did not speak. "If you're still worried, why don't you tie my hands behind my back?" His tone was wry.

"I might do just that," said Lawson, holstering his .44, "if I don't decide you might behave better with a bullet in your head..."

LAWSON decided to take no chances. He appropriated Will Niven's guns and left the man unarmed. Niven did not seem too pleased about this, as though it were something he had not expected even though he had suggested it. But he made no comment.

Dolly Niven's interest in the girl seemed genuine and Lawson was not sorry he had allowed her along. She and Ardis appeared to be hitting it off quite well. Ardis did not talk much, she was still weighted in grief, but she seemed to derive comfort from Dolly Niven's presence. Lawson rather liked the woman although he had no use whatever for her husband.

That night, when they camped, Dolly Niven insisted on doing all the work. At first, Ardis protested but then she gave in. She lay down on her blankets and appeared to doze off.

Will Niven, as usual, began to complain and boss his wife around. Lawson's temper was short. He had a lot on his mind. He'd never before in his life had a responsibility other than to himself but now he had an old man's dying wish on his mind. It made Lawson restless and irritable.

When Niven asked his wife to bring him a drink, Lawson snapped, "Will you shut up and leave her alone?"

Niven stiffened. His eyes grew angry and mean. "Are you telling me how to handle my wife?"

"That's right," said Lawson.

"Because you've got a gun and I haven't?"

"Do you want yours back?"

Niven paused while he studied Lawson's face. Then Niven shrugged and said, "Forget it, friend." He did not bother his wife any more after that.

After she had eaten, Ardis McQueen fell asleep again. Lawson thought this was a good thing. The girl had not slept any the night before

and the preceding nights she had rested little. It was good for her to get a long, restful sleep.

He wished he could do the same but his mind was too troubled. He felt disturbed and restless. He had not thought the thing would weigh his mind so heavily. He wanted so hard to discharge his responsibility to the letter that he was afraid of letting the old man down. It was this that made Lawson so fretful and uneasy.

He paced restlessly about. He smoked one cigarette and immediately built another. He was aware of the Nivens huddled together to one side, discussing something. Their voices were so low that Lawson could not catch what they were saying. Will Niven seemed to be insisting on something which his wife was reluctant to do. After a while, however, she apparently gave in for Niven subsided in his arguments. The woman kept casting glances at Lawson. They seemed uncertain and even frightened.

AFTER A while, Niven rolled himself in his blankets and promptly began to snore. He apparently had the faculty of relaxing anywhere and under any conditions. His wife remained awake. Every now and then she would dart a glance at Lawson. It was almost as though she were appealing to him for something.

At last weariness came to Lawson. He felt he could sleep so he lay down on his blankets but once he was there he discovered he could not drop off. His eyes would not close. They stared up at the winking of the stars. He wondered if it was his distrust of Niven that kept him awake.

He lay there a long time waiting for sleep. He dozed a little once but it was not for long. Finally, full of disgust with himself, he rose and tossed more wood on the fire. He noted that the girl still slept heavily. Niven, too, was snoring. However, Dolly Niven was sitting up, staring at Lawson.

He looked at her a while, troubled by something he could not explain. Seated himself on a rock. He had finished building a cigarette when he saw Dolly Niven walking toward him.

He popped the smoke in his mouth but left it unlighted. Squinting a lit-

tle, he watched the woman come. She walked up quietly and seated herself on the ground beside him. She was wearing an old flannel-lined denim jumper and faded blue jeans with a patch on each knee. She drew up her legs and clasped her arms about them and rested her chin on her knees. She looked very thoughtful. The shadows hid the lines and creases in her face, leaving it poignantly beautiful.

She was a long while like that, immersed in somber reflection. Finally, her head turned and she looked at Lawson. "Where are you going, Lawson?" she asked in a whisper.

He did not answer right away. A disturbing prescience stirred in him. Then he said, "What do you mean?"

"Where are you taking Ardis?"

"Wherever she wants to go."

"And where is that?"

"Why do you want to know?"

She paused while she thought on something. Then she said, "Will you take me with you, Lawson?"

He took the cigarette from his mouth and studied it. After a while, he put it back between his lips. He knew a pang of bitterness and distaste.

"Would you leave your husband?" he asked quietly.

"Do you blame me, Lawson?"

He did not answer that. "Why don't you wait until you get to some town before leaving him? If you leave him now, he'll only follow you."

"He couldn't do anything though, not if I'm with you. He's scared of you, Lawson. That's why I want to come with you."

HE WAS THINKING how odd and cruel the world was. There seemed to be so very little that was good and beautiful about it. "What if I won't have you?"

She clutched his arm with urgent, pleading fingers. "I won't be any bother. I won't get in your way. I know why you're in the Seven Peaks but I won't get in your way."

Something aigid squeezed his heart. "How do you know why I'm in the Seven Peaks?"

"I know who Jeff McQueen was. I know why he and Ardis came into these mountains." She paused ever so slightly, then went on, "I know about

Big Jim Sabine's gold. Do you know where it is, Lawson? If you do and that's why you don't want me along, I'll promise not to get in your way."

He said nothing. His thinking was full of rancor and weariness.

"You won't have to cut me in on it," she went on when he did not speak. "I'll do the cooking and I'll help around the camp but I don't want any of the gold. I just want you to take me with you. I'll do anything if you'll do that, Lawson. Won't you? Please?"

"If I take you," he said slowly, "what will your husband do?"

"He won't do anything. He's afraid of you. Don't you see, Lawson? That's why I want to come with you. He won't dare try to make me come back if I'm with you."

"But he'll be trailing us all the same, won't he?"

"What do you mean?"

Bitterness and anger edged his tone. "One of you will be with me in my camp and the other will be behind me. In other words, I'll be caught in the middle. Isn't that it?"

"Oh, no, Lawson," she said quickly. "It's nothing like that."

"Isn't it?" he said. "How dumb do you think I am, Mrs. Niven?"

She put her face in her hands and began to cry. "Please, Lawson. Please take me with you. You've seen the way he treats me. You've got to take me with you."

"He put you up to this," said Lawson, his tone hard and uncompromising. "It's his plan to get the gold. Isn't it? Well, you go back to him and tell him it won't work."

Her sobs were real and frightened now. "Don't send me back," she pleaded, hanging on to his arm, her head thrown back, eyes wild and fearful staring up at him. "He'll beat me. It's true he made me come to you but he'll beat me if you send me back and I have to tell him I've failed. You don't know how mean he can be, Lawson."

"Couldn't you take me with you? Now that you know what he has in mind, couldn't you take me with you anyway and stay on your guard? He wouldn't know that you know. You could get away with it, couldn't you, Lawson? Don't send me back. He'll beat me if you do."

Anger raged in Lawson. "If he lays a hand on you, I'll kill him!"

"He'll wait until you're gone. Then he'll beat me."

"Then I'll kill him now!"

"No, Lawson, no," she begged, holding him when he wanted to rise. "He's mean to me but I love him. No matter what he does to me I'll always love him. I'll go back to him even if he beats me. He's my husband, Lawson, and I love him."

He sank back on the rock and stared at her. The sobs convulsed her, each one a spasm that racked her shoulders. Her crying held all the regret and anguish of a misplaced love and this realization put a feeling of pity and compassion in Lawson's heart. He placed a hand on her head and stroked her hair. Gradually, her sobs diminished and finally were silent. The night then seemed empty and sad...

When Niven awoke the next morning, Lawson walked over to the man. Lawson's face was hard and grim. "Get your gear and move out," he said. "If you ever ride into another of my camps, I'll shoot you down."

Niven spread his hands in feigned bafflement. "Now what's got into you, friend?"

"You know what," said Lawson. "I'm on to your game." He had Niven's Remington and rifle and he unloaded these. He tossed the weapons at Niven's feet. "If it wasn't for your wife I'd set you afoot. That would stop you from following me."

Niven turned and threw a dark look at his wife. She cringed and bowed her head. Lawson saw this and his wrath increased.

"I'll tell you one more thing, Niven," he said. "Don't lay a hand on your wife because of this. If you do and I ever find out, I'll get you if I have to trail you to hell and back..."

CHAPTER

8

The Girl And The Gold

THE MAN lay sprawled with his arms flung out and his face thrust into the sand. That much Lawson could see. He reined in the bay while he was still some distance away and carefully studied the land. Beside him, he was aware of the girl

giving him a questioning look.

The man lay quite still as if in the grip of death. From the looks of his clothes he was the man who had called himself Homer Cartwright. He lay at the foot of a bluff just outside a cluster of stones and jackpine. Overhead, a couple of vultures were wheeling with unclean impatience.

Lawson stayed there a while, watching the land. The girl gave him another inquiring look but he ignored her. He stared until his eyes smarted from the intentness of his scrutiny. The man ahead never stirred. Lawson was finally convinced that the man's inertness was really the stillness of death.

He sent the bay ahead at a walk. His narrowed eyes still studied the land but nothing untoward or suspicious showed. The girl trailed him just as cautiously. They rode up to the man and when Lawson saw the large blot of dried blood on the man's back his last doubt was dispelled. He dismounted and turned the man over. It was Cartwright.

Lawson heard the girl cry out and he came around, hand stabbing at his gun. The tip of the barrel had just cleared the holster when he found himself staring into the guns of Dixie Ellsworth, Wes Tyler and the Arapaho Kid. It was just like looking into the cold eyes of death. Lawson froze like he was and his fingers opened and his .44 fell to the ground.

"Good," said Ellsworth, smiling when he saw this. "We'll get along, amigo, if you know how to behave."

The three came out from among the rocks and jackpine where they had been hiding. Avid looks were on all their faces. Ellsworth and the Arapaho Kid had eyes only for Lawson. It was Tyler who went up to the girl and disarmed her.

"We meet again, honey," he said. "I've missed you."

Her lips tightened but her face was not too afraid. She said nothing.

Ellsworth saw the startled, puzzled look on Lawson's face and the man laughed. "This was Cartwright's idea only he got caught in his own stampede. He was pretty mad at you, amigo. He wanted to get even in the worst way. He ran into us and offered to throw in with us. He rounded

up our horses and then we killed him because we don't aim to split more than three ways. We hate to waste anything so when we spotted you we planted his body here for bait. It worked, too."

He was jovial and light-hearted but a glint of meanness glowered in his eyes. That white smile was still only a forced display. The pleasantness he evidenced was merely a surface show.

The Arapaho Kid came ahead and took Lawson's Winchester from its saddle scabbard. Then he walked away and a short while returned with the horses. Ellsworth wagged his .45 at Lawson.

"We're going for a little ride now. Lawson. We'll camp up ahead where there's some water. After we've made camp, we're going to have a little talk. I'm sure you've got some interesting things to tell us..."

WHEN ELLSWORTH called a halt and they had dismounted, the Arapaho Kid tied Lawson's wrists behind his back with a piggin' string. They left the girl free, however, and ordered her to cook the meal. Tyler insisted on helping her. He followed her wherever she went. It seemed to Lawson that she encouraged this and it made him rather angry.

Lawson seated himself with care. He picked a spot where he could rest his back against a rock. There was a sharp edge to the stone behind him and every chance he got he began rubbing his bound wrists against it. He had an idea what these men had in mind and it left Lawson chilled and desperate.

The girl fed Lawson. He got the impression that she was trying to tell him something with her eyes but she did not speak. When the meal was done, Ellsworth ordered her wrists bound. Tyler did this and then seated himself beside her. Ellsworth gave him a dark look.

Tyler grinned. "You and the Kid keep Lawson company, Dixie. Me, I'll entertain the lady."

Ellsworth appraised the girl carefully, a wary interest in his narrowed glance. "Don't go making a fool of yourself over her, Wes," he said.

He walked over and stood in front of Lawson. "Well, amigo," said Ells-

worth with that false joviality, "did you eat well? Are you comfortable? Are you ready for a little chat?"

Lawson said nothing. He hadn't had much of a chance to saw on his bonds. He felt hopeless and a little sick right now.

"What's the matter, Lawson?" Ellsworth said mockingly. "Cat got your tongue? Or are you bashful? If you are, we'll get you to talking. Won't we, Kid?"

"He—he," said the Arapaho Kid. He was hunkered down by the fire, arms across his thighs, eyes fixed on Lawson with a bright, brutal intensity.

"Nothing yet, Lawson?" Ellsworth said when Lawson did not speak. "Believe me when I say that the Kid knows how to make people talk. Years ago he lived a long time with the Arapahos. He picked up a lot of pointers from them. Isn't that right, Kid?"

"He—he," the Kid said. He got up and went over to where his saddle lay on the ground and got a running iron. He came back and shoved the iron in the coals of the fire. Then he squatted and fixed that avid look on Lawson again.

Lawson said, "What if I don't know anything?" He could feel sweat running down his face and clinging to the beard stubble on his face.

"You know something all right," said Ellsworth. "The old man is dead. If he hadn't told you anything, you'd have turned back. While that iron is getting hot, amigo, you try to remember what the old man told you. You can tell us what we want to know of your own free will or you can make us dig it out of you with that iron. It really doesn't make any difference to us. Does it, Kid?"

The Arapaho Kid looked at Lawson, his mouth a thin slit.

Ellsworth walked away then. He went and sat down on a pack and built a smoke. The Arapaho Kid squatted by the fire. Every now and then he would draw out the iron and check it to see if it was hot enough. Every time he put it back he would titter happily.

SUDDENLY the girl spoke. Her voice was clear and cold. "I'm go-

ing to give you something to think about," she said. "I know where the gold is. I'll lead one of you there, but only one. He can have me and the gold. I've seen all of you looking at me and that's my offer, me and the gold, but only to the one of you that's left."

Ellsworth was sitting up tense on his pack, the smoke forgotten in his hand. Tyler, seated beside the girl, pulled a trifle back and laid a surprised, eager look on her. Even the Arapaho Kid took his eyes off Lawson. The Kid turned around until he was staring at the girl with the same fixity he had reserved for Lawson.

"It doesn't make any difference to me who it is," the girl went on. "I want each of you to think on this: How far can you trust the other two? How do you know they won't turn on you just to have a bigger cut for themselves? Look what happened to Cartwright. How do you know it won't happen to you? The smartest one will strike first and get rid of the other two before they get rid of him. Who is that one going to be? Think on it."

"Shut up," shouted Ellsworth, jumping to his feet, face contorted with rage. He strode angrily up to the girl and leaned over her, the back of his hand poised. "Shut up before I shut you up."

"Why should I shut up?" she cried. "It's the truth, isn't it? Neither one of you trusts the other two. You brought them along, Ellsworth, because you needed them. You needed Cartwright, too, and you struck a bargain with him. After you got your use out of him, you killed him. Is that what you've got in mind for Tyler and the Kid?"

"I told you to shut up," Ellsworth shouted, the cords standing out in his neck. The back of his hand made a sound like a gunshot as he brought it across the girl's face. She moaned and fell over on her side.

Wes Tyler came up to a crouching position, angered face turned up toward Ellsworth. "Don't you hit her again, Dixie," Tyler cried.

"You fool," snarled Ellsworth. "Can't you see what she's trying to do?"

"I'm only saying something that's

on all your minds," the girl said. "Even on yours, Ellsworth. Haven't you ever thought how nice it would be to have all that gold to yourself? Are you going to deny you've ever had such thoughts? I'll throw myself in with the gold, Ellsworth. To you. To whoever is left of the three."

"I'll shut you up," growled Ellsworth. "I'll shut you up good."

His foot lashed out, catching the girl in the side. She groaned with pain and tried to roll away as Ellsworth poised his boot for another go.

"I told you to leave her alone," shouted Tyler.

He came to his feet with a bound that carried him up close to Ellsworth. Tyler's fist lashed out and Ellsworth emitted a cry of alarm and went sprawling on his back. Rage and hate stormed across Ellsworth's features. He did not try to get up. Still on his back he drew his gun and fired.

TYLER SAW it come and he made a grab at his own pistol but he was too late. The bullet took him in the heart. His face slacked harshly and his mouth gaped and then he collapsed in a limp heap.

Something warned Ellsworth, still on the ground. He rolled over quickly, gun poking out ahead of him. However, before he could snap off a shot, the Arapaho Kid had fired.

"No," Ellsworth cried, but it was a strangled, stricken cry. "No," he cried again, pushing himself up on one elbow, face grimacing with pain. He tried to aim his .45 but his arm was shaking. A small blotch of blood appeared on his back.

The Arapaho Kid fired again. This slug smashed through the top of Ellsworth's head and dropped him as suddenly as a sack of wheat. He made no further sound. Now there was only the smell of gunsmoke and the feel of death about the camp.

Lawson had seen it coming. Heart thumping, he had begun sawing furiously with his wrists the moment the last attention diverted from him. He was still sawing at his thongs as Dixie Ellsworth died.

There was only one thought in the

Arapaho Kid's mind. "He—he," he snickered advancing toward the girl. "You're a smart one you are, girlie. I think I'm gonna like you. Now there's only me and you and the gold. You said you'd belong to the one who was left, didn't you? Well, that's me."

The girl lay on the ground, face twisted with horror. She started to come up on her feet but the Arapaho Kid swung out with his open hand. The blow sent her flat again.

"There now," he said. "You outsmarted yourself, didn't you? You figured we'd kill each other off. Wasn't that it? You didn't figure on any of us coming through it alive, didn't you? It takes a purty smart fellow to put anything over on the Arapaho Kid. You just ain't that smart, girlie."

Sweat was streaming down into Lawson's eyes as his wrists parted. On the instant he could not believe he was free. Then he brought his arms around in front of him and rose to his knees. The Arapaho Kid's back was to him and the Kid was intent on the girl who was trying to roll away from him.

Lawson glanced longingly at the gun in Ellsworth's dead hand but both Ellsworth and Tyler lay on the other side of the fire. The Arapaho Kid was between them and Lawson. Moving as quietly as he could, he sneaked up on the Arapaho Kid. The Kid still had his gun in his hand.

Spur jingle warned the Arapaho Kid. He tensed and started to come around swiftly. As the Kid turned, Lawson drove in, kicking up with his right boot. The toe caught the Kid's gun wrist before he could fire. He howled with hurt and rage and the gun flew out of his hand. Lawson made a dive for the weapon but the Arapaho Kid kicked out, catching Lawson in mid-air. The blow slammed the breath out of Lawson. He felt himself going back. He rolled over twice and came to a stop at the edge of the fire. Glancing up, he saw the Arapaho Kid advancing on him.

The Kid came on in a crouch. He had drawn his Bowie and the blade glinted a reddish-orange where it reflected off the blazing fire. A vile, cruel smile twisted the Kid's lips.

Coming on slowly and warily, the Kid said. "I like a knife more than a gun. I like to see the blood run and hear a man scream. Have you ever seen a man with his guts hanging out, Lawson? Well, you're gonna see yours."

The heat of the fire was a warm blast on Lawson's face. His breath came fast and frantic in his throat. His eyes seemed mesmerized by the sharp point of the Bowie coming slowly and relentlessly closer to him. His left hand pawed at the ground, searching for something, anything. Then he remembered the running iron in the fire.

Still on his back, he began inching himself backward, hoping that the Arapaho Kid would not divine what lay in his mind.

"Go on and crawl. You ain't getting away from me. I'll have your belly open in a minute or two." The Kid screamed at Lawson.

Sweat streamed down the sides of Lawson's face. His heart throbbed like a violent, frenzied drum. He went back a little more, careful to hug the edge of the fire, and then, out of the corner of his eyes, he saw it.

The Arapaho Kid leaped then. He launched himself through the air at Lawson, knife firmly thrust out. Lawson only had time to snatch the handle of the running iron and pull it from the fire. He had no time to try to evade the Kid. Lawson thrust the red hot end of the iron out at arm's length, straight at the face of the Arapaho Kid.

The Kid saw it come and with a violent wrench he twisted his head to the side but still the iron burned a path along the side of his face. The Kid's scream blasted up at the stars. The stench of burnt flesh and whiskers filled Lawson's nostrils as he caught the Kid's body on his knees and flung him aside.

The pain had made the Kid forget his knife but he still had it in his hand as he jumped to his feet, shouting with rage and torment. Lawson was on his feet, too. He started a motion with the red-hot tip of the iron at the Kid's midsection and when the Kid cringed and doubled up for protection, Lawson brought the iron up

swiftly and slammed it down on the Kid's skull with all his strength...

CHAPTER

9

"Kill Them Both"

THE NEXT night Lawson and the girl camped at the foot of the seventh peak. At the break of dawn they were up. It took them an hour of searching before they found the way to the ledge that wound around the mountain.

Now that the moment was at hand, Lawson was surprised that he knew no excitement. All was dullness in him. There was even a small measure of distaste. If it hadn't been for his promise to the old man, Lawson would have given it up right then.

It was slow going along the ledge. It was very narrow in places and beyond the rim there was nothing but a heart-chilling drop to a bottom that lay far below. The mountain here was covered with jackpine that clung tenaciously to the precipitous slopes. It was impossible to see any distance at all along the ledge.

They had decided against taking the horses for the ledge had appeared too precarious for that. They brought along only a prospector's pick and shovel for digging.

It was the middle of the morning before they found the cave. The jackpine grew so thick around the edge of the narrow opening that Lawson almost passed it up. He had to chop the scrubby trees away to enter and to give the interior some light.

However, the cave widened out immediately inside the entrance. They had brought along a length of dried wood for a torch and Lawson lighted this now. Against his will, he felt his heart pounding and excitement surged in his veins as he glanced about the cave. He did not like this birth of emotion but he could not help it.

The girl, too, was caught up with elation. Her breathing was an audible sound. It came fast and sharp in the narrow confines of the cave. Her eyes were wide and bright with excitement.

The mound of dirt and stones lay at the end of the cave. A small cry burst out of the girl when she spotted

it. Lawson could hear his heart hammering as he walked up to it. The mound looked like it hadn't ever been disturbed.

The girl held the torch while Lawson dug. It was cool here in the cave but still sweat was soon channeling down Lawson's body under his clothes. He knew a feverish anxiousness to get the thing over with.

He went down three feet before the blade of the shovel rang against metal. He cleared away the dirt hurriedly and the smoky light of the torch revealed a small, iron-bound chest. It was very heavy and the girl stuck one end of the torch in the ground and gave Lawson a hand.

WHEN THEY had the chest out of the hole, Lawson straightened and stepped back. The girl was trembling with excitement. A wry twist curved Lawson's lips. He indicated the chest with a motion of his hand.

"Go on and open it," he said. "You're entitled to first look."

The chest was unlocked. The girl's hands shook as she knelt and lifted the lid. The girl's intake of breath was a shrill, gasping sound. Lawson felt his throat freeze for an instant.

Then the noise came from the front of the cave.

Lawson whirled, drawing his gun. He had the weapon cleared of the holster when he spied the other standing there, big bore of his Remington pointing at Lawson's heart. Lawson went rigid, his .44 half-raised.

"Want to try it, Lawson?" said Will Niven, a hard, mirthless smile on his face. "If you aren't going to, then drop your gun."

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Lawson obeyed. The sound the .44 made when it hit the ground was like a death knell to all his hopes and dreams.

Niven exhaled a sigh of relief. Some of the tension went out of his face. "Come on in, Dolly," he called.

She entered the cave and stood there, eyes wide with remorse and dread. A snarl contorted Niven's mouth. "Don't stand there like a stump," he growled. "Walk up there and take the girl's gun and then give a look at that chest. I want to know what's in it."

She complied hurriedly and fearfully. She lifted the girl's .38-40 from its holster and then threw a look at the chest. Sight of the treasure left Dolly Niven strangely unmoved.

"Well," Niven snarled, "speak up. What's in it?"

She tossed the .38-40 to one side. She did not seem very happy. "The gold's there," she said simply.

Desperation gnawed at Lawson's heart. He was enough of a realist to imagine what was forthcoming and this knowledge lodged a bit of panic in his brain. However, it was quickly gone. He was resigned to a violent death. The only thing that saddened him was the realization that he had done so little good during the time he had lived.

"How did you get here?" he asked. "I checked my backtrail all day yesterday and I never spotted you once."

Niven's grin was evil and triumphant. "I got wise," he said. "I laid low during the day. I trailed you by moonlight. When you started up the peak this morning, I figured this was where the gold was hidden. So I came right after you." He gave a short laugh. "Looks like I played it smart, doesn't it?"

"You haven't spent the gold yet," said Lawson.

"Who's going to stop me?" Niven flared. "You?"

"What are you going to do, Will?" asked Dolly Niven. There was a quaver in her voice.

"There's only one thing to do," he said matter-of-factly. "Kill them both."

"No!" Her voice was a sharp, protesting cry. "No!"

"What do you want me to do?" he snarled. "Leave them alive so they can come after me?"

"Couldn't you leave them here without any guns? They haven't done anything to you," she cried. "You've got the gold. Isn't that enough? Do you have to kill, too?"

"Don't go soft on me," he said. "I know what I'm doing."

"Please, Will," she cried. She started toward him. "Let's not have any blood on our hands. We've got the gold. We don't have to kill them. They can't do anything to you if you

take their guns with you. Please, Will."

"Get out of the line of fire, you fool," he shouted.

SHE CAME to an abrupt stop. A moment she stood there, frozen, face convulsed with fright and helplessness. Then a thought struck her. She started backing up, arms spread out. She backed up until she stood directly in front of Lawson.

"I won't let you do it," she cried. "I won't let you kill them. They were good to me. Lawson is the only man who was ever good to me. You can shoot, Will, but I won't get away from in front of him."

Niven's lips paled back from his teeth in a smile that was both brutal and happy. He looked like he had suddenly reached a most pleasing conclusion.

"Do you think that will stop me?" he cried. "With all that gold I'll get myself a real woman, not a simpering cry-baby like you!"

The roar of the Remington was a hollow boom in the cave. Dolly Niven emitted a shrill, pained cry and began to sag. The instant Niven's gun barked, Lawson was diving for his gun on the floor of the cave.

Niven fired again but Lawson had his gun now and he was rolling to the side. The bullet kicked up sand in the spot he had been a moment before.

Ardis McQueen grabbed the torch and threw it into the hole from which the chest had come. The light went out and darkness filled the cave. Only the entrance was visible. A little light came in through the opening. Framed visibly against this was Will Niven.

Lawson aimed at Niven's silhouette and fired. The impact of the bullet rocked Niven back a step. A hoarse cry of pain ripped out of him but he did not go down. It dawned on him then that he was outlined against the light and he turned to run.

Lawson fired again. This slug tagged Niven as he was passing outside. His arms flung up in a wild, agonized gesture and then his stumbling feet tripped and he fell headlong over the lip of the ledge.

He screamed as he plummeted down. There was all the terror and despair of a horrible, imminent death in his

screams and it seemed they would never end. Even the echoes appeared to linger with a cruel, leering malevolence long after Will Niven was dead.

The muscles in Lawson's thighs were quivering with reaction as he rose to his feet. He retrieved the torch and lighted it. He saw that Ardis McQueen was already kneeling beside Dolly Niven.

Lawson knelt down opposite the girl and looked at her. She shook her head ever so slightly. Then he glanced down at Dolly Niven.

Her face was pale and waxen as if already set in the cast of death. However, her breast rose and fell lightly as she breathed. A big blotch of blood stained the front of her shirt.

As though aware that Lawson and the girl were watching her, Dolly Niven's eyes fluttered and opened. They glanced first at the girl, then they shifted to Lawson. They seemed grave and strangely peaceful as they looked up at him.

"Will?" she whispered. "Is he dead?" It was an effort for her to speak.

LAWSON nodded.

"I'm glad," she said. A spasm of pain contorted her features and she paused a moment. She looked very thoughtful as though she had spent a lot of time on what she was now saying. "He's dead but I can't shed even one little tear for him. Is that bad of me, Lawson? I'd have done anything for him because I loved him once."

She paused and drew a deep breath that made a whistling sound in her throat. But she went on.

"It was the gold that finished him. He never would have shot me if the gold hadn't made him crazy. You've got the gold now, Lawson. Don't let it do to you what it did to my Will. You're a good man, Lawson. Don't let that gold make you rotten." With a last show of strength she came up on her elbows. "I wish—I wish—" she said, but then death claimed her...

Lawson and the girl walked out of the cave and stood in the light on the ledge. Lawson felt strangely spent and somber. He felt like he could never hate or kill again.

(cont'd on page 71)

THE TOWNTAMERS

by JOHN LUMSDEN

SILAS FABER rose before dawn and ran a wet comb across the broad top of his almost bald head, and wasn't going to shave because he'd shaved the evening before to call on the Widow Thompson but then decided to lather up and scrape his thin jaw smooth again, and went and heated up the pot of coffee he hadn't finished at dinner and he drank it staring at the top of the two-plank kitchen table.

He drove the buckboard into town and he stood in front of the station looking down the new-laid tracks where the train would come. The en-

Bums, trail bums, that's all they were, but just because they could shoot a gun, everybody made heroes of them...

gine looked new too, when it showed steady around the bend after which ten minutes later, moving squat and glossy in the pale early-morning sunlight.

Silas Faber didn't come forward until his new employee had stepped

Silas Faber liked what he saw when his new employee stepped off the train.



down and in the dust-covered street set his carpetbag down to take the makings from a breast pocket.

"Peter Manning?" Silas Faber came forward and inquired then.

"Well, 'Pete' Manning, yes," with a careless laugh. "I don't go for that 'Peter' stuff. That was my old lady's idea, not mine."

Silas Faber's new employee towered just about half again over Silas. And he must have weighed fully twice as much. Silas liked these details, and his eyes narrowed to cover his pleasure; display of satisfaction, Silas' long experience in dealing with his fellow man had taught him, could cost money.

"You're Silas Tabor?" Pete Manning said past the hand-made quirley he was screwing between his wide weather-toughened lips. Every inch of Pete Manning's skin that was in evidence, in fact, more closely resembled elephant hide than human flesh.

"Fabor, not Tabor," Silas corrected. "My carriage is behind the station. Is this all your luggage?" He was looking at the carpetbag.

"That's it." The careless laugh accompanied this too. "That and what's in my holster."

Silas flicked a glance there, and warm pleasure as at a sharp deal consummated, again swept him; the gun decorating Pete Manning's hip had the look of use and care. Silas was well satisfied indeed; if he felt any displeasure at all, it was at the big fellow's seeming inclination to insolence, but even that, Silas thought, might prove an asset where he planned to use Manning.

"Now we'll get right down to business as soon as you finish your breakfast," Silas said a half hour later after he'd personally set out bacon and coffee and stale biscuits in the big kitchen of his sprawling ranch-house.

"Uh huh," Pete Manning replied, relaxing over his coffee, tapping cigarette ashes on the floor as he glanced here and there indifferently.

"I was the original cattleman in East Bend," Silas went on. "I employ twenty-odd hands, all of whom live

in the bunkhouse you saw just below here as we rode in. You will live not with the other men, but in a room here in the house."

"Uh huh," Pete Manning said.

"Now what was your experience again. Henry Foley, the hostler, told me about you, you know, and he listed your qualifications, but very sketchily."

"My 'qualifications' is good," Pete Manning chuckled. "Hank Foley, eh. Speaking of 'qualifications', Hank has a few 'qualifications' himself."

"Yes, I noticed that he had a considerable number of notches on that old walnut-handled Colt of his, but he declined this job when I offered it to him, said he was too old now for gunfighting."

"Yeah, Hank must be sixty if he's a day. Tamed some tough towns in his time."

"Yes, so I understand. Now just exactly what has been your record again, Mr. Manning?..."

"JERRY!" Pete Manning whooped. It was noon of the same day and he'd taken his new mount for a test jaunt into town for tobacco ("And maybe I'll take a little peep in at the saloon too, while I'm there," he'd winked at Silas Faber, who'd made an heroic effort to grin back but with not too notable success), and there standing right on the boardwalk, a sight for sore eyes if he'd ever seen one, was Pete's old saddlepard, Jerry Mulligan.

This worthy looked as though some giant might have swung an anvil on a chain three times around his head and then caught Jerry up side the jaw with the flat side of the iron on the fourth time around. But his grin of happy recognition was nevertheless as good as new.

"Petey!"

So Pete Manning took his little peep in at the saloon in Jerry Mulligan's company.

"Sure, Sink Zukesky is around these parts someplace," Jerry said bleary-eyed an hour later.

"Sink Zukesky?"

"Sure he is. Him and me threw down on that bank in Red Horse, it wasn't three-four weeks ago. Like to

got our damned heads blown off. You know what that lousy tinbadge uses on us? A shotgun."

"Old Sink himself. What do you know. How about old what's-his-name—you know, the skinny one—"

"Parsons? Hairy Parsons?"

"Parsons, that's him. Old Hairy. What ever happens to old Hairy? The dirty dog. He ran out on me up at Dodge, when we shot up that honkatonkery up there."

"He's still around. Hairy's around someplace. He's around someplace."...

SILAS FABER, having been in on no part of this happy reunion, was filled with none of its brimming good-fellowship as he stood on his veranda that evening and watched Pete Manning ride in.

"It was my understanding that you had planned to return within an hour," Silas greeted him.

"Yeah, well the trouble was, I met old Jerry. Jerry Mulligan. An old friend. Boy, am I hungry. What time do you bang that dinner gong around here, Mr. Tabor?"

"Eating seems to be your chief capability, as far as I've been able to observe, Mr. Manning. Eating and drinking," Silas added as Pete stumbled on the bottom step coming up onto the porch. "I'm beginning to wonder if you're the wizard with a gun that Henry Foley claimed. And my name is Faber, not Tabor."

Pete Manning stood with his eyebrows raised wildly high, gazing down at Silas Faber.

"You're beginning to wonder if I'm such shakes with a six-shooter, eh, Mr. Tabor," he said. "You see that copper spoon hanging on the wall in the kitchen there?" Pete's right hand suddenly blurred as he drew and snapped a bullet through the front doorway, and the bullet crossed the wide living room and the wide kitchen and it rang the dangling ladle like a dinner gong.

"Now, wait a minute—!" Silas Faber began in outrage.

"You see that cigarette butt out in the yard there, Mr. Tabor?" Pete persisted, and as his gun exploded again, the quirley remnant leapt briefly in

the dust. "And that cinch strap halfway down the hill there, hanging on that corral gate?" He triggered again and looking in the indicated direction involuntarily now, Silas Faber saw the scrap of leather remain undisturbed.

"You missed," Silas said at once.

"Yeah, I missed," Pete said, and put another slug down the slope that flipped the cinch strap neatly off the fence rail.

Pete Manning rode indifferently, on his first assignment, his face half screwed up. This kind of stuff, he didn't know. Shootin' down a gent, cold, and all. The other half of his face writhed sourly now too. He squinted around at nothing, baking desert bouncing the blazing sun up at his pale blue eyes.

What the hell was the fellow's name again—Addison, was it? Allison? The hell with it. He locked a big forefinger over the cigarette limp on his sun-calloused lips, squinting around, whipping a deep inhale back into his lungs.

Should've stuck to town-taming. This damned helling around, he didn't know. It wore a man down. What was he? Thirty-seven, was it? Or forty-seven? All this damned sun on his head all the time was turning him punchy or something.

"Hey, inside the house!" he hollered when he rode into the dooryard of the first place north; that was where Tabor had told him to go. There were these three different pilgrims who'd staked out Tabor's graze; this Addison or Allison or whatever the hell his name was, was the first of them.

Pete Manning didn't expect to see Sink Zukesky appear in the open doorway of the house.

"Sink!" Pete grinned. "What the hell you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same question, Pete boy," Sink smiled. Sink was another very tall, husky one, whose resonant basso voice had fooled him into thinking he was quite a dignified fellow instead of a trail bum, and he tended therefore to phrase his speech pompously.

"Ain't this where this Addison

lives?" Pete inquired.

"That's right, Pete boy. Only it's not Addison, it's Allison."

"Okay, Addison, Allison, the hell with it." Pete Manning suddenly wiped the grin off his face, stepping down. "What, are you working for him or something?"

Sink Zukesky had not altered the smile on his coarse, nondescript features.

"That's right, Pete boy. Mr. Allison is out on range with his crew. He left me here with instructions to deal with any visitors."

Pete Manning said, "Uh huh. Well, tell him he'd better be the hell off Silas Tabor's grass by sundown tomorrow or—"

"This ain't Silas Faber's grass, Pete boy. Mr. Allison says he's been running cattle here nigh onto a year now, ever since this section was thrown open. Silas Faber has been threatening Mr. Allison off and on, but he ain't got a leg to stand on, Pete boy not any more he ain't." Sink had wandered down off the doorsteps and he offered Pete one of two stogies he took out of a breast pocket. "Smoke?"

Pete Manning abruptly gave Sink Zukesky a good hard shove in the chest.

"Oh no?" he snarled.

"Now wait a minute, Pete boy—" Sink said, setting his deep voice at an extra low pitch.

"Okay, reach," Pete said.

"So it's going to be like that, eh, Pete boy," Sink said very slowly.

"Yeah, it's going to be like that."

THE YOUNG man and his pretty wife were plainly uncomfortable here in this back room of the saloon. Hairy Parsons didn't care about the young man, though, all he was interested in was the girl. The young man would make his talk and Hairy would grunt acknowledgement of it but his too-wide watery eyes remained all the while on the young lady, and the lustful smile wreathed his loose lips all the while like a soiled streamer in the rafters of an old barn a month after the annual hoe-down.

The young man was saying, "... so

that's how it is, Mr. Parsons, apparently the only way a small cattleman can survive around here is to hire a gunfighter. My neighbors, John Allison and Avery Chase, have both put gunmen on their payrolls, and Silas Faber—"

"Kind of rough country fer sech a purty little lady, ain't it?" Hairy Parsons interrupted. He was sprawled back in one of the barroom chairs, one long arm lying out over the round-top table, the knob-knuckled long fingers playing with a stack of blue chips.

"Yes, it is," the young man said "and that's why I wanted to hire you, Mr. Parsons. As I was saying, Silas Faber has one of the fastest gunmen in the Southwest on his payroll, a 'Pete Manning' and it is Faber's intent to run us small ranchers out of this section completely—"

Hairy Parsons had looked at the young man for the first time, and it had been the suddenness of this, as well as the ghastly grimace on Parsons' face, that had this time broken off the young rancher's speech.

"Pete Manning? One of the fastest gunmen?" And the walls shook with the blast of Hairy Parsons' uproarious laughter. "Old Pete?" And Hairy rocked back and forth in a new paroxysm of glee, and finally he also pounded the table.

"Look," he said, suddenly sobering, "how much money you got, young fella?"

"I don't think I understand—"

"Look, what's it worth to you to get rid of this great gunfighter Pete Manning?"

"Well, the figure I'd had in mind to—"

"Look, young fella, you want to get rid of Pete Manning, right? Okay, you have a thousand dollars cash money stacked on your kitchen table for me to pick up at sundown tonight, and by sun-up tomorrow morning you won't have a thing to worry about, you can forget all about Pete Manning. Okay?"

"Oh my gosh, though, Mr. Parsons, I have no way of getting a thousand dollars together in a lump! You see, what I had—"

Hairy Parsons was beaming at the

young rancher's very pretty blonde wife again.

"Okay, then, young fella," he said huskily, keeping his watery eyes though on the blushing girl, "you can pay me so much down and so much a week. And I'll stop by every week and collect."

The young rancher didn't like it at all, he was plainly caught, he saw, between hell and a hard place, and he took off his stetson and ran his fingers nervously back through his curly brown hair and he and his wife exchanged a perplexed glance which Hairy Parsons noted and upon which Hairy suddenly extended a big palm face-up to the young man.

"Give me ten dollars," Hairy Parsons said.

"But what—?"

"You got ten dollars on you?"

"Sure, but—"

"Put it here in my hand. *I won't bite you!*"

The young rancher fumbled in a jeans pocket and produced a small roll of bills and was hesitantly fingering it as though stalling to give himself time to think when Hairy suddenly plucked a ten spot from the loose roll and held it up as though to dry between a big thumb and forefinger.

"Okay, it's a deal," Hairy snapped. "You can stop worryin' about Pete Manning beginning now."

SILAS FABER was going to town in his buckboard again. He carried a grossly incongruous twenty-foot bullwhip under the seat and he got it out now and laid it mercilessly to the flanks of the glossy black. Once, in his fury, he banged the confused horse over the head with the heavy rawhide scourge.

All he knew was that that damned self-styled gunman should have been back hours ago, and since he wasn't, he was either dead, killed by Allison's hired-gun, or dead drunk, and there was one sure way to find out which, and Silas was taking that way forthwith.

And those damned squatters, they'd all gone and hired gunfighters too now, not only Allison but Chase now too and even that greenhorn kid—one

of Silas' riders had said he'd seen the kid and his young wife come out of the saloon that afternoon with a notorious one, a "Hairy Parsons" or some such damned crazy name.

Silas Faber ground his teeth. He did that when the rage that was always in him but usually under control, got out of hand. Usually this made a crunching, squeaking sound, but not now; the uproar of the frail wagon careening along the rough trail, along with the rush of wind, filled the silvery moonlit night, obliterated such small personal evidences. Silas also sucked a tooth, which also ordinarily made quite a noise, but not here.

Arrived at the saloon, Silas didn't take time to tether the whinnying black, he simply scrambled out of the buckboard and let it go. The first thing that hit him, when he shoved through the high batwings, was a whiskey glass. This is recorded as the "first thing" because there were others later. The whiskey glass, though it only grazed his temple, was the most effective object that hit him because it was the most surprising; Silas entered the saloon bursting with the need and intent to impose his aggressive will upon his immediate world, and the latter, in effect, had spit in his eye before he could peep. The most disgusting object that hit him was the mop, because after a mop has swamped a trail town saloon for a time it becomes very disgusting, and this particular mop had seen the opening of the establishment. This came later.

The funny thing was, none of the discomfiture that came to Silas Faber on this occasion was intended for him.

Strung along the bar on his entry were the following: Hank Foley, Hairy Parsons, Jerry Mulligan, Sink Zukesky, and Pete Manning. All other patrons must have long since departed, for the wide-eyed bartender was the only occupant of the saloon besides the gunmen.

A conversation was in progress. There had been a libation and now there was a conversation. All of the gunmen were hung heavy with six-guns and they and the guns, as they

milled restlessly like stallions in a stall, bumped and clunked against each other.

"Old Petey's the lucky one," Sink was saying in blurry though still resonant tones. "'f I hadn't knocked him cold with a lightning left cross while he was watching for my right hand to draw, he would've drew on me and I would've had to plug him."

"The hell you say," Pete muttered with a big burp, staring glassily straight ahead at nothing, his one foot groping on its own, as it had been for several minutes now, for the brass rail.

It was Jerry Mulligan who threw the whiskey glass. For no particular reason. He had been grinning on the one good side of his face ever since his tenth double slug. "Whammy," he said, without knowing where the whiskey glass had gone.

Then Jerry, who'd been silent all evening, made a speech that nobody listened to.

"I don't care what none of youse say, I had the best damn boss of the lot of yuh. Mr. Chase. Mr. Avery Chase. A nice, kindly, old gent, Mr. Chase is, an' he don't mean no harm to nobody. No-sir." Tears welling from Jerry's eyes ended his speech as abruptly as it had begun; Jerry became preoccupied with trying to get his red polka dot bandanna out of a back jeans pocket thereafter.

"Well!" Silas Faber blustered, at a loss, now that he was inside the place and there right before him was the object of his rage, what to do next.

That was the moment when Hairy Parsons, for some reason that was never clarified and with a raucous whoop, suddenly gave Sink Zukesky a good hard push, so that Sink, his ham hands trying in vain to find something to grab onto for support, crashed into and, subsequently, onto, Silas Faber.

"Why the dirty dog," Sink said sonorously and without rancor as he climbed to his feet, stepping on Silas Faber's neck in the process.

Hank Foley was the only one of the group who preserved any dignity. He was pie-eyed too, but he was the oldest member by two or three dec-

ades, and he carried the burden of this extra maturity. Besides, it was he who had called this parley which had ended in this celebration. So he said, "Come on now, boys, watch it."

Unfortunately for this attempt at restoring order to the meeting, Pete and Jerry had suddenly unlimbered their sixshooters, and they began to see which one could hit the most targets. Hairy drew his gun and contributed one shot too, when he saw both Pete and Jerry miss the little window in the rear office door and felt the need to adjust this, which his single slug did.

One errant bullet creased Silas Faber, dropping him unconscious to the floor right after he'd climbed groggily up off of it, though he hadn't been one of the official targets. The mop that one of the boys flung during this period also found Silas, taking him full across the face but it was actually the bullet and not the mop that sprawled him, out cold, in the sawdust again.

THE WIDOW THOMPSON threw a pail of water in Silas' face; she was a capable woman, taller than Silas; there was no doubt, as he'd long figured, that she'd make him a mate of which he could be proud.

The sheriff blustered, "Wa'l, now, what's been goin' on hyar?"

The doctor stanchd the blood trickling down behind Silas' right ear from his scalp wound.

The bartender, who'd tried to make Silas comfortable on the saloon floor after sending for the Widow and the medico and the lawman, was still ranting. He'd cursed the rambunctious gunmen roundly, beginning his tirade even before the last of those worthies had staggered out through the batwings, and some of his words were undoubtedly prophetic of Silas Faber's own future attitude toward trigger artists who could be hired for aggressive purposes:

"Bums, that's all they are, trail bums, but just because they can shoot a gun, everybody expects they'll act like responsible grown-up men. Why,

(continued on page 43)

LAST BULLET

WHEN JIM finally let the mare stop, the disc of copper on his right which was the sun hung some twenty minutes from the jagged contours of the rim. In its quiet, hot rays, a hawk circled indolently.

The mare was done. Jim needed two more hours out of her, two hours which the roan could have given him, but the little mare needed rest. He'd had no time to pick and choose when he left, yet he'd been a damn fool to let himself be caught this way.

Cradling his injured left arm, he slid to the ground and leaned against the saddle until the pain stopped and his head cleared. Then he drew out the Winchester '83 from the saddle-holster and laid it against the boulder. Using only his right arm and a knee, he loosened the cinch around the mare's belly.

Before he slipped the saddle off, he searched through the bags again, knowing they were empty, having known for the last twelve hours they were empty. Then he lead the exhausted mare around into the protection of the rock and nudged her flank until she went down flat, her legs sprawling, her chest heaving in dangerous little convulsions.

The sheriff calculated that Jim's Winchester was empty — but the fact was that Jim still had one shot left in the rifle

by THOMAS MIDDLETON

Still, he had not looked back, though he'd already caught the clatter of hoof on stone. He knelt by the mare's head, put his arm under her neck, and looked into her glazed eyes. With a night's rest she'd outrun any horse in Arizona, in the two-hour break for the border. But there was no way out of it. She wasn't going to get that night's rest. She'd be on her feet within an hour, carrying somebody, and whoever it was wouldn't be using a saddle.

A stone pealed out under an iron shoe from the valley below. Jim heaved himself to his feet and went back to the edge of the boulder. He wasn't in any hurry to look down. He knew they were there; eight of them had been there two or three miles behind all morning; and throughout the arid afternoon there had been three, less than a mile away. Those three weren't more than a thousand yards below now.

He felt under his shirt, over his left shoulder. The bandana was stiff, but the blood had glued it fast to his skin. The bleeding had stopped five or six hours ago.

Before he climbed up the rock he fished the bullet out of his pocket. There was no reason why it should have been there, but after he had used the last one in the rifle that morning, he'd found it in one of the saddlebags. He blew on it carefully and, picking up the Winchester, slipped it in the butt-stock magazine. He could



hear them plainly now, heard Terris' tired voice cut incisively through an argument.

He took his time rolling a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth and put a lighted match up. When he had rested the Winchester on the rim at the top of the rock, Terris and his two deputies were no more than 300 yards away. Terris was unmistakable leaning on the saddlehorn, looking up, the sun flooding his grizzled, hawk-like face. Jim could see the white sweep of his mustaches, and he knew those ice-blue eyes were centering on his rifle barrel.

The man on Terris' right was getting close enough for recognition. His flat crowned hat was dangling down his back and long blond hair hung over his forehead. Dutch Schultz, of course. He'd be eager. He and Thayer had been old friends. Dutch Schultz already had his Winchester out across the saddle and he looked like he wanted to use it.

The other one had his hat pulled down low, and it wasn't until they had dismounted and started up toward the rock, Terris in the center and slightly ahead, that he recognized old Sayles' boy, Bob. Only a few years ago, when he was riding for Sayles, Jim had taught Bob how to handle a gun, and now there Bob was packing a Winchester up the side of a mountain after his master.

Jim turned his head slowly and glanced at the sun. It was just touching the rim off to his left, and long dark shadows probed down into the valley below.

WHEN JIM looked down again they were still coming; Terris with his arms hanging down straight, his right hand swinging by the Colt at his side, Bob Sayles and Dutch Schultz cradling their rifles.

The shoulder was hurting again. Jim sighed and threw the cigarette away. Reluctantly he settled the butt of the Winchester against his cheek and brought the sights down. Terris didn't break his step, but the two men at his side hesitated, and Dutch Schultz glanced nervously across at Bob Sayles.

Terris was in his sights all the way

up to where he stopped about a hundred yards below. He waited there until the other two joined him, and then he called out in his firm, tired, old-man's voice.

"Now, I'll tell you, Jim, we come a long ways today, and I can't go back without you." He stopped and waited for Jim to speak, but Jim was silent. "I wanta thank you for not hurting any of my men. I reckon them five boys are still walking back—you're going to owe them lads about fifty bucks a piece for horses."

He hesitated again and Jim thought there was a trace of a chuckle.

"I guess I'm gettin' old. I shouldn't never 've let you get me in that bowl, but Jim—you come on out now. Just heave that empty rifle over and come on out. I told you plenty of times that '83 don't carry enough lead. You've had your six shots, five for five horses—and the first for Thayer back there behind Larkin's saloon."

Again he paused for a moment.

"It just don't work like that no more, Jim. You gotta stand trial; it'll be a fair trial and you'll get justice, but you gotta go back." He stopped talking and waited.

But Jim was silent.

"Now listen to reason, Jim. If you'd had anything more for that rifle, you'd have dropped our horses too. The boys saw you at Larkin's just before you went out and you didn't have no Colt on you."

But what you don't know, Sheriff, Jim thought, is that Thayer saw that too, and he followed me until we got into the shadows where nobody was around, and he started shooting, and you don't know that after I was hit he followed me all the way to the blacksmith's where the mare was tied with the Winchester in the saddleholster...

Jim left the sights drift over to Dutch Schultz who was getting anxious. He put the bead on a sweat-stain just below the deputy's badge. At 100 yards he could put a bullet directly in the middle of that star and really pin it on.

"I'm giving you a chance now, Jim. We ain't fools enough to try to shoot it out with you, but I figure you're empty, Jim. You ain't got a chance."

Jim swung the sights around slowly over Terris to young Bob Sayles. More chance than I'd have if I went back with you now, Sheriff. With that two-hour judge you got now, he'd have me tried, convicted, strung up, and deep in the ground before Mallet in Tucson ever heard Thayer was dead.

"Now come on down outta there, Jim. I wanta get started back before it gets dark. I'll give you another minute."

And I need at least two weeks, time for Mallet to get back from Tucson. Time for him to testify that he was with me when Thayer came out to the ranch crazy-drunk and swore he'd kill me.

Terris turned his grey head and squinted at the remaining arc of the sun, looking like some flashed-beak bird of prey. Like the hawk still soaring almost directly above Jim. Then Terris looked up at the rock again. He spoke as though the burden of years had suddenly become more than he could adequately bear. "Me and you've been friends for a long time, Jim, but I gotta come up now."

HE HAD TAKEN two steps when Jim caught the flicker of shadow over the rock on his right. The hawk had grown impatient and now was diving off to the left behind Schultz and the idea suddenly came to Jim with almost the speed of instinct. He raised the rifle carefully with one arm and fired. The hawk never broke its dive. It hit the boulder some fifty feet behind where Schultz had been standing.

Terris blinked, stopped. He turned

to look down at his men. They were both flat on the ground, trying to find shelter behind some egg-sized boulders.

"Get it, Dutch," Terris commanded.

Schultz looked up at the rock, his hair hanging over his eyes and his mouth open.

"Get it!" Terris said again.

Schultz got to his feet and scrambled hastily over the boulders. He came back as far as Bob Sayles with the hawk in his hand. He held it out before Bob and said hoarsely, "Look . . . look at this. The *head's* completely gone." Then abruptly re-impressed with the enormity of the thing in his hand, he threw it at Sayles' feet, picked up his gun and started running down toward the tethered horses.

"Bring it up here, Bob," Terris said.

Bob Sayles picked the bird up and climbed to Terris, who took it from him and examined it thoughtfully. Then he turned, and carrying the headless hawk with him, he climbed slowly toward the rock. When he was about fifty feet away, he stopped again. It was too dark for Jim to see his face, but he watched the old man weigh the bird in his hand. After a few seconds Terris looked up.

"I never et one, Jim, and there ain't a devil of a lot of meat here, but you'll be mighty hungry before you cross that border tomorrow." He looked at the hawk again. Then with a single sweep of his arm he pitched it up within ten feet of the rock. "Jim," he said quietly, "let me know when you're ready to come back. I'll meet you anyplace on the border you say." ● END

THE TOWNTAMERS

they even pin law badges on some of them." The saloonman addressed the sheriff in particular now. "You know where this bunch that wrecked my place are headed now for example? To Sundown-City. The mayor of Sundown City offered Hank Foley five thousand dollars to bring in a crew of gunfighters and 'clean up' the town. Can you imagine?

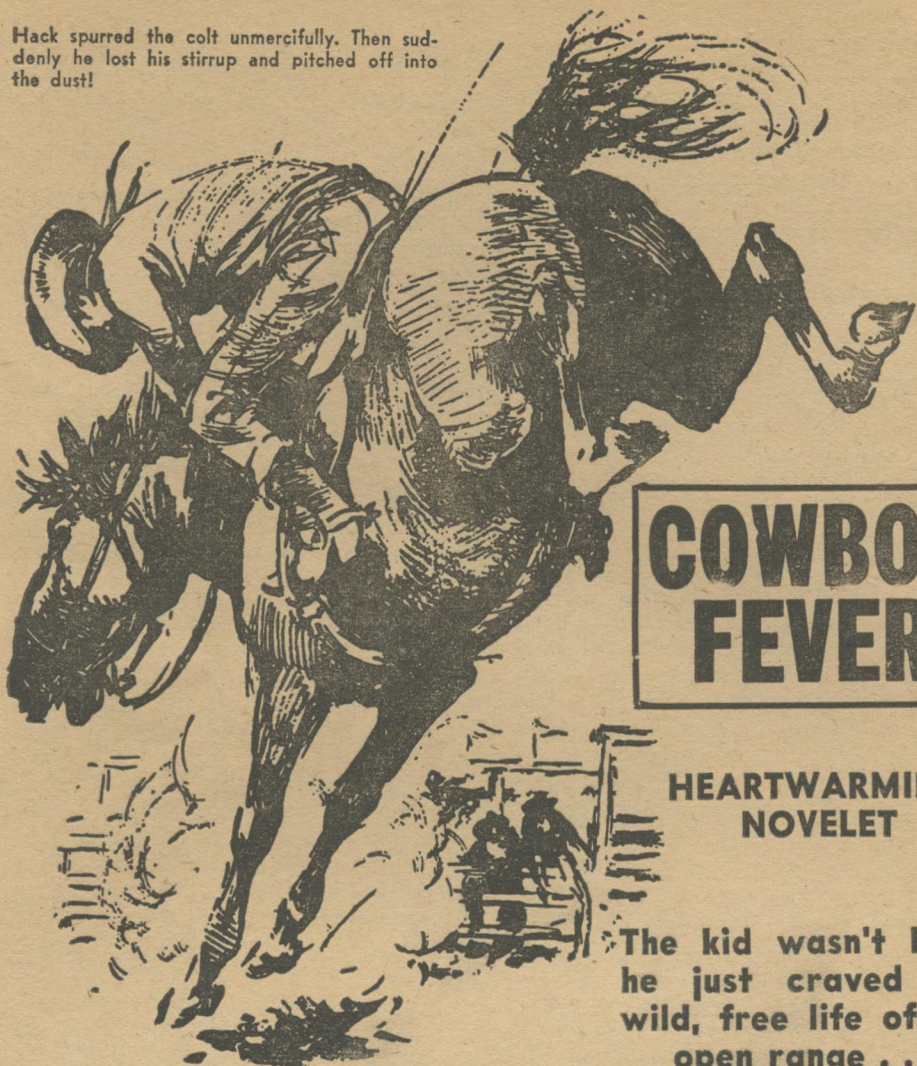
"And because some local damfool

(continued from page 40)

started the idea around here of hiring-on these gun bums, Foley had his crew right at hand and ready to go. Well, good riddance for us, anyway."

Still sitting in the sawdust, Silas Faber blinked maybe from the refreshment of the pail of water thrown in his face, maybe from having regained consciousness in time to hear these last words of the unusually articulate saloonman. ● END

Hack spurred the colt unmercifully. Then suddenly he lost his stirrup and pitched off into the dust!



COWBOY FEVER

HEARTWARMING
NOVELET

The kid wasn't loco,
he just craved the
wild, free life of the
open range . . .

by S. OMAR BARKER

CHAPTER

1

RANGE BOSS Frosty Murdoch and four Flying V cowhands were at supper when this kid showed up. He looked to be about fourteen, and lanky enough to stretch out inside a stovepipe. Unbarbered black hair fringed from under a railroad brakeman's cap to form drake-tails over a frazzled shirt collar. Streaks of dust grime on his freshly sunburned cheeks could have been patterned there by sweat, by tears—or both.

"Howdy!" His greeting had a bold.

breezy sound, but even the way he squared his skinny shoulders there in the doorway could not hide the sag of deep fatigue.

In a land where travel by horseback was taken for granted, the kid's scuffed clodhoppers betrayed him as a foot-traveller.

"Well, by grampus!" said the bald, grizzly-templed range boss. "Where the howlin' hellidad did you come from?"

Frosty's voice was dry and gravelly, thanks to many a year of New Mexico sun, sand and wind, and that could have made it sound hostile. The kid batted his big dark eyes as if to beat down any stray-dog look that might

have crept into them. He swallowed hard, then tried to make his twangy drawl sound man-sized and easy.

"Flew in on a buzzard's tail, mister," he said. "You got ary job for a cowboy around here?"

"Cowboy, huh? Where's your horse?"

"Injuns stoled him," shrugged the kid. "That's how come me ridin' the buzzard."

A long-backed buckaroo with greenish-gray eyes and sparse tawny hair chuckled. His gaze dropped to the boy's frazzle-toed, dusty shoes.

"These low-flyin' buzzards sure drag a man's feet," he observed dryly. "The washpan's right outside. If you can't find a dirty place on the towel, wipe on a clean one. I'll set you a plate."

"Much obliged, mister." The kid didn't quite grin, but the odd uneasiness lurking behind his brash talk relaxed a little. "I ain't had a wash since me and ol' Grover swum the Pecos."

He pronounced it "Pee-cus," and several cowboys swapped half amused, half curious looks.

"Grover Cleveland?" The long backed buckaroo called Yaqui Kilgore raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Grover was my faithful ol' cowpony, mister."

"The one the Injuns stole?"

"You guessed it, mister. They stoled my saddle, too." For a brief moment the kid looked Yaqui straight in the eye, then turned to go wash up.

"The lyn' so-and-so!" said big, straw-haired Hack Hanley. "Ought to have his smart-aleck little pants kicked!"

"By who?" The usual easy-tongued good humor of Yaqui's drawl was missing, in its place a flatness not commonly heard between good friends in the cow country. But if there was challenge in it, the bulky blond cowboy chose to ignore it.

WHILE THE kid was washing up, Yaqui loaded a granite-ware plate with beef, beans, biscuits, fried spuds and gravy.

"It's easy to see who don't pay the feed bill around here," observed Frosty Murdoch. "You fixing to fat-

ten an elephant with all that grub?"

"I'm fixin'," said Yaqui, "to gladden the gullet of the stranger within our gates—a custom highly spoke of in Holy Writ. All right, buster, come on in here and pad your paunch before it grows to your backbone!"

"Here's place for you, keed!" Brown-skinned, black mustached Dolly Bustos shoved over on the bench, but the kid still hesitated.

"I only got two bits," he announced. "But I ain't no beggar. If I can't work for what vittles I eat, I won't eat."

"Shut up and set down," advised Yaqui. "Better swaller a little coffee first to warn your stomach the drouth is busted."

The kid took a big swallow of coffee, then sat staring at the heaped up plate before him as if he couldn't believe it.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, picking up his fork with trembling fingers. "I ain't et grub like that since I left—I mean since—well, anyway not since—"

"Since the Injuns stole your horse?" broke in Yaqui gravely.

"You guessed it, mister. The boogers got away with my grubsack. Bed-roll, too."

"What tribe?" asked Hack Hanley. "Bugtussles or the Tuckahoos?"

"I didn't ask 'em." The kid paused to swallow a hungry mouthful. "They—they was about forty of 'em, purt near naked, all painted for the war-path, feathers on their heads, gallopin' around bareback, whoopin' and hollerin' shootin' arrows and—"

"Just like in the picture books, huh?" Hack sounded unpleasantly sarcastic. "There ain't been a naked buck Injun off the reservations for the past ten years. What you want to lie for, kid? You think we're a bunch of idiots?"

The light of excitement died abruptly out of the boy's dark eyes. They turned, as if instinctively, to Yaqui Kilgore. His jaw tightened. He laid down his fork and stood up.

"If I ain't welcome here," he blurted, "I'll git!"

"Set down and eat," said old Frosty, not unkindly.

"Hack," advised Yaqui Kilgore as the boy sat down to the plate of food again, "you leave this kid be!"

Hack pushed back from the table a little. "You givin' orders around here?"

"I gave that one." Yaqui calmly sopped gravy with a hunk of biscuit.

Hack's broad features took on a reddening hue of resentment. "One of these days you're goin' to step on my rope once too often, Kilgore, and when you do—"

"Lay your bristles, boys," broke in Frosty with dry authority. "I'm gittin' too old to referee dogfights."

Yaqui met the foreman's frosty gaze with an amiable grin. "My hackles ain't up any to speak of, boss," he shrugged. "How about passin' my young pardner here another biscuit, Cactus?"

Cactus Wiggam managed to keep his sharp young face expressionless as he passed the biscuit plate. Friction between Yaqui Kilgore and Hack Hanley was nothing unusual lately on the Flying V, but so far it had never quite rubbed itself into a blaze. Someday it might, despite the chilling restraint of Frosty's disapproval. Meantime, in accord with cowpoke custom, it behooved bystanders to keep their noses discreetly out of it.

Hack growled something under his breath and went on eating supper in silence. So did the rest of them, including the hungry young stranger, for about ten minutes. Then the kid spoke up again, addressing himself to Yaqui Kilgore almost as if no one else were present.

"I reckon I fibbed a little about them Injuns," he confessed. "They wasn't forty of them. They was only—"

"Never mind, buster," broke in Frosty Murdock again. "Did you bring a name with you—or leave it back in Arkansas?"

The kid's mouth dropped wide open in an expression of dismayed astonishment. It took almost a full minute for his none-too-convincing look of bravado to return.

"On the ol' Diamond M down in Texas," he declared solemnly, "before I shot a feller and had to pull out sudden like, they called me Bronc. Wh-what makes you think I come from Arkansas?"

Frosty Murdock leaned back in his

chair to reach a copy of the *Las Vegas Gazette* from a cluttered shelf niched deep in the adobe wall, and started to unfold it.

"There was a little item in last week's paper—"

Seeing a pair of unwiped tears dribble down the kid's cheeks into his now empty plate, Frosty refolded the skimpy newspaper and shoved it in his pocket. He turned to Yaqui Kilgore with something not far from a twinkle in his weather-paled blue eyes. "This Texas cowboy looks kinder petered out, Yaqui," he said gravely. "You reckon you can rustle up a couple of spare soogans and show him where to fix a bed?"

"There's a couple of old goatskins out in the gear shed." Yaqui passed the boy a wink that seemed to restore his woebegone spirits considerably. "Come along, buster!"

"Name ain't buster!" protested the ragged kid stoutly. "It's Bronc, dad-blame it!"

"All right, tiddledewinks," grinned Yaqui. "Let's go douse them feet in the horse trough before they start sproutin' grass."

CHAPTER

2

INSIDE THE mess shack Hack Hanley made a snorty sound. "The lyin' s-o-a-n-d-s-o! What was that item in the paper about, Frosty?"

"That item," Frosty tamped his pipe reflectively, "was about some feller that poked his nose through a knot hole and got it bit off. Any more questions?"

"Sure-mike!" Dolly Bustos showed white teeth in a wide grin. "When we gonna got some rain?"

"Secrets, huh?" muttered Hack under his breath as he went out. "I reckon that ain't the only newspaper in the county, Mister Mud-Ox!"

Despite the chat of a seven-up game in the bunkhouse, the Flying V's "petered out" guest was sound asleep in the bunk next to Yaqui's when Frosty came in to ask Yaqui to come over to the cook shack.

There they found Whitey Monk-bridge, the snowy-haired Negro cook,

reading his Bible by yellowish lamp-light. He got up to leave, but Frosty said: "Set down, Whitey. We might need you to quote us some Scripture on this."

"Yassuh!" Every wrinkle on the old man's face was the outward trace of a deep inner kindness. "About de prodigal son dat took his journey into a far country?"

"Something like that." Frosty handed Yaqui the *Las Vegas Gazette* with his finger on a paragraph headed: "RUNAWAY REPORTED" "I was aiming to read this out at the table till I saw the kid fixin' to bawl. I didn't want to hack him any worse about his big windies. You seemed to sorter claim him so I figgered I'd see what you think about it."

A quizzical frown creased Yaqui's brow as he read:

"My son Orbin, age 13, has run away to New Mexico to be a cowboy. 5 ft. 5 in., black wavy hair, dark eyes, skinny but not sickly. Liable to tell tall stories but don't mean no harm. God bless anybody that will send him home or kindly look after him and let me know he is still among the living. —Mrs. Matildy Tomison, Dryfork, Arkansas."

"That brakeman's cap and cinder dust in his shoes," mused Yaqui. "He must have bummed his way on the freights, then hoofed it here plumb from the railroad. Injuns stole his horse, huh? The fibbin' little son-of-a-gun!"

"I noticed you bristled up some when Hack said the same," observed Frosty dryly.

"Yeah, but that was different."

"Think so, huh? How come?"

"I reckon you know my opinion of Hack Hanley, Frosty."

"I know you and him are fixin' to tangle one of these days if you don't git that bow out of your necks," said the grizzled range boss a little grimly. "But the sooner you recognize that we've got no spare time for buryin' damn fools, the better for both of you."

"I ain't hurtin' to kill nobody—not even if he needs it." Yaqui's slow grin was part and parcel of a certain sober honesty. "Nor I don't hanker for needless trouble. I know Hack's daddy

was your best friend, Frosty, and I know how you hate gravel in a cow crew, but by golly—"

"De Good Book," broke in Whitey in his deep, gentle voice, "it say 'Thou shalt love one another—even if you hate 'em!' Amen!"

"I've seen Hack Hanley's spurs bloody too many times for me to love him any to speak of, Whitey," said Yaqui dryly. "Why the devil do some fellers have to be always tormenting something or somebody anyhow?"

"I'll speak to Hack again about them bloody spurs," Frosty told him quietly. "But I wish you'd leave him be. Now, about this runaway rooster from Arkansas. I expect Sheriff Romero could arrange to ship him back to his ma. These sheriffs have got some way of passing people along from one to another. Maybe you'd better hitch up the buckboard and haul him to Vegas in the morning."

YAQUI SAT silent a moment, scratching his head.

"Frosty, he said finally, "wasn't you ever a kid your ownself?"

"No, by grampus!" grunted the range boss. "I was born with bridle reins in one hand and a cow's tail in the other. I know what you're gittin' at all right, but I've got enough trouble without a young smart-britches whoopin' around the place playin' cowboy! Besides, his ma wants him back."

"It says here: 'or kindly look after him,'" Yaqui pointed out. "We could write her where he's at. Ain't you the feller I've heard complaining you need a roustabout?"

"Yeah, but—"

"De Scripture say 'Suffer de little chillun—'"

"We'd suffer all right with that little windy Willie around," broke in Frosty, drumming his gnarled fingers on the table.

"We could ship him anytime he turned out to be a nuisance. Suppose you were a poor kid tied down on some little ol' razor-back farm in Arkansas, so many brothers and sisters that you had to sleep under the porch with the hound-dogs, a step-daddy that whaled you every time you looked cross-eyed, no future to look

forward to except hoe handles, hard work and hog-meat?

"Suppose you'd heard about the life of the cowboys, wild and free, and you got to wanting to be one so bad you could taste it. So you bummed your way on freight trains all the way out to New Mexico, then hiked thirty miles afoot lookin' for a ranch, and when you finally come to one, all played out, footsore, and half starved all they did was—"

"Stop!" Frosty broke in dryly. "Before you git me to cryin'! Did the little rooster tell you all that?"

"Nope," Yaqui shook his head. "What *he* told me was that he's a Texas cowboy named Bronc. That cowboy fever ain't easy cured, Frosty. You want me to write his ma that her wandering boy has lit among friends and wants to linger awhile, so she can quit worryin'?"

"All right, dammit," agreed Frosty grudgingly. "I reckon a few days won't hurt. I'll write his ma that we'll ship him back as quick as he fattens up a little. Meantime he can start swampin' out stables. But if you let Hack gig you into a ruckus over this maverick, hanged if I won't shoot all three of you!"

"De Good Book," grinned old Whitey, "it say 'Iffen a man smite thee on one cheek, give him a whack at the othuh one befo' you takes to him!"

"I'll try and remember that, Whitey," Yaqui told him. "If the first whack don't make me too mad!"

CHAPTER

3

COWBOYS are early risers, but when Yaqui rolled out the next morning the bunk in which Orbin Tomison of Dryfork, Arkansas, had slept was already empty. Yaqui found him in the yard chopping wood by the gray light of coming dawn.

"Ain't you scared of Injuns, out before daylight thisaway?" asked Yaqui.

"I aim to earn my keep," said the kid, then after a pause: "I didn't see no Injuns, but there was a big ol' panther layin' on the woodpile when

I come out. I throwed the ax at him. I'll bet he was ten foot long!"

"And six feet tall!" Yaqui laughed. "You better watch those big windies, buster, or I'm liable to sic ol' Hack on you."

"I don't like that he-coon anyhow," declared the kid. "Reminds me of an ol' boar razorback with a knot in his tail. I'll bet you could whip him, though, if got an even start."

"Let's hope I don't ever have to try it. I wouldn't say no more about that panther if I was you, buster."

"There you go, busterin' me again! How many times I got to tell you my right name is Bronc?"

"Listen, *buster*," said Yaqui, "every drugstore cowboy in the country tries to call himself Bronc. In the cow country you don't pick yourself a nickname like you would a shirt. You take whatever happens to light on you, or do without. You'll be lucky if you don't get called Orbie—in case you're around long enough to get called anything."

"Orbie?" The kid shoved the end of an arm-sized dead pinon branch up on the chopping block in position to break rather than chop it and raised his ax. "Then it was about me in the paper, wasn't it?" There was a subdued, sickly sound to his voice.

"That's right—your ma asking folks in these parts to be on the look-out for you."

"So you're fixin' to ship me back?"

"We'll see," said Yaqui.

"I won't go back!" The kid said it with a quiet fierceness that somehow got under the cowboy's hide, the ax still poised over his shoulder. "I never run away just for the fun of it, Mr. Yaqui! I done it so I could git to be a cowboy an' save my wages an' buy a ranch an' git to be a rich rancher, dadblame it, an' fetch Ma an' the young'uns somewhere where they won't have to live like poor white trash any more!"

He brought the ax down with a wallop that matched the vehemence of his words. The brittle stick broke. The short piece flew up with unpredictable violence and hit Yaqui in the face.

"Oh, golly-whiz!" wailed the boy. "I never aimed to do that, Mr. Yaqui! Honest, I—"

"I thought maybe you mistook me for a panther," said Yaqui. "Well, I've got one eye left anyway. Let's go in to breakfast."

"Mr. Yaqui," asked the kid earnestly as they started in with armloads of stovewood, "if Mr. Frosty don't ship me back to Ma right away, I sure wish you'd learn me to ride and rope and ever'thing it takes to be a cowboy."

"I thought you Texas cowboys already savvied all that stuff, buster!"

"Aw, shucks! That was all just big talk, Mr. Yaqui. I didn't want y'all to think I was a pure tenderfoot!"

"All right," Yaqui told him. "You can start learning cowboy right after breakfast—by milkin' the cow for ol' Whitey."

"Aw, I had to milk a dadblamed ol' cow back in Arkansas! I thought real cowboys never did milk cows. I thought—"

"On a heap of ranches they don't, but Frosty needs milk for an ailin' stomach, so somebody's got to squeeze it out for him. Of course, if you don't like the work here—"

"I'll milk forty cows a day if you'll let me stay here and learn me to be a cowboy!"

"We'll see," said Yaqui again.

The kid ate his breakfast in subdued silence. The cowboys couldn't help noticing the bruise under Yaqui's right eye.

"What happen your face, *compadre*?" inquired Dolly Bustos. "You make fight with some *Indios*?"

"Nope," shrugged Yaqui. "Got kicked by a panther."

Hack Hanley made a snuffy sound of contemptuous disbelief. "Fell off a horse, more likely."

"You keep on talkin' so sweet to me, honey-boy," Yaqui told him across the table, "and I'm liable to sneak over there and kiss you!"

"Any kissin' around here, I'll do it," put in Frosty dryly. "With the toe of my boot!"

THE FLYING V'S "milk cow" was a long-legged, longhorned old line-back shanghai'd out of the range herd for milken purposes of which she didn't much approve. The kid limped in from milking her with a kick-bruised shin, a new dent in the milk

pail and only about a pint of milk.

"Tsk tsk!" said old Whitey. "Maybe I bettuh tend to squirtin' dat cow hereaftuh myownself, bustuh!"

"No you won't!" There was a stubborn set to the kid's jaw. "Yaqui give me that milkin' job and I'll learn to handle it right or bust a gallus!"

"De Good Book say de Lawd he'ps them dat keeps on a-tryin'!" observed Whitey. "But it don't say nothin' about where de boss gonna git his milk if it ain't in de bucket."

"I'll git it in the bucket next time. Where's Yaqui?"

"He's out to de stables rustlin' up some implements of de cowboy trade for you, bustuh."

The implements Yaqui had waiting for him out at the stables were a long-handled manure fork and a wheelbarrow.

"The boss has been wondering if these stables have got any floors in 'em," he said. "You want to see if you can find out for him, buster?"

"No, dadblame it, I don't!" Rebellion clouded the boy's dark eyes. "If I can't have a horse and saddle to ride on this ranch, I'll go hunt me one where I can!"

"Suit yourself, tiddledewinks," grinned Yaqui. "You'll find the Box R off about eight miles thataway. But look out for Injuns and panthers!"

The kid watched Yaqui step across his cowhorse and lope off after the others already dusting out of sight over a distant hill, then stooped to grasp the wheelbarrow handles.

"All right, dadblame it!" he announced to the wide open world. "If he thinks I'm a-scared of work, he's sure beatin' on the wrong washtub!"

About twenty wheelbarrow loads and a backache later, Whitey came out with some watered-down coffee and cold-biscuit-syrup sandwiches.

"De Good Book say 'Him dat work-eth by de sweat of his brow sho' need-eth his vittles,' amen!"

"Mr. Whitey," said the kid between bites, "ain't 'Bronc' a good cowboy nickname?"

"Any nixname all right except if it don't fit good," replied the old cook with a chuckle. "You take Yaqui—he punch cows down in Mexico amongst dem wild Yaqui Injuns. Dol-

ly, his real name Pievesimo, but he always give his rope a 'dolly weltuh' round de horn 'stid of tie fast. Cactus—he nevu had no nixname till one time his hoss th'owed him in a patch of pear. Hack—dat's short for 'hack-amore'. And I reckon it might be they calls me Whitey 'cause I'm so blessed black! Don't you fret, skeezix—you'll git a keepin' nixname hung on you in de Lawd's good time—if de boss ain't send you back to yo' mammy fust!"

"You think he's fixin' to ship me. Whitey?"

"Now you done ask me somethin' bustuh!" Whitey shrugged and hobbled back to his kitchen, whence presently there drifted the chanting sweetness of an old campmeeting hymn that somehow made the youngster feel homesick.

CHAPTER

4

EVERY MORNING for a week Orbin Tomison watched with longing eyes while the Flying V crew saddled up and rode off to whatever horseback chores looking after range cattle and horses might require, then turned to his own seemingly endless job of looking for non-existent stable floors under last winter's heavy, hardpacked, horsey accumulation. During that punishing period of probation he also chopped wood, carried water, scrubbed out the bunkhouse and helped Whitey wash dishes.

Morning and evening he milked the old lineback cow. He rigged up a sort of milking stall just inside the corral's pole fence near where it joined on to the gear sheds, and his patient handling soon got the cow gentled so that she gave him no more kicking trouble—except once when Hack Hanley rode up unexpectedly just outside the fence, reached through the poles and gave her tail a yank. The kid called Hack a bad name and got cussed out in return. But nobody else had seen it happen, and the kid chose not to tattle either to Yaqui or the boss.

Neither, during that week, did he tell any more big windies or com-

plain again about being called buster. Only once did he ask Yaqui about riding a horse.

"You're doin' all right, buster," Yaqui told him kindly. "My first job on a ranch, they kept me chorin' around for six weeks before my pants ever touched a saddle!"

"Yeah, but if Mr. Frosty wrote to my ma—and she tells him to ship me home—like as not I won't even git to stay here six weeks!"

"We'll see," said Yaqui with his friendly grin. "Maybe your ma will write that she's glad to be rid of you!"

BACK IN Dry Fork, Arkansas, a worried widow named Matildy Tomison read and reread the three brief letters she had received from New Mexico, trying too puzzle out which one to believe—and to answer.

The letter signed "J. W. Murdock" read:

"Dear Madam: We got your son here safe & in good health. Will have the Sheriff start him home as soon as he fattens up a little."

The letter signed "Hack Hanley" read: "Madam: Your kid has got himself into a little trouble out here in New Mexico that it will take about \$100 to git him out of. You send me the money registered mail & I will see to it for you."

The third letter was signed "Yaqui Kilgore": "Dear Mrs. Tomison: Your boy flew in here on a buzzard, full of big breeze and not much else, but he shows prospects of making a ranch hand. He has already quit seeing panthers and Injuns and will likely do to set on a horse before long, then start sending you some of his wages. So if you feel like you can make out without him for a while we will see how he shapes up for a cowboy. You let me know and I will sure look after him. We got a fine old cook that feeds good and reads the Bible, so don't you worry."

ON A SUNDAY morning when Orbin Tomison's lean young shanks had just about given up all hope of ever straddling a horse, Yaqui laced an old spare saddle on a gentle cow-horse, showed the kid how to mount.

cowboy style, and told him to "step across." Hack Hanley had ridden to Chilote as he often did, where there was a store, a saloon, and a postoffice where mail came on Tuesdays and Saturdays, but the rest of the crew were on hand to watch.

"Golly!" The kid's grin spread happiness all over his face as he snugged his clodhoppers into the stirrups. "I wish Ma could see me now! I bet I could ride him even if he pitched. Yaqui!"

"Braggin' ain't ridin'," said Yaqui dryly. "Here comes Hack. Hold on a minute and let's see if he brought any mail."

"Nothin' but a blame catalog," Hack answered Yaqui's inquiring look. He made as if to ride on past, then suddenly reached down, grabbed a handful of loose flank skin on the kid's bay horse, and gave it a twist.

NO COWHORSE ever gets too gentle to resent such an indignity. The bay didn't buck hard, but the kid sailed off over his head the second jump, landing hard on his bottom. Hack laughed. So did the rest of the watching cowhands.

Ordinarily such a tenderfoot tumble would also have brought at least a grin to Yaqui Kilgore's face. This time it didn't. He watched approvingly as the boy got up, limped after the pony and climbed back on him, then he rode over to where Hack was starting to unsaddle.

"Hack," he said, "when I want your help learnin' this button to ride, I'll call for it!"

Without waiting for Hack's reply, he whirled his horse, rejoined the kid, and they rode off together toward the mesa.

"Yaqui," said the boy after awhile. "I bet I could have rode him with cowboy boots like yours!"

"One excuse is as good as another when a feller gits piled, buster. Main thing is, you climbed back on. Let's lope 'em a piece and see how high you bouce."

When they got back about an hour before noon, Hack Hanley was in the bronc corral just getting his saddle on a big, leggy, three-year-old, while Cactus Wiggam eared him down.

They had one of the bronc's hind feet tied up and a blindfold over his eyes. Blood dribbled from the colt's wide-flared nostrils.

Yaqui frowned. He hadn't heard Frosty say anything about working broncs today. Dolly Bustos and another cowboy were watching from up on the fence, but Yaqui didn't see the boss anywhere around.

"Golly!" It was the first bronc handling the kid had seen, and his eyes were big with interest. "Is Hack goin' to ride him?"

"We'll see," said Yaqui shortly.

He dismounted and went inside the corral. The kid followed him. Yaqui squatted on his heels against the fence near where Dolly Bustos was perched on the top rail. The kid followed suit.

"Dolly," asked Yaqui quietly; "where's Frosty?"

"He went for talk weeth some home-steader about better fence on his corn," Dolly told him. "I tell Hack the boss don't like heem to bust bronc because he handle too rough, but he don't pay me no 'tention."

"Well, he's done got this one saddled." Yaqui's voice had that flat sound to it again. "We'll see what happens."

What happened was pure dynamite. For four high, snaky, bone-jarring jumps Hack spurred the colt unmercifully, beating him over the head with his quirt. Then suddenly he lost a stirrup, clawed wildly for the saddle-horn, failed to find it, and pitched off headlong into the dust.

He got up swearing, picked up a length of trace chain from beside the fence and headed for the bronc with it. Yaqui got there first, sidestepped the scared colt's whirl to kick at him, grabbed the dragging hackamore rein, yanked him to a stop and turned to face Hack Hanley.

"Chain wallopin' don't help none, Hack," he said. "I'll ride this colt sometime when he ain't been abused!"

"The hell you will!" Hack stood wide-legged, the trace chain drawn back ready to swing at Yaqui's face. Suddenly a hand grabbed the chain from behind him, but the kid's tug lacked the power to jerk it out of Hack's grasp. Instead Hack yanked it

free and swung it so hard across the boy's chest that it knocked him down.

THE NEXT instant Yaqui's fist landed like a mule kick under Hack's right ear. Yaqui seized the trace chain and tossed it over against the fence, waited for Hack to get up, then hit him again. This time Hack stayed on his feet, his big fists swinging, and for about two minutes it was a man-to-man slugging match. But while Yaqui used his fists with a deadly calm skill, Hack fought with the wild, blind wrath of a goaded bull. The third time Yaqui knocked him down, Hack got up backing away toward the corral gate.

"You'll git yours for this, Kilgore!" Hack threatened as he went out the gate.

"Any time," said Yaqui. He turned to help Cactus Wiggam get the bronc unsaddled.

"Hell, Yaqui," Cactus started to explain. "I had no business helpin' him, but—"

"Forget it," broke in Yaqui shortly. "Better turn this pony out." He turned to the kid who had come up silently beside him. "He hurt you bad, buster?"

"Shucks, no! You sure whipped him, though! You—you reckon he's gone after his pistol?"

"I doubt it," said Yaqui. "Let's you and me go wash up."

Hack Hanley didn't show up for dinner.

"Saddled his private horse and took out towards Chilote," reported Cactus Wiggam. "Lookin' for bottle consolation, I expect."

"Which de Good Book say," commented Whitey, "dat in de end it bit-eth a serpent an' stingeth like a adduh. Wuz you me, Yaqui, I'd sortuh watch out behind me for a spell."

"Thanks, Whitey," answered Yaqui with a grin that belied his sober tone. "Maybe I will."

They did not discuss the matter further.

Looking worried and miserable but holding his tongue, the kid was in the bunkhouse watching Yaqui clean and oil his six-shooter when Frosty Murdoch, back from his homestead call, came in. The grizzled range boss sat

down on an empty bunk and filled his pipe.

"Whitey tells me you and Hack locked horns," he said finally. "You want to tell me about it?"

"I'd just as soon not," Yaqui shook his head. "Them little things happen, you know."

"'Little,' hell!" said Frosty dryly. "Over this kid?"

"Nope."

"It was, too—partly!" broke in the boy. "If I hadn't—"

"Never you mind, tiddledewinks," broke in Yaqui a little sharply. Then to Frosty: "You heard anything from his ma yet?"

"Not unless it come in yesterday's mail." Frosty paused to puff his pipe. "But I expect we'd better ship him anyhow. You ready to go home, buster?"

It took the boy a moment to master the threat of chin-quiver enough to talk, but when he did, it came out steady.

"I never aim to be no trouble to nobody, Mr. Frosty," he said. "I'm ready to go—if I have to."

"We'll see." In his unhurried way Frosty started out, then turned at the door. "I always hate to see a man oilin' his gun, Yaqui," he said gravely. "I had to shoot a man once my-ownself, but I never have relished the recollection."

CHAPTER

5

THAT WAS a quiet June afternoon on the Flying V—a little too quiet—but when Hack Hanley had not showed up again by sundown the invisible tension seemed to slack off considerably.

The first streams of milk squirting into a tin bucket make quite a bit of noise. Intent on his job, Orbin Tomison failed to see or hear Hack ride up and stop just outside the corral fence until he spoke.

"Hey, kid!" Hack's low, sullen tone had the hoarse sound of drunkenness. "Go find that so-and-so Yaqui an' git him out here!—Wup! Ssh! Nev' mind!"

Stepping to the door of the gear

shed from where he had been lacing new stirrups on the old spare saddle the kid had ridden that morning, Yaqui found himself facing the unsteady snout of Hack's raised six-shooter less than twenty feet away.

"Now, you wormy son!" Hack snarled. "You're gonna git yoursh!"

With an inner reluctance that had no kinship with fear, Yaqui's lean right hand dropped to the gun at his hip. But at that instant a strong, well-aimed stream of milk squirted through an opening between the corral fence poles and hit Hack's horse smack in the flank. Hack's roaring revolver spat a bullet harmlessly into the shed roof as the startled cowpony's sudden wild leap unloaded its rider like a half-filled sack of oats.

Within a second after Hack hit the ground, Yaqui was on him, wrestling the six-shooter out of his grasp. Like an overgrown grass-hopper, the kid came clambering over the fence, his milk stool raised for a bludgeon. But his help was not needed. Yaqui was yanking Hack to his feet by the shirt collar when Frosty and the others got there.

"He's drunk, Frosty," Yaqui spoke quietly, but there was a grim whiteness about his lips. "Either he'd have killed me or I'd have had to kill him—if this boy hadn't spooked his horse by shooting a squirt of milk at his flank."

"I saw what happened." Frosty's voice suddenly turned hard and cold. "Hack, for your pappy's sake I've put up with your meanness for a mighty long time, but now I'm done. Climb on your horse and git! And don't you never show up around here again—

or next time you'll have me to deal with!"

In a recognizable imitation of Yaqui Kilgore's habitually casual manner, the kid picked up Hack's hat and handed it to him. Without a word Hack Hanley jammed it on his head, accepted the horse's reins from Dolly Bustos, lurched into the saddle and rode away.

It was Whitey Monkbridge who picked up the letter lost out of Hack's pocket when the horse threw him. It was postmarked "Dryfork, Arkansas" addressed to "Mr. Yaqui Kilgore & Mr. J. W. Murdoch"—and it had been opened.

Frosty read it, then handed it to Yaqui.

"Looks like Hack must have tried to throw in his loop for a little blackmail," he said dryly. "But the kid's ma didn't fall for it. She wants us to keep him here if we think he'll do—and I reckon he will."

"You hear that, Squirt?" Yaqui's smile had sober depth behind it. "You'll be needin' a saddle. Let's go see how them new stirrups fit."

Young Orbin Tomison, henceforth destined to wear, with some pride, an unmanly sounding nickname inspired by his manly share in that June evening's violent events, grinned widely. But he spoke like a cowboy modestly aware of his newfound caliber and its implied obligations.

"After a while, Yaqui," he said. "I've got to finish milkin' my cow first—before the Injuns git her!"

"Squirt!" chuckled Whitey, ambling back to the cook shack with Frosty Murdoch and Dolly Bustos.

● END



THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

by WILLIAM VANCE

CHAPTER

1

MEL NESBITT had been working with the stage outfit less than six months when the letter arrived for him.

Mel liked working for easy-going Speed Thompson as shotgun on the Milford-Frisco-Newhouse stage. He liked Speed's daughter, Tina, who not only dished up a nice table of victuals but was a nice dish herself. He'd even begun thinking thoughts about himself and Tina. And for the first time in his twenty-nine years he'd started taking thoughts like that serious.

They stood slugging it out, toe to toe.



He'd been leaning against the off-wheeler, a solid chunk of a man, better than six feet, lean of hip and thigh, with thin hard lines around his mouth and gray eyes, his sawed-off double-barrel tucked in the crook of his arm. He'd felt at ease, content with the world and his lot, with hardly a thought of his kid brother. Then Lige Ross had brought the letter from Bud.

Lige Ross, sheriff of Silver County,



**GRIPPING
FEATURE-
LENGTH
NOVELET**

No more owl-hoot for him, Bud wrote, no-siree. But Mel winced anyway, because his rambunctious kid brother had vowed that two or three times before...



and Speed Thompson came from the depot now lugging the strong box. It held thirty thousand for the Saturday payroll at the Horn Silver in Frisco. Lige had waved the letter under Mel's nose and all the brightness in Nesbitt's day disappeared when he saw and recognized the handwriting. He read the letter while Lige and Speed loaded the strongbox in the boot.

Dear Mel:

They're letting me out for Xmas and brother, I promise this time it's going to be different. No more of the owlhoot for me. I been here over a year now and even had a chance to go with Kell Torrant and I turned him down. I'm really on the straight and narrow, Mel. I need forty bucks. Can you help me out this time and I'll pay you back soon's I get a job.

Bud

P. S. Do you know of any jobs?

Mel looked at the postmark. Laramie, Wyoming, December 15, 1896; more than two months ago. The reason the letter was delayed, Bud had sent it to the horse ranch on Wind River. The horse ranch that was supposed to put them on easy street. Mel let a cynical smile play with his wide lips and his gray eyes grew hard for a moment, lending a bleakness to his brown face. He was slightly hook-nosed and his crisp black hair curled from beneath the brim of his flat-crowned black hat.

Instead of putting them on easy street, Bud got mixed up with a bunch of horse traders who were not too particular about bills of sale. The ranch had gone for lawyer's fees; lawyer's fees that hadn't kept Bud from the State Pen at Laramie. And that wasn't the first time, either. The first time was more than ten years before, when Bud, not quite eighteen, had been one of a gang of hellions who made the mistake of taking mail from a stage down near Rock Springs. Bud did time in a federal reformatory for that; and it didn't teach him a thing, Mel reflected.

His thoughts were interrupted by Speed's shout: "Hey, Mel! We're gonna be late fer supper!"

Mel stuck his shotgun into the boot and climbed up. On the seat beside Speed, he lifted the gun and laid it across his knees.

On the ground, Lige Ross, the loose red skin on his neck reminding Mel of a turkey and smoking his eternal cigar said, "No bad news, Mel?"

Mel grinned. "No news is good news," he said carelessly. "No passengers, Speed?"

"Nary a one." Speed gathered his lines and flicked them and let out his familiar yell. "Get out o' here!"

THE SIX HORSES bunched their muscles and lunged. The leather-suspended stage bucked and they whirled north, the gray dust lifting behind them. They went down Milford's single street, at a gallop, with Speed yipping at the top of his leather lungs; the black-snake cracked like the pop of a six-gun and all the kids in town ran along behind yelling like Indians. And in a few moments on the edge of town, Speed eased up and they made the grade west at a walk. As Speed explained it to Mel, practically every day: "People just naturally want t' see you ain't wastin' no time."

Speed kept looking at Mel and Nesbitt knew the old man wanted to ask about the letter. But he wouldn't ask; not if he died of curiosity. That was one of the many things Mel liked about Speed Thompson.

Mel said, "He's out, Speed. Wantin' some money." Mel had told Speed and Tina about Bud right after he'd moved in with them and began to feel like one of the family.

Speed looked at Mel from beneath his bushy-white brows and then he spat down between the near wheelers. "You ain't obligated," he said. "He's nigh old as you."

Mel tried to find words to tell Speed how it was with him. How, ever since Ma died, he'd tried to take care of his younger brother. He'd wanted to—he hadn't felt it a burden or obligation. But Bud went down

the wrong trail. Mel reasoned that he himself had failed somewhere along the line. He wanted to tell Speed these things, but he couldn't find the words. So he said, "He's old enough, all right." But he didn't sound convincing even to himself.

The horses were laboring now, their withers wet and a white froth foamed on their breeching. An hour and twenty minutes from Milford they came steaming out of the canyon. The ragged burned-iron sign said: *Frisco, 5 mi.*

Speed reared back on the lines and jammed on the brakes. The horses stood panting in the slanting rays of sun that filtered through the scant stand of cedars. Speed built himself a cigaret and scratched a match on the seat of his corduroys. The match stopped halfway to his mouth.

"Reach!" A rifle blasted and the off-leader sagged in the traces. The other horses lunged and then brought up sharp with the weight of the dead animal. Two men rode out of the cedars, one on each side of the stage. They wore red bandanas over their faces. One of them carried a still-smoking rifle, held like a six-shooter and the other held a sixgun. Mel's hands were still on the shotgun that was cradled on his lap. Speed cursed as the match burned his fingers.

"Ain't never been held up afore," His voice was hoarse and strained. "Throw down that box!"

With a start, Mel stared hard at the man who hadn't spoken as yet. He seemed to recognize the set of the shoulders. The way the man sat his horse seemed familiar, and the slightly-hooked nose beneath his bandana—no, he told himself, it couldn't be. Yet, the letter was two months old. Mel could feel it crinkle in his pocket as he moved slightly, getting ready to tip the shotgun. His finger was curled around the trigger and he thought maybe he could try it, because Speed was acting up and both men were mostly watching him. A wildness in Speed Thompson's eyes kept the hold-up men tense.

There was agony in Mel's mind and heart. Suppose it was Bud? Suppose Mel knocked Bud out of the saddle

with a load of buck... His fingers relaxed on the stick of the gun.

"Take it easy and won't nobody get hurt." The man doing all the talking was slightly-built and acted like he knew what he was doing.

"Ain't never been held up afore," Speed repeated and he seemed to be trying to convince himself of something.

"Easy," murmured Mel. "Take it easy, Speed."

"Don't try it!" yelled the smaller man and the rifle in his hand blasted.

Speed Thompson stood up in his seat and the six-gun in his hand fell as he clutched his breast with both hands. He twisted and fell across Mel's knees and the shotgun. The rifle swung up at Mel and Nesbitt lifted both hands.

The second man was not to be seen and Mel heard the springs creak and boots scraping on the back. He half turned as something cracked over his head. A mantle of darkness followed the shower of lights and stars and he and Speed fell into the boot...

HE REGAINED consciousness by degrees. First, an intolerable ache in his head. Then as realization returned, just as poignant ache in his heart. His exploring fingers found the slash across the back of his head and the crusted blood on his denim jumper. His hand brushed Speed Thompson's and the chill of it made him shiver. He gently moved Speed's body so he could move.

He jumped to the ground and the sudden jar made his head throb. He cut the dead leader out and unhitched its mate and led it back and tied the leathers to the rear of the coach. He climbed to the seat and picked up Speed and lifted him to the top of the coach and lashed him here. He took off his jacket and spread it over the dead man's face and chest. He didn't let himself think while he worked. He took one last look around and then picked up the lines and got the stage moving.

He passed an ore wagon coming down grade. The teamster stopped

his hitch and wanted to know what happened. Mel shouted, "Hold-up. Speed was killed. Tell Lige when you get to Milford." He kept the horses moving.

The teamster closed his gaping mouth and waved that he understood.

Mel stopped the coach in front of the express office, next to the Horn Silver General Store. A crowd of loafers came from nowhere to stand around the coach, talking excitedly. Burt Larson, the town marshal, pushed importantly through the crowd and climbed up on the stage and jerked the coat from Speed's face.

The express agent came running from the express office. "What about the payroll?" he yelled excitedly.

"They got it," Mel said briefly.

Burt Larson said, "Got 'im, b'gawd!" He swiveled his head around. "Who done it?"

Mel shook his head, not trying to conceal his dislike for Larson. "Two masked men. Didn't know them or their horses. Got us while we was stopped at the top of the Grade. Speed didn't have a chance."

One of the loafers started off down the street at a dog trot.

Mel called after him, "Don't tell Tina! I'll tell her."

The man kept going and didn't look back.

Larson carefully covered Speed's face with Mel's jacket. He stood up and looked out over the crowd. "Any o' you want t' be sworn hold up your hand."

Three or four men put up their hands and the marshal looked at Mel. "How 'bout you?" he asked. "He's yore gal's old man."

Mel stepped out on the wheel and jumped to the ground. He reached back in the boot and got his shotgun. He looked up at the sheriff. "I'll do my looking alone," he said and turned down the street. Larson was a killer who enjoyed his work and Mel wanted nothing to do with him.

CHAPTER

2

THERE WAS dread in Nesbitt's heart as he clumped along the walk, trudging the three blocks to Speed Thompson's

little frame house on the edge of Frisco. He got within calling distance of the place and he saw the crowd out front. They were milling around, trampling Tina's flowers and generally making a nuisance of themselves, he thought. He opened the neat picket gate and went along the walk outlined with flower beds bordered with upended bottles of all colors. The house itself was white with green shutters and gingerbread woodwork all around. Speed was proud of that house and so was Tina; Speed had built it for her.

"She's inside," someone volunteered as he pushed through the sombre crowd. Mel went up the steps and into the front parlor, with its prim rugs, curtains and the organ in one corner. He thought with surprise that this was the first time he'd ever used the front door.

Tina sat very straight in a wooden-back rocker, rocking gently. She was holding her head high and her eyes were bright and dry. She had not been crying. She didn't notice him. He went across the room and stood close by her. She didn't speak or look at him.

"Tina," he said in a dry voice. "Tina, darlin'!"

She turned her head slowly, her blue eyes searching his face. Her golden brown hair framed her tanned face and her wide unsmiling mouth was twisted with a visible pain that hurt Mel deep inside.

"He—he's gone!" she whispered. She came to her feet then, tiny and slim and golden, and she came to him and rested her head on his chest. He stroked her hair and whispered something. He did not know what he said, but it released her grief and she cried quietly and terribly for a moment.

The inside door pushed open and a slender, dark man came through with a tray holding a cup of coffee. He stood for a moment, his booted foot holding the door open.

Mel stiffened. His arms tightened around Tina and he said, "Bud!"

Bud grinned, showing even white teeth in his dark face which carried just a trace of paleness. "That's me," he said. "Been waitin' for you. Sorry 'bout Miss Tina's old man."

Mel pushed Tina back to the rocker and straightened, his eyes glinting. Fierce anger surged through him and he clenched his hands. He took the cup of coffee from the tray and placed it in Tina's hand. "I'll be back in a moment," he said gently.

He jerked his head at Bud and went back through the kitchen and outside into the back yard. He motioned his head toward the barn and walked swiftly through the gloom up the wooden ramp and into the big airy barn of which Speed Thompson was so proud. It was dim inside and Mel came to a stop and turned, waiting for Bud.

Bud came into the barn, uneasiness in his stride. Mel couldn't make out his features in the darkness but he imagined Bud was grinning. His anger deepened.

"You got a lot of gall," Mel grated, "coming here now!"

Bud's voice was cool. "Don't know what you mean, Mel."

"The devil you don't, you rotten, no-good pup," Mel snarled. "Maybe you didn't pull the trigger but you may as well have done it yourself."

"You're loco," said Bud. A match flared as he lighted a cigaret he'd rolled in the darkness. His dark features were outlined in the yellow light and he looked at Mel with smoke curling from his nostrils. "Plumb loco," he repeated around his cigaret.

Mel slapped him hard with the palm and then the back of his hand. Sparks flew and Bud cursed and struck out with rock-like fists. The blow jolted Mel and set him teetering. Bud came boring in. Mel didn't try to defend himself. He stood there throwing everything he had.

THEY SLUGGED it out toe to toe, grunting, cursing, spittle and blood flying and neither would give ground. They moved back and forth in a small space their fists flailing, blind with rage.

"Blame—crazy—fool!" panted Bud. "What's—eatin'—you?"

Mel's pumping hands was his answer. His weight began to tell and he

forced Bud back. "You—know—blame—well what's eating me!" gasped Mel. He had an advantage now and he followed it up quickly. His rock-hard fist found its mark and the younger man went down. He struggled to his feet and Mel knocked him down again. He lay still.

Tina came into the barn holding a lamp over her head. She looked at Bud stretched out on the floor and then she looked at Mel's bloody face.

"Not fighting!" she said and her voice was shocked. "He's waited for you since early this morning. And now you're fighting!"

Mel's jaw dropped in amazement. "Since early—this morning?" he repeated incredulously.

She nodded and set the lamp on the floor and went to Bud's side. She took a tiny handkerchief from somewhere and dabbed at Bud's blood-streaked face. "Get some water," she commanded.

Mel said, "I picked a fine time to get the kinks out of family arguments." He went heavily out the door and across the yard to the kitchen. When he returned with a pan of water, Bud was sitting up, smiling crookedly through battered lips at Tina. He grimaced when he saw Mel.

Mel squatted beside him.

"I'm sorry, Bud," he said. "I was loco. Just about anyway."

Bud gingerly felt his injured jaw. "You still pack a wallop," he said. He got unsteadily to his feet and bent over and splashed water on his face. Tina stood on tiptoe and wiped it, tenderly, Mel thought, with her handkerchief.

Mel lifted the lamp and gave it to Tina. "We'll be in in just a moment," he said.

She took the lamp. "No more fighting?" She looked from one to the other and they both shook their heads.

Mel turned to Bud after Tina had gone back to the house. "I was all wrong," he said simply. "I thought I recognized you at the holdup." He didn't look at Bud.

"Guess you got every right to think that way," Bud said after a short mirthless laugh. "But I meant it, Mel. I'm on the straight and narrow."

"You've said that before," said Mel. "But that's all right. I don't give a hoot any more. But I do need your help—if you can still follow a trail like you used to."

"How much did they get away with?" asked Bud.

"Thirty thousand," Mel answered and he didn't like the sound Bud made as he sucked his breath in.

Bud whistled softly. "Boy, what I couldn't do with thirty thousand!"

"You gonna help me?" Mel asked harshly.

"Sure, what the devil have I to lose?"

"Where'd you leave your horse?"

"At the livery in town," Bud said. "I'll get saddled and meet you here?"

Mel said, "Yes, right away," and Bud faded out into the night.

Mel turned back into the interior of the barn and brought out his own animal. He saddled hurriedly and wrapped a lantern in a slicker and strapped it to his cante. He led the big and rangy gray outside and tied him to a post and went into the house.

TINA MET him in the kitchen, her face pale and scared looking. She held her finger to her lips and whispered, "Burt Larson and Lige Ross are in the front room. They're looking for you—and Bud!"

"What for?" Mel asked automatically as he came towards her.

Her lips were quivering and her eyes filled with tears. "They say—Burt said they couldn't find but one set of tracks at the Grade. They say Bud held you up—that it's a put-up job Lige knows about Bud."

Mel took her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Do you think that, too, Tina?" he asked swiftly.

She shook her head. "If I did, I wouldn't be talking to you now," she said.

He turned quickly. "I've got to get out of here and fast. Bud and I are going up on the Grade and see if we can pick up sign." He stepped through the door and she came out after him and came against him, her arms tight against him. "I'll be back,

honey," he whispered and stepped out into the night. The door closed behind him.

He took a dozen strides toward his horse when something hard rammed into his back. "You ain't goin' no place, Mel," said Lige Ross. "Turn 'round slow, man, and don't make anv sudden move."

Mel turned around slowly. Lige held his .45 loosely in his hand and his cigar glowed. "You don't believe that stuff, Lige?"

Lige puffed on his cigar and said, "Looks damn suspicious, boy. Looks bad." He cleared his throat and went on: "Larson said there was just one set of tracks at the stage tracks."

"He's lyin'," said Mel heatedly. "He's trying to hang something on me! Why?"

"I'm not solvin' riddles," said Ross. "Then too, y' don't want t' forgit that I checked on you long time ago. Know all about your brother bein' in th' pen. I told Speed he'd live t' see—"

Mel struck Lige's gun hand with his left and slammed his right into the sheriff's face. He felt the flesh, soft and flabby give as his fist sunk home and the sheriff squealed. Lige Ross staggered back, trying to bring the gun into play. Mel hung on the sheriff's gun hand and with his other fist struck repeatedly at the struggling lawman's head. He swung another savage blow and Ross went down. Mel ripped the gun out of Ross' hand and dragged him roughly into the shadow of the barn.

He squatted there with his hand on the sheriff's shoulder, waiting. He heard the pound of shod hooves and then Bud hammered into the yard. Mel ran to his horse and jerked the tie knot and stepped up to his saddle. "Let's get out of here Bud," he said tersely.

Bud said, "Want t' tell that gal good-bye."

Burt Larson came running around the corner of the house. He stopped short and emptied his gun at them.

Bud said, "Guess it'll wait," and kicked his mount into a run. They went out of the yard side by side and hammered down the dirt road.

CHAPTER

3

THEY STOPPED their horses at the Grade. Bud dismounted and stretched. "We can't do nothin' 'til mornin'," he yawned.

Mel sat his horse and untied his slicker. He got out the lantern and lighted the wick. He handed it down to Bud. "See what you can find," he said gruffly.

Bud shrugged as he took the lantern. "Sure hate to have you on my trail," he grunted.

"You're the tracker in this family," Mel said. "Get to lookin'."

Bud walked over to where the dead leader lay and pushed at it with his foot. "That's an old trick of Kell Torrant's," he said. "Always shoots one o' the hosses. But last I heard o' him, he was up in Jackson Hole. Nussin' a pack o' lead."

"Hurry up, dammit," Mel said sharply.

Bud grinned. "I'm just as anxious as you to get my hooks on that thirty thousand," he said. "Keep your shirt tail in." He sounded cheerful.

Bud made a short circle holding the lantern close to the ground. He said, "Looks like something here," and bent down to study the scuffed dirt. He rose and walked toward the clump of cedars, leading his horse.

Mel kicked his mount after Bud. "I'll hold your horse," he said.

Bud let him take the reins, grinning. "Don't trust me, huh?"

"Get on that trail," Mel told him. "You're not a blame bit funny."

Bud was gone long enough for Mel to roll and smoke two cigarets. Then he came back and stood beside Mel's horse. He raised the lantern glass and doused the light.

"They waited over beyond that clump of cedar," he said. "Then they separated and come on the stage from different directions—like you said. They finally hit off south, riding together and ridin' hard."

Mel flipped his cigaret away and watched the red arc form and die in the soft night. "Got any ideas?"

"Sure. They'll go south and circle

Newhouse. And wind up at Garrison on th' state line."

"You must know 'em," Mel's voice was surly. He knew that Garrison was a small outlaw town on the Nevada-Utah border.

Bud got on his horse. "You're sure givin' me a ridin'," he said shortly. "I'm certain one o' them is Kell Torrant. And one o' their horses has a broken shoe. We can cut trail or we can go straight to Garrison."

"We'll make damn sure," said Mel. "We'll follow their tracks."

Bud lifted his reins. "Then let's go—moon ought t' be out soon."

The moon did lift over old Granite when they were a few miles south of the Grade. The trail was easy to follow. They went at a lope, mostly, through the short, sparse sage and sandy desert. Mel kept hoping a wind wouldn't come up to fan out the well-made tracks.

They drifted along in silence for a long while, with Bud every now and again leaning from his saddle to study the hoof prints when they hit a hard stretch of ground. After a time he said, "Them boys really made a killin'—if they get away."

"They won't," Mel said sourly. "You keep thinking about the money, don't you?"

"Damn right," said Bud. "That's a lot of scratch, Mel. More'n I've ever seen."

"Forget it," advised Mel. "Forget it, Bud."

Bud went on musingly. "Think o' that, Mel. Thirty thousand bucks. In gold you couldn't tote it—or could you? We split it two ways and it'd still be a chunk. Enough for you and that gal back there to live on—right nice."

"If I was a mind to take it," Mel said heavily, "she wouldn't have nothing to do with me."

"Then you neglected her education," Bud said. "I wouldn't steal just a hoss, or a few measly dollars, Mel. But this is worth taking—"

"Dammit, keep quiet about it," Mel cried in a soft voice. He was silent for a long time and then said, "I'm not trying to preach. Lord knows I've done enough of it and it didn't help.

But you gotta make up your mind—it's going to be all one way or all the other. You ain't going to pull one more crooked deal and then go straight. It don't work like that. You're in the clear now—"

BUD SLAPPED his saddle and roared. "*In the clear?* You loco again? That kill-crazy town constable was just celebrating, wasn't he?" Bud bent in his saddle, convulsed with laughter.

Mel said quietly, "We bring that dough back, and Speed's killer, that'll take care of that."

Bud shook his head. "Them guys are smart. We might make a deal with them, but we'd never be able to take 'em. They're gonna sleep with both eyes open from here on out."

Mel looked over his shoulder at the moon, well above the mountains. "They're swinging west," he said.

"They're headin' for Garrison, all right." Bud pulled up his mount and got off. "I'm tired. Let's wait for daylight."

Mel stayed aboard. "Come on," he said, "it's light as day."

"I ain't goin' another step," Bud answered. "I'm tired." He began unsaddling.

Mel stepped down reluctantly. He bent toward the ground with a muttered curse. "Lost one of them, damnit!" he exploded.

Bud's muffled voice from his blanket said, "Yeah? I noticed that back a' ways. T'other rider headed back to ards Frisco."

"Why didn't you—" began Mel and then subsided. He wrapped in his blanket and lay back against his saddle, smoking a last cigaret before trying to sleep. He thought of the times he and Bud had camped out like this hunting strays in Wyoming. Now instead of that Bud was on the verge of committing another crime, if he could read sign. Bud wasn't interested in looking for a killer, or recovering stolen money. He wanted that money for himself. If he had half a chance, he'd have it too, Mel thought.

He wanted to talk to Bud again, but a soft snore stopped him. He ground out his cigaret and pulled his blanket up over his shoulders.

Mel felt something was wrong when he awoke. The sky behind the mountains was a rosy pearl. It made the mountains seem even more rugged and dark. He got up stretching, wondering what was wrong. He saw his gray standing alone in the sage. Mel looked down at the imprint of Bud's body, where he had lain in the sand. He stood there for a minute, with his head down, wondering what it was that drove the boy to act as he did. Bud was money hungry. The trail was getting hot and, Mel thought, Bud wanted to be there first. Well, by Judas, he thought savagely, he won't get away with it.

He saddled the gray and mounted. He turned his back on the first rays of the morning sun. His shadow, long and grotesque went ahead of him and the sage thinned out to nothing but sand dunes. Sand dunes stretched ahead and north and south as far as the eye could see. He cast frequent glances backward now, and the dust cloud he'd been expecting showed in the hazy distance when his shadow was right under him.

He watered the gray, using his neckerchief to sponge out the horse's nostrils. He wet his own tongue and went on, pushing the big rangy horse at a steady, mile-eating clip. The dust cloud grew larger in the afternoon.

He lost them after sundown, just about the time he raised a few flickering lights that marked Garrison. He rode up the rocky defile that led into the outlaw town. He felt that he was being watched, but he pushed on. He came out of the shallow canyon and turned into the town that sat on a plateau looking eastward over the desert. He stopped his horse for a moment, thinking that the inhabitants of this shanty town had had him under observation most of the afternoon. He shrugged and went on down the narrow street, wondering where Bud might be at the moment.

CHAPTER

4

A BLACKSMITH shop on his right pulled him into the boardwalk. He stopped by this shop and dismounted and let the

gray plunge his muzzle into the hollowed-out log that served as a watering trough. The smith was closing his doors as the gray drank noisily.

"A fine large evening," Mel said, "and a man who makes an honest living with his hands can enjoy it."

The smith turned and stared. Then he came to the edge of the walk. He spat into the dust and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking at the sky. Finally he said, "Don't know where you'd find an honest man here." He said it darkly.

Mel worked the sweat off the legs of the gray, stroking the quivering muscles. "Didn't happen to fix a broken shoe for a gent that came in some time today?" Mel got the question out quickly, turning and peering through the shadows to watch the blacksmith's reaction.

The blacksmith raised his head quickly and looked around and found the street empty. "Guess maybe I did," he said. He turned abruptly and went down the street.

Mel ran after him. He asked, "Who was it?"

The blacksmith hurried faster than ever, but he tossed over his shoulder, "The rider put him up at the livery." He disappeared into a darkened door just off the street.

Mel led the gray to the livery and brought him to a stall just inside the big double doors. A lantern hung from a nail beside the door marked office. The door opened and a man with a cadaverous face came out. His dark eyes were sunken deeply into his head and he was completely bald.

"I'll take care of him myself," said Mel. "Just show me which stall."

The bald man regarded him for a moment and then said; "Last one on the right. That'll be four bits—in advance."

Mel gave him a half-dollar and led the gray back between the stalls. Dim light filtered through the doors in the rear. He pushed the gray into a stall and stripped down his hull and rubbed the horse thoroughly. He got oats from the bin and as he made his trips up and down the stalls he looked the horse over, but could tell nothing in the darkness.

When the gray was attended to, Mel went along the stalls, examining the horses by match light. He reached the end of the stalls on that side without finding a newly shod horse. He started on the opposite side and went down the line methodically, listening for the pound of hooves that would mark Lige Ross' and Burt Larson's arrival.

About the middle of the barn, he struck a match and grunted with satisfaction as the light reflected on the new nails in the hoof of a big, sweat-streaked roan. He remembered the horse as being one the smaller man rode. He shook out the match and went to the front of the barn.

The bald-headed man had left the office door open. He sat inside reading a tattered newspaper by the light of a smoky lantern. Mel went over and leaned on the doorframe.

"Looks like Kell Torrant's cayuse down there," he said easily.

The man didn't look up from his paper. "Got eyes like a cat, ain't yuh?" he mumbled.

"Isn't it?" insisted Mel. "Ain't seen ol' Kell since last time."

The liveryman turned his cadaverous face toward Mel. "I didn't ask ye questions," he said. "Your name, 'er nothin' else."

Mel stepped inside the door and close to the man. "Kell's an old friend," he said. "He won't take it kindly, when I do find him."

The liveryman seemed to shrivel in his chair. "Last house on the right on this street," he said. "An' don't tell 'im I told ye."

Mel went out the door and ducked quickly inside as a band of horsemen swept up. He recognized Lige Ross.

The liveryman stood up and looked at Mel and then went across the room and opened a door that led outside. "Here," he said. "This way."

Mel went through the door with a bound. Outside he found himself in the corral. He climbed the fence and skirted back doors until he came to a vacant space. He cut through to the street and went toward the end. Over his shoulder he saw Ross talking animatedly to the liveryman.

THE HOUSES thinned out. Ahead he could see the yellow light of a solitary shack. He went stolidly ahead and not attempting to go quietly. He craned his neck as he neared the house, glancing through the window. He could see no person though the room was light. He went directly to the door that opened into the one-room shanty. Hooves pounded down the street and he pulled his gun and threw his shoulder against the door.

He went in standing. A small, mouse-colored man with his face in a dirty wash basin groped for an even dirtier towel on the wall and finally got it. The man was unarmed. His gun and shell belt hung from a cane-bottomed chair across the room.

"That you, Burt?" asked the small man from behind the towel.

Mel cocked his gun in answer and the small man hastily took the towel from his face and squinted.

"All right, Torrant," said Mel, expelling his breath in a gusty sigh. "Where's the money?" He found it hard to believe that this wizened, bow-legged man was known throughout the West for sheer coldbloodedness and deadliness with a short gun.

Torrant grinned a yellow-toothed grin and carefully placed the towel back on a rusty nail. "You got me all wrong, pard," he said in a whiny voice. "I been right here fur the past week 'er two."

"You're lyin'," grated Mel. "You're the skunk who shot Speed Thompson. You'll swing for that!"

"I got an alibi," said Torrant. "You nor that two-bit sheriff can't hang that on me."

"We're wasting time," Mel said, moving forward. "You gonna tell me where that money is—or do I have to wrap this gun around your skull?"

"You can't get away with it," said Torrant quietly. "A dozen men know you're here. What d' you think we hole up in this stinking town for?"

"That won't mend a busted skull. Yours!"

Torrant shrugged. "The money's under the bunk," he nodded toward the unmade bunk in the corner. "Under the mattress."

Mel kept his gun on Torrant and

moved around him and squatted beside the bunk. He threw back the mattress, revealing a canvas sack. He jerked open the draw strings with one hand and saw the glint of yellow and greenbacks. He closed it and picked it up. "I'll take care of this," he said with satisfaction. He motioned with his gun. "Outside now, ahead of me!"

"I'll take care of it now," said a new voice and glass tinkled on the floor and two guns came through the window. "Hold it, old son, or I'll let you have both of these!"

Mel stood still, blood pounding to his head. He'd recognized Bud's voice.

Bud stepped through the window with a .45 in each hand. "Just take it easy," he said, holstering one of the guns, "and you won't get a bullet in your belly."

Mel felt Bud lift the sack from his hand, then Bud backed against the wall. "You're crackin' up, Kell!" he shouted gaily. "Is that the way you protect gather?"

Torrant looked uncertainly at Bud. Then his eyes lighted with recognition. "You young devil! Got t' hand it t' you, kid. You must 'a learned some sense up there in Laramie!" The smile faded off his face as he jumped to his gun hanging on the chair. He walked purposefully across the room to Mel and lifted the gun.

"Hold it, Kell," warned Bud. "I got 'im. He's my meat."

Kell looked at Bud and then laughed and put his gun away. "I'd like to pistol-whup him," he said, "like he was a-fixin' to do t' me."

VOICES sounded outside and they turned to the door. Two men came in and one of them was Burt Larson. The Frisco constable jerked out his gun and said, "They're together, Kell!" and shot at Mel.

Nesbitt ducked low, his gun flaming to meet the hail of lead as Kell unnumbered his gun with incredible swiftness. The diminutive killer spun about and fell on his face. Bud's guns were beating a staccato of death; Burt Larson and the man with

(cont'd on last page)

PEACEABLE JONES AND THE CARELESS BARBER

by Edwin Booth

All he wanted was a shave and a haircut and a bath. He didn't want to fight anybody, or go to jail, or make anybody any trouble . . .

PEACEABLE Jones rode his shaggy cowpony down the single street of Mound City, Wyoming, with only one thought in his mind—to locate the barbershop and get rid of a three months' accumulation of hair and whiskers, and soak in a tub of hot water. Call it three thoughts if you will; to Peaceable they fitted together into a single picture of bliss—a vision he had carried in his mind during the long winter months when he had been cooped up in a line shack high in the hills, with only cows and his horse for companions, and nothing to look at but acres and acres of snow.

Now, as he finally neared his goal, there was a rapturous expression in his round, innocent eyes, and he rode with his chin high, so that his wiry yellow whiskers stood out straight in front of him like a banner. That his left hand kept jumping around to various parts of his anatomy to scratch idly was mere habit: all his attention was centered on a little shanty at the far end of the short row of false fronted buildings, an unpainted shack on which some long-forgotten artist had painted his impression of a barber pole.

Peaceable stopped scratching long enough to point a lank finger toward the shanty, and address a remark to his pony. "Socrates," he said. "This is it. We've reached us the end of the rainbow." He heaved a great sigh of sheer pleasure. "This dirty, itchy, wooly carcass you're about to see me drag through them heavenly portals is going to come out as pretty, slick-shaved, and sweet smellin' as—" He groped for a word to finish his oration, but gave up. "Just you wait and see, Socrates. Just you wait and see."

To which the cowpony made no response except to turn and look at him

politely with one eye, then permit himself to be turned in toward the barbershop.

Peaceable swung out of the saddle and laid the reins across the hitch rail, a gesture which was intended to flatter the horse into thinking it might be energetic enough to run away. He scratched a spot between Socrates' ears for a moment to prolong the anticipation, then crossed the boardwalk in two strides and pushed open the door to the shop.

The barber, a glum-looking man who needed a haircut himself, was sprawled in the only barber chair, reading a tattered newspaper. He looked up at Peaceable without any indication of interest.

"Howdy," Peaceable said happily. "I finally made it."

"You don't have to holler," the barber said. "I ain't deaf." He lowered his newspaper. "Not that I care, but what is it you finally made?"

Peaceable's ecstatic grin faded. "Well, now, I didn't *make* anything, the way you're talkin' about. What I meant was, I've been dreamin' of gettin' here for most of the winter, and I finally made—I finally got here."

The barber sniffed. "I guess you ain't been tryin' very hard. Anybody in Wyoming could've told you which road leads to Mound City, and once you got within a hundred miles of here, you couldn't hardly help seein' *that*." He pointed a stubby finger at the big mound which lay just across the street from the barbershop. "Once you was in Mound City, I don't reckon it oughta took you more than an hour to find the barbershop." He picked up the paper and began to read again. "However, if that's your story, it don't make any difference to me."

The last vestige of Peaceable's grin disappeared. He looked at the barber

uncertainly for a minute or two. This sure wasn't much of a reception after waiting all those months. He cleared his throat diffidently. "I forgot to mention," he said, "that my name is Peaceable Jones." He stepped forward and extended his hand, his grin coming back a little.

The barber squinted at him over the edge of his newspaper. "Well," he said, "if that's supposed to make any difference, it don't. Not to me, at least." He dropped his eyes behind the paper.

Peaceable stared at the floor dubiously. This barber almost made a feller forget what he came in for. He began to get a little riled. Doggone, he'd come all this way to get slicked up, and nobody was going to talk him out of it. He stepped over and looked down past the edge of the newspaper. "Mister Barber, sir," he said, "I aim to take me a bath. I reckon you've got a bathtub?"

The barber looked up at him defiantly. "Well, suppose I have?"

"Why then, where is it?"

THE BARBER ducked his head toward the back door. "No wonder you couldn't find Mound City, when you can't even find a bathtub in a two-room building."

Peaceable relaxed. A bath would feel just as good, even if the barber was an old crank. "I'm goin' back there and take a bath then. You want your money now, or when I get done?"

The barber shrugged. "Makes no difference to me, stranger. I don't care what you do with your money."

Peaceable shook his head wonderingly. "You just don't care about much of anything, do you, Mister Barber?"

The barber just grunted, and Peaceable went through the back door. He found himself in a dingy room with only one window. However, the smell of steamy water assailed his nostrils, and his spirits rose. He saw that there was a big bucket of water heating on a stove over by the window. Across the room, he could see the hazy outlines of a white tub. He quickly shucked out of his shirt, then decided it would be advisable to fill the tub before he finished undressing, so that

the water could cool a little. He lifted the bucket of water off the stove and hurried over to the tub. The bucket was poised for pouring when he suddenly stiffened.

"Great balls of fire!" he muttered. "There's a man in here already!"

"What did you expect—a mermaid?" a deep voice grumbled. "That's all right, boy; pour it in. This other's beginnin' to cool off."

Peaceable swallowed painfully. "Yes sir," he said. "I'm sorry." He started to tilt the bucket, then caught himself. "Hey! If I pour this in the tub, there won't be any left for me."

"Go on, pour it," the gruff voice said complainingly. "You can heat some more."

"I'll be dogged if I will." Peaceable lowered the bucket. "If you've been in there long enough for the water to cool, you've been there long enough to get clean. Now it's somebody else's turn."

"Young man," the voice said pompously, "I was clean when I got in here. I just like to soak in hot water. It's good for my joints. Now pour that water."

"Well—" Peaceable looked longingly at the bucket of hot water. "All right, mister. I don't aim to stir up trouble. I'm going to fill this bucket up again, and while it's heating, I'll go out and get trimmed. By then, I aim to get in this tub, whether you like it or not."

A gentle snore answered him. He raised the bucket over the man's head, then thought better of it, and poured the water carefully into the tub. No use spoiling a day like this by getting thrown into jail or something. Anyway, he'd just as soon have his haircut and shave first. He tiptoed softly to the door, and stepped back into the barber shop.

The barber had gotten up, and was leaning over the chair. He turned to glance over his shoulder.

Peaceable glared at him aggrievedly. "You might've told me there was somebody in there," he said.

The barber shrugged. "You never asked. If you didn't care enough about it to ask a question, it didn't make any difference to me." He turned back.

Peaceable struggled into his shirt.

"All right, I'm like my name says, just a peaceable cowpoke. I'll let you cut my hair and give me a shave while that feller finishes his bath." He went around the barber and started to step into the chair, reaching for the cloth that lay across it.

The barber grabbed his arm. "What the tarnation you up to, stranger? You figger to sit in this man's lap?" He shook his head. "You're a trouble-maker, all right. First you try to crowd into a bathtub with a feller, and now you want to squeeze a customer out of the chair."

PEACEABLE stopped dead in his tracks. He pointed a shaking finger. "You mean to say there's somebody under that sheet?" He stuck out his chin. "By grab, you knew I was here first. You had no business lettin' this man get ahead of me. I'm going to pull him out of that chair and throw him into the street!"

The edge of the sheet moved, and a bald head popped up. "What say, mister?" a cracked voice asked. "You talkin' to me?"

Peaceable's jaw sagged, and he looked at the barber.

"Go on," the barber said bitingly. "It's just Grandpa Finleader. Throw him out in the street. It's about what I'd expect, from the way you've been actin' ever since you hit town. Now you're going to pick a fight with a man old enough to be your own grandpa, if your grandpa was a man, which I'm beginnin' to doubt."

Peaceable gulped. "I had no way of knowin' he was an old man. Why didn't you tell me?" He held up a hand. "I know. You don't have to say it. I never asked you." He began to feel a little wild, and lashed out with his foot at a whisky box sitting near the wall, then grabbed his foot in both hands and let out a yelp. "Yeow! Why didn't you tell me that was nailed down? I like to broke my foot."

The barber shrugged. "It don't make any difference to me if you want to hurt yourself." He pointed with his scissors. "There's one that ain't nailed down, if you simply got to kick something."

Peaceable glared at the other box, then back at the barber. "All right,

Mister Barber. You know I ain't going to throw an old man out in the street, but you ain't going to keep me from gettin' a haircut and a shave neither, or from takin' a bath. There's a feller in that tub back there that ought to get out of it. Are you going to make him do it?"

The barber scratched his chin. "Nope. All I get for the use of that bathtub is ten cents a head. At that price, I can't afford to be runnin' back and forth puttin' 'em in and takin' 'em out. Next thing you know, they'll be expectin' me to scrub their backs."

Peaceable hiked up his pants. "All right. If you won't do it, then I'll get somebody that will. I'll get the sheriff." He grinned. "I bet you was hopin' I'd do it myself, and get thrown in jail." He stepped out into the street, then stuck his head back through the doorway. "Whereabouts is the sheriff's office?"

The barber pointed. "Hundred yards east of here, on this side of the street."

Peaceable bowed. "Me and Socrates thank you," he said. "I'll be back."

A man was squatting in front of the law office. He looked up sleepily as Peaceable strode up.

"You the sheriff?" Peaceable asked, noticing the star on his shirt.

The man yawned. "No, I ain't the sheriff. He'll be back sometime before sundown. Anybody will tell you that I'm too dumb to do anything alone, so you might as well sit down and wait." He closed his eyes and let his head tilt forward on his chest.

Peaceable reached down and shook his shoulder. "This don't require any brains. You'll do just as well as the sheriff. Come along."

The deputy rose reluctantly to his feet. "Can't it wait, stranger?" He saw Peaceable's expression, and shook his head. "No. I don't reckon it can, from your looks. You're one of them impatient fellers." He sighed. "All right, mister. Will I need my gun?"

Peaceable shook his head. "This feller I want you to arrest—he wasn't wearin' a gun when I left him. In fact, he wasn't—anyway, come along and see for yourself." He turned back toward the barber shop, the deputy at his heels. They entered the shop, and

the barber looked at them disinterestedly. The old man in the chair raised up.

"What're them fellers up to?" he asked brightly.

The barber shrugged. "Who knows? That newcomer—I think he's a little bit loco." He pushed the old man's head back against the headrest.

PEACEABLE shoved open the back door, and motioned for the deputy to pass. "There he is," he said, pointing at the tub. "There must be some law against hoggin' the bathtub. Throw him out."

The deputy squinted into the darkness. "Howdy, Sheriff," he said. "You seen anybody breakin' any laws around here?"

Peaceable gasped. "He's the sheriff?" he spluttered. He yanked open the door to the barbershop. "Hey you! Why didn't you tell me the sheriff was back here?"

The barber looked at him and shook his head. "You forgot to ask again." He looked at Grandpa Finleader. "You see what I mean?"

"Close that door," the sheriff said petulantly. "You want me to freeze?"

"For all I care," Peaceable muttered, "you can freeze and be—"

"That's the man," the sheriff snapped. "He's the one that's causin' all the trouble. Keeps runnin' in and out, and he didn't want to bring me the water off the stove. He must be the one you're lookin' for, deputy. Lock him up!"

"Yes sir." The deputy reached for Peaceable's arm.

Peaceable shook him off. "Hey! I'm the feller that came after you. Remember? I ain't busted any laws. All I want to do is take a bath and get sheared."

The deputy looked at the sheriff questioningly. "How about it, Sheriff?"

"Well—" The lawman thought a minute. "All right then, if you think you can keep from causin' any more trouble. We had a nice peaceful little town here until you came ridin' in and started hurrahin' the place. I'm gettin' downright fed up with it. Now get out and let me finish my bath."

"Yes sir." Peaceable opened the door carefully and stepped back into

the barbershop, the deputy behind him. He sat down on the whisky case, and watched morosely as the deputy exchanged glances with the barber and left the shop.

The barber cleared his throat. "I don't care what you do, one way or the other, but if you're waitin' for a haircut, you'd better go away and come back later. Soon as I finish with Grandpa Finleader, I've got to go to work on the sheriff. First come, first served—that's my rule."

Peaceable frowned a moment, then brightened. "All right. Then I'll go back and put some more water on the stove. The sheriff can't be both places at once."

The barber nodded. "That's the first good idea you've had today. Grandpa Finleader likes his bath water pipin' hot."

"Grandpa Finleader?" Peaceable gasped. "You mean he's—"

The barber looked pained. "Naturally, mister. He got into the chair first. He's entitled to get into the tub as soon as it's empty. Only fair and square."

Peaceable stared at his boots. Was this the same place he'd ridden up to with such high hopes? It must be, because there was Socrates still slouching out by the hitching rail, and there was the big hill rearing up on the far side of the street. He stared at it blankly, then turned his eyes back toward the barber. An idea was beginning to shape up in his head.

"If I was to go away and not come back for a haircut," he said, "I don't reckon you'd care much, would you?"

The barber didn't even look up. He shook his head. "What you do don't cut no ice with me."

Peaceable nodded. "I figured it wouldn't." He got to his feet. "Well, I'll mozey along." He glanced again at the mound. "Nice little hill you've got over there, but I reckon it don't make any difference to you." He stepped out into the street, picked up the reins, and swung into Socrates' saddle. "Come on, horse; we got us some business to tend to." His grin was beginning to return. "Seems like I noticed an old wagon down the street a ways when we came in."

THEY REACHED the abandoned wagon, and Peaceable examined it. He looked up to see a man watching him. "This your wagon, mister?"

The man took a pipe out of his mouth. "Whatever it is, stranger, it's mine. I don't calc'late it's much of a wagon any more."

Peaceable held up a half dollar, and waited.

The man shrugged. "She's yours, stranger." He caught the half dollar when Peaceable tossed it, and went into his house, grinning.

Peaceable used his lariat to make a temporary harness and fasten Socrates to the wagon. "Come on, horse," he said. "We're going to give that barber one more chance." He led the horse back in front of the barbershop and stuck his head in the door. "Hey, barber," he said. "I got me a wagon. You want to look at it before I take it away?"

The barber shook his head angrily.

Peaceable frowned. "You ain't interested in knowin' what I'm going to do with my wagon, barber?"

The barber waved his razor threateningly. "No, I don't want to see your danged wagon, and I don't care what you're going to do with it. Just go away and quit hollerin' at me!"

Peaceable shook his head dolefully. "You're a careless man, barber. You ought to care about something once in a while." He closed the door softly, and picked up the reins. "Come on, Socrates; you heard what he said."

Fifteen minutes later the wagon was well up the side of the mound, directly opposite the barbershop. Peaceable had the wagon bed half full of rocks which he had gathered. One rock was wedged under a back wheel, keeping it from rolling. The lariat was once again coiled and tied to the saddle.

Peaceable wiped sweat from his brow. "That ought to do it," he said. He cupped his hands and hollered. "Hey, barber! Come on outside!"

Down below, the shop door opened with a bang. The barber stuck his head out, and glared around.

"Are you sure you don't want to know what I'm going to do with this wagon?" Peaceable yelled.

The barber looked up and saw him.

He shook his fist. "By dang! I don't care if—"

The rest of the sentence was drowned out in the sound of Peaceable's gunshot. The bullet blasted to pieces the rock he had used to prop the wheel, and the wagon began to move, gathering momentum as it rolled. Down below, the barber stared at it dumbly for a moment, then let out a yell. He turned toward the shop, then reversed himself and ran out into the street. Grandpa Finleader burst out the door, the white sheet sailing out behind him.

Peaceable's grin widened as the two men reached safety. He turned his attention to the wagon, which was bounding along down the steep hillside. It hit the street, bounced once or twice, then continued on its way. There was a satisfying crash as it hit the front of the barbershop. The building quivered, then the front wall collapsed in a cloud of dust.

A man let out a muffled yell, and the sheriff erupted from the back of the shanty, a towel clutched frantically around him.

Peaceable nodded thoughtfully. "That ought to loosen up his joints," he said. He picked up Socrates' reins and swung into the saddle, then looked back down the hill. The sheriff was shaking his fist and shouting oaths, but they were almost drowned out by the barber's screams and curses. Only Grandpa Finleader was quiet. Peaceable thought he looked strangely pleased about something.

Socrates was watching the scene with evident satisfaction. Peaceable shook the reins slightly. "Come on, horse," he said. He scratched his long whiskers. "You know, whatever that barber's got, I must've caught it. All of a sudden, I don't care whether I get a shave or not. I don't even care if I have to take a cold bath in the creek tonight." He touched his heels to Socrates' flanks.

"Most of all, I don't care if we put a few miles behind us before that sheriff gets into his britches. That is, if it don't make any difference to you?"

Socrates winked one eye, then broke into a lope. ● END

LONG WINTER

by RAY G. ELLIS

ONE SUMMER day in the year 1872, William C. Ralston was sitting quietly in his office in the Bank of California doing whatever bank presidents do, when a bomb in the shape of a chamois bag was dropped onto his desk. He lifted shaggy eyebrows at the rude intrusion and glowered at the two unkempt men that stood before him. Before he could order them out, however, the shorter of the two picked up the bag and emptied the contents onto the slick mahogany desk.

Ralston's growing anger quickly vanished and was replaced by a thrill of excitement as he gazed down at the small fortune in diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires. Now he understood that these men were prospectors and had found what everyone dreams of finding, a diamond mine.

cautious and afraid that the secret might get out, Arnold and Slack at first refused to sell any part of their discovery. But when Ralston applied the pressure and upped the ante to \$300,000, the two men gave in and agreed to part with half.

Being president of one of the richest banks in the country was no job for a foolhardy man and Ralston was not that. Before he would turn over any of the money to the two men, the discovery must be investigated.

The first party to journey to the new diamond field was headed by a certain David D. Colton. In this case, as they would in the future, Arnold and Slack required that the men be blindfolded when the party reached a point near the diamond field. The two prospectors were no fools themselves.

If somebody lets you in on a diamond mine he just discovered in Colorado, don't jump off the deep end and quick organize a ten-million-dollar company

Arnold said finally, "Keep those in the vault for us. We'll be back in a few days."

With those the only words they spoke, the two prospectors walked from the office before Ralston could ask the many questions that flooded his mind.

Ralston didn't wait for the two men to come back. A discovery like this was too good to be hidden behind the heavy door of a bank vault. First he cabled Asbury Harpending, a noted financier who was in London at the time, and told him that a rich diamond strike had been made in the country. Harpending left for California at once.

Next Ralston got hold of George D. Roberts, a well known mining engineer and an associate of his. Roberts found the two prospectors around town without too much trouble and interviewed them. Appearing very

Colton came back with more diamonds and a very optimistic report. Still the location was kept secret—it was told that the field was in northern Arizona territory.

Harpending now arrived from London and found the city of San Francisco buzzing with excitement now over the new source of riches. More than a few old sourdoughs were ready to leave for the field just as soon as they found out for sure where it was.

Slack and Arnold, feeling that additional proof was needed to show these men the value of the discovery, offered to go back and bring in a million dollars worth of diamonds. A week later after they left, they telegraphed from Reno for someone to meet them at Lathrop. Harpending went and after an agonizing wait the train finally pulled into the station.

The two men, looking haggard and worn, left the train. When Harpending met them Arnold said, "We lost one bag of stones crossing a river but the other one is here with at least a million dollars worth."

WHEN THEY REACHED San Francisco a public showing of the stones was made and now the excitement had reached the bursting point. Ralston sent the stones to Tiffany's in New York, which, even then, was well known around the gem circuit. The appraisal was \$150,000—considerably less than the promised million, but very good indeed, nevertheless.

Even with all this evidence Ralston was still moving with care. He hired Henry Janin, a distinguished engineer and friend of Roberts, to go to the diamond field for one last look-see.

The party, with Arnold and Slack, of course, proceeded directly to Rawlins, Wyoming, and from there headed into the wilds. They reached the field without incident and began immediately to hunt for the gem stones. With pick and shovel they dug into the soft detritus and it wasn't long before they had a nice little pile of stones. The bulk was of diamonds but there were a few rubies and emeralds to brighten up the collection.

Janin was enthusiastic. Even though he was only able to spend one day looking over the field (the rest of the time he spent surveying and securing timber and water rights), he reported that it was the find of the century. He turned in a report to Ralston stating that the field was worth, conservatively speaking, four million dollars.

That tore it. Ralston read the report and went into action. A company with a capital of \$10,000,000 was organized. Twenty-five of the most initial \$2,000,000 was placed in the Bank of California, Ralston's bank. Wealthy and reliable Californians subscribed \$80,000 apiece and this Slack and Arnold received their \$300,000 at this time.

The gems that Janin and his party had recovered were noised about as

being worth \$20,000 although Tiffany's appraised them at eight thousand. This slight discrepancy was overlooked in the excitement. Anyway, who cared what they were worth when there were plenty more just for the digging.

Handsomely appointed offices were set up with a map of the three thousand acre claim. Already they had named various parts of the topography with such graphic titles as Diamond Flat, Ruby Gulch and Sapphire Hollow. Then the directors of the company sat back to chew fingernails until the winter passed. It never passed as far as the new company was concerned.

A telegram was delivered to the company office on November 11, 1872. The ax fell and hopes rolled farther than Anne Boleyn's head. Clarence King, head of the Fortieth Parallel Survey and later the first director of the U.S. Geological Survey, had taken it upon himself to investigate the new field, the location of which had now been made public.

The ground was salted, King said. The whole thing was a hoax. The new company didn't take this sitting down—they took it lying down, for a few days later King's full report arrived in San Francisco.

King listed ten important points in his report, probably the most interesting being that one of his party had found a cut diamond in the field. There are indications that there had been other cut and polished diamonds in some of the samples but nobody had noticed this small detail. King also pointed out that rubies, emeralds and sapphires are not found associated with diamonds nor with each other, for that matter.

Soon after this deadly blow the company folded up and silently stole away. Ralston, honest and upright in the tradition of the Old West, paid back the twenty-five investors and stood the expense of the several prospecting parties out of his own pocket.

Slack and Arnold, by this time having silently stolen away themselves, were brought suit against. Slack, for reasons known only to Arnold, had received only \$30,000

then had disappeared never to be heard from again. Arnold had retired to Kentucky where he was much respected by his neighbors. They were all for him when he was confronted with the evidence that he had salted the mine. Arnold stated, "It must have been them California scamps that done it." Finally, he anted up \$150,000 for immunization from further prosecution.

Arnold didn't live long to enjoy his ill-gotten gains, for the next year he was shot in a street fight.

Now where did Arnold and Slack get all the money to buy the diamonds in the first place? After all Tiffany's first appraisal was for \$150,000 and the second for \$8,000. It didn't seem to make much sense to anyone that the two men had spent that kind of money for a mere \$300,000. Then, too, all the diamonds

were never recovered from the field.

The gems were re-appraised. It was found that Tiffany's had made a slight mistake. The first batch of gems wasn't worth more than fifteen or twenty-thousand, and these were of an inferior quality. Still, in all fairness to Mr. Tiffany, it must be remembered that little was known of diamonds in those days and Tiffany was not unfamiliar with uncut stones.

It turned out that Arnold and Slack had purchased the diamonds and other stones in London the year before for a little over \$35,000. Where that money came from, nobody ever found out.

So if someone should come to you with a wild gleam in his eye and a diamond that he just found below the Colorado border, don't jump off the deep end and quick organize a ten-million-dollar company... ● END

SHE HAD RED LIPS, HE HAD A SIX-GUN

(cont'd from page 34)

He built a cigarette and smoked it down. All the while, Ardis McQueen stood beside him without uttering a word. When he was through with his smoke, he flipped the butt over the ledge and watched it until it dropped from sight.

"Well," he said with a sigh, "let's get your money and then head out."

"My money?" she said. "Isn't half of it yours?"

"I don't want any part of it," he said with a burst of bitterness. "After all the conniving and dying because of it, I don't want to touch a penny of it."

"What if I told you I felt the same way?"

He turned and laid a narrowed look on her. "You know what your father wanted. That money is to give you a new life. I have an idea what it was like for you," he said, and she colored, "and this will give you a new start. With all that gold, you can do what you want the rest of your life."

"I only want happiness," she said gravely, eyes searching his face. "Will that gold buy it, Lawson?"

He said nothing. He bowed his head and looked at the ground. There was an ache in his heart and a yearning and all the old hopelessness and loneliness.

She reached up a hand and touched his sleeve, almost timidly. "People find happiness only in each other," she said. She paused awkwardly and then went on, "Don't you know what I'm trying to say, Lawson?"

"What about the gold?" he asked.

"What would you do if it was all yours?"

"I'd turn it over to the law and let them make restitution the best they could."

"Then I'll do it that way," she said. "You see. Lawson, I'd like to do things your way the rest of my life."

His head lifted and he looked searchingly at her. She met his eyes with a glance that was both shy and bold. His heart gave a hopeful leap.

"I'm no bargain, Ardis," he said slowly.

"Neither am I, Steve," she said. She came in close and laid her head against his chest. "I'd be awful proud if you'd have me."

He put his arms around her and held her. He wanted very much to tell her that he loved her but his throat clogged up and the words just would not come. So he stood there silent, his cheek against her hair. There would be time to tell her he loved her. There would be the rest of his life to tell her that... ● END

IM CLANEY boarded the Ute Springs stage at Durango and gave himself to the sour run of his thoughts while the Concord carried him north into the gaunt and avalanche-scarred San Juan range. Trouble was Clane's business; it had been since he was twenty and he was thirty-two now. He hated it. Every job he'd taken for the last five years was to be his last yet something always happened that kept it from being so. This time it was a letter from Ed Manning, and he couldn't turn the little miner down. So he was buying himself into another fight, and from what Manning had written, it would be a real corker this time.

Black Tom Taggart was in Ute Springs. Manning had added a P.S. to tell Clane. It hadn't been necessary because Manning's plea for help was enough, but he was glad to know about the outlaw being in Ute Springs. He'd settle an old score with Taggart while he paid his debt to Manning. Then he'd hang up his guns. Buy a spread somewhere. Paradox Valley maybe. He'd never been there, but he'd heard it was good cattle country.

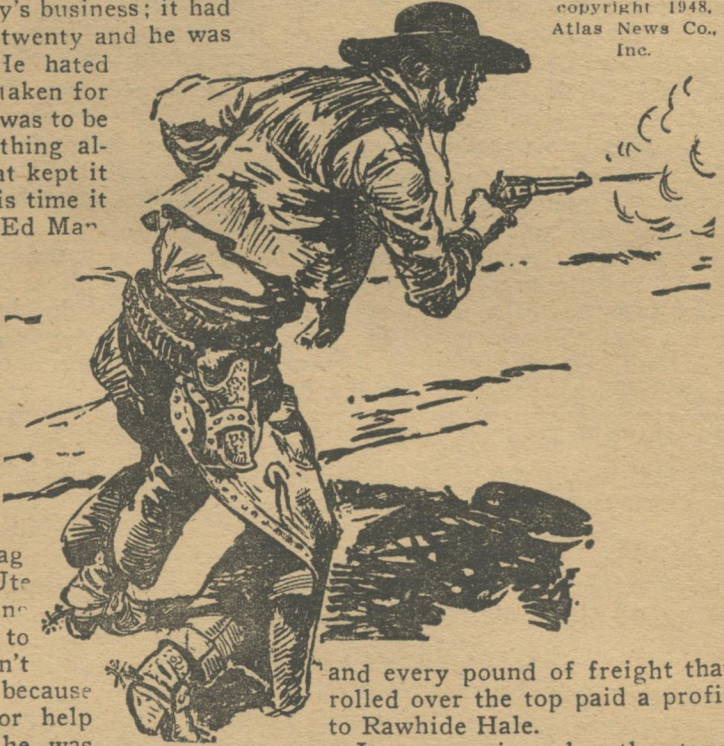
The stage laid over at Harney Station and then the Concord rolled north again before sunlight touched the canyon floor. They left the river in mid-morning to follow a road ribbon that had been blasted out of the mountainside. Rawhide Hale's toll road, the driver had said at breakfast, the only way to get to Ute Springs.

A year ago everything had come to the Springs by pack train. Now wagons rumbled over the pass. Hale the roadbuilder had staked his last dollar

on this venture, and his gamble had been a good one. The Ute Springs strike had proved bigger than even Ed Manning and the rest of the first-comers had guessed. Five thousand men had boiled over the pass the first week it had been cleared of snow. Now, every man

TIME HONORED
WESTERN CLASSIC

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and every pound of freight that rolled over the top paid a profit to Rawhide Hale.

It was evening when the stage reached the tollhouse atop Twin Peaks pass. Stepping down, Clane's eyes swept the long green fingers of spruce that reached far up the mountainside to be blotted out a thousand feet below the bare rock spine. Here was a granite land, chiseled by the ceaseless wind into precipices and rock points and gaunt peaks that tilted steeply to the sky, a hard and forbidding land where only the tough survived. Rawhide Hale must be tough, or he would never have succeeded in building this road.

A miner said, "We'll be in the Springs afore midnight."

"And if you don't have a friend who'll share his bunk," another muttered, "you'll freeze in the street. Reno Ford sees to it there ain't enough beds to go around."



He shielded the girl and took careful aim!

MAN - BREAKER

BOOK-LENGTH
WESTERN CLASSIC
by WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER

Trouble was Claney's business, but this Ute Springs ruckus bore the brand of more than boomtown hate and fury. For Claney knew the bushwhack patterns that trouble took, and plain cold courage like he saw in the pretty cowgirl from Durango would never stand up here . . .

RENO FORD! The name was familiar to Claney, but he couldn't hook it up with anybody. Manning hadn't given any details about the trouble he was into, or who was making it. He'd only mentioned Black Tom Taggart, and Taggart didn't have the brains it took to make real trouble. This Reno Ford might be the one.

"Why would he see to it there wasn't enough beds?" Claney asked.

"It'd put the price down," the miner said bitterly. "Didn't you ever

hear of Reno Ford?"

"No."

"You must have come from a long ways off." The miner spat and rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ford's the kind that . . ." He stopped, and squinted at the darkening sky. "Yep. We'll make it 'bout midnight."

A man had come to stand in the tollhouse door, a big man, bull-necked and meaty-lipped. His mouth tightened against yellow snags of teeth as he laid his gaze on the miner.

"Running off at the mouth again, Stover?" he rumbled.

"Not me," the miner said hastily.

"I thought you'd got it through your bone head that Reno don't want no trouble makers in the Springs." The big man moved toward the miner. "You're waiting here for the Durango stage."

Stover swallowed, eyes whipping to Claney and back to the big man. "I got a job waiting for me with Manning. You ain't running me out again, Pasco."

"Won't take me long to change your mind." The man called Pasco

paced steadily toward Stover. "You're taking the stage out, Savvy?"

Because trouble was Jim Claney's business, he had learned long ago to recognize the patterns it took. He understood the motives that made men follow the paths of violence that they did and he seldom failed to place a correct judgment on a man. So it was easy enough for Claney to see that this Pasco was one of Reno Ford's bully boys who would bust Stover up if the miner didn't break.

"You bluffed me into running once," Stover flung at the big man. "I've been hating myself ever since."

Then Jim Claney knew the miner wouldn't break and Claney had a decision to make. Manning had written for him to come quietly and get the smell of things before he attracted any attention. It would be the smart way, but Ed Manning couldn't have foreseen this. Besides, Jim Claney wasn't one to stand idle while a big man beat up a little man.

Stover held his ground. "I ain't going, Pasco. You lay a hand on me and the Miners' Guard..."

Pasco hit him, a head-rattling blow that knocked Stover back against the coach. Claney let it go that far and no farther. He caught the big man by the shoulder and turned him around. Pasco started to swear, a fist pawing instinctively at Claney. Claney ducked and waded in. He was shorter and lighter than Pasco, but he was faster, and he always fought with a cold and calculating fury that made him a hard man to beat.

Pasco gave ground, weaving and dodging, but taking a high percentage of Claney's punishing blows. Claney worked him across the yard to the stable wall. He held him there, getting through his guard to his chin and nose and eyes. Claney was conscious of the crowd that followed him, of the taut silence. He wondered vaguely about it, for it was not like a crowd of miners to keep silent while they watched a fight. Then he had no time to think about it, for Pasco broke sideways and wheeled back.

They stood close for a time, the hard thud of fist on flesh and bone echoing across the yard. Claney was being hurt, for Pasco had recovered

from the first shock of surprise and regained some of the advantage that Claney's unexpected attack had brought him. But it wasn't enough. Pasco's nose was bleeding; one eye was shut. Then Claney closed with him, wrestled him for a moment, right fist hammering his stomach.

Pasco's breathing was short labored pants. He tried to break free, and suddenly Jim Claney had the opening he wanted. It was a short blow, expertly given to the side of the head. Pasco's knees became rubber. He went down into the litter of the yard, not quite unconscious but lacking the strength to lift himself.

A miner cried out bitterly, "Bust him up, you fool. He'd do it to you."

BUT JIM CLANEY waited, standing with clenched fists over the beaten man. Pasco came to hands and knees, head bent, blood a steady dribble into the dust. Then a girl's voice came clearly, "Stay out of it, Taggart. It was a fair fight. Get Pasco on his horse and drift."

Taggart! Black Tom Taggart! Turning, Claney raised his eyes to this man he had hated so long. He opened and closed his right hand, cursing himself for a fool. He'd injured his gun hand on Pasco's head. His draw wouldn't be fast enough to beat Taggart.

Taggart came across the yard in the strange rolling gait that had always been characteristic of him. He reached Pasco, lifted him and drew one arm around his neck. For a moment his black evil eyes were pinned on Claney's face. He hadn't changed in the twelve years. His swarthy skin, the grotesquely bent nose that went back to a fist fight in his youth, ebony hair that showed under his hat brim; all made Black Tom Taggart look exactly as Claney remembered him.

"This ain't finished, mister," Taggart said flatly. "You can ride that stage into the Springs, but you'll never ride it out."

Taggart half-carried Pasco across the yard and helped him into the saddle. They rode downslope toward Ute Springs, Pasco slumped over the

horn. Then the truth came to Jim Claney, Taggart hadn't recognized him. He'd changed in the twelve years because he'd been a kid when Taggart had seen him last, but the outlook had been a man grown.

Stover lurched across the yard. "Thanks, mister. I don't know why you bought into that fight, and it ain't none of my business, but you're a stranger and you'd better know afore it's too late. You'll be a marked man in Ute Springs. Reno Ford will get you afore morning."

"Maybe not."

"Don't fool yourself, friend," the stage driver cut in. "I work for Reno Ford, but I don't dirty my hands with the kind of jobs Black Tom Taggart and Pasco Wallen do. I know 'em, though, and I know Reno. Was I you, I'd wait here till morning and catch the stage back to Durango."

"He's right." The girl came across the yard from the tollhouse, a rifle in her hands. "Pasco Wallen hasn't been licked before. He won't be any good to Ford as long as you're around, so they'll have to get you. I'll give you a bed and meals till the stage comes through."

SHE WAS small and pretty with a firm chin and a full-lipped mouth that could be friendly. Her light brown hair was curled around the back of her head. One lock had escaped a pin and now caught in the breeze, fluttered above her forehead. She was sweet and lovely and fine, and Claney, wiping a hand across his bruised face, was suddenly ashamed of his appearance.

"Reckon I've got to go on, ma'am."

"I'd have done the same for any man." She turned to the driver. "Better roll, Slats."

"Right away, Miss Ann."

"Stover, you know what'll happen if you go on," the girl said.

"I know, but I'm going," Stover said grimly. "Even Reno Ford can drive a man so far and no more."

"You've got a wife and children in Durango," the girl cried. "Don't you think of them?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's why I'm going back."

The girl shook her head and turning, walked to the tollhouse. Claney

watched her go, and felt his admiration for her. Her slim back was as straight as an aspen trunk; she carried herself with pride and dignity, and there was a kind of courage in her that Jim Claney had found in few men.

Claney was the last to climb back into the stage. When the tollhouse had been lost behind a curl in the road, he asked Stover, "Does she work for Hale?"

Stover chuckled. "She works for him all right. She's old Rawhide's girl. If it wasn't for her, he'd have been broke a year ago. Then Reno Ford would be running the road same as he runs everything else hereabouts."

CHAPTER

2

Bushwhack

IT WAS nearly midnight when the stage stopped in front of the Wells Fargo station in Ute Springs. Stepping down, Claney shivered in the cold wind that whipped down from the pass. It was mid-summer, but here, at ten thousand feet, the nights were always cold.

Even at this hour the one long street that curled along the bottom of the gulch was alive with lights and racket. Flares burned before the saloons, barkers chanted their monotonous invitations, and music flowed between the false fronts in a hideous jangle of sound. Somewhere ahead of Claney a gun barked and a man cried out in agony.

It was an odd scene to Jim Claney, one that he hated. Here in Ute Springs would be greed without conscience. Here would be men like Black Taggart who used gun and fist to rob and murder while others like Ed Manning fought back, too often with futile results, for gold bought power. It was an evil cycle; power bringing wealth which in turn brought more power until the little men who had taken the first risks were smashed like ore under the pulsing sound of heavy stamps.

Whether he liked it or not, Jim Claney was here to pay a debt to Ed Manning and another debt of a dif-

ferent brand to Black Tom Taggart. It would be his last job of this kind, he told himself again as he waited at the rear boot of the coach for his valise. He'd been raised on a ranch in Central Oregon, and the desire to return to the cattle business had been deepening in him through the years.

There was another hunger in him, too, the hunger of a lonely man for family ties and the roots those ties give him. He had nothing to hold him now except the debts he owed, debts like this one he owed Ed Manning. He had no roots at all. He was a drifter and he was sick of it; sick of bad food and lumpy beds, sick of whiskey smell and the sweat-stink of a hundred miners packed into a saloon seeking escape from the monotony of their lives. Without conscious direction, Jim Clane's thoughts turned to Ann Hale and he wondered about her.

Claney stepped away from the stage when he was given his valise. The miner, Strover, said, "I'll find you a bed, Claney. Come along."

Claney hesitated, thinking of Manning's instructions and wondering how bad a mistake he had made by buying into the fight at the pass. Strover was a man marked for death, and now Jim Claney had marked himself for the same fate.

"Want a drink first?" Strover asked. "The Blue Chip is Pasco Wallen's place."

"I don't want a drink and I don't want any more trouble." Claney fell in beside Strover. "Not yet."

"You've got trouble, son," Strover said grimly. "So have I. If I can stay alive until morning, Ed Manning can get the Miners' Guard together and I'll have help." He gave Claney a quick glance. "Aw, hell, I'm fooling myself but no sense in fooling you. We've had the Guard organized for a month, and we ain't done no good with it. Reno Ford keeps easing in. Some claims have been jumped already. One of these days when the sign's right, Pasco's toughs will finish us."

THEY RAMMED their way through the crowd in front of

the Blue Chip saloon, the flickering light falling across Claney's freckled face. He was a medium-tall man with hard thick-muscled shoulders that he used to drive his way through the milling miners, the slight-built Stover letting him take the lead. They passed the door of the saloon, and Claney, turning his eyes that way, glimpsed Black Tom Taggart's swarthy face. Instantly the man wheeled away and disappeared.

A warning doubt tugged at Claney's consciousness. The crowd thinned and Claney and Stover came into the pool of light in front of the smaller saloon on the corner. "What's the law like?" Claney asked.

Stover laughed shortly. "What law?"

"You've got a sheriff here, haven't you? Or a marshal?"

"The sheriff's a hell of a long ways from here, and the marshal's a fat old man who sleeps all night."

Stover nudged Claney to the left and they followed a dark alley toward the river. "Where are we headed?" Claney asked.

"Manning's cabin. He's got an extra bunk. All the men in this neighborhood belong to the Miner's Guard. I'll find a bed somewhere."

Claney slowed his pace thinking about this and not liking it. He had planned to get a room in a hotel, cruise the town, and as Manning had suggested, get the smell of things. He could play his hand in any of a dozen ways if he wasn't hooked up with Ed Manning and the Miner's guard. He might get around in his fight with Pasco Wallen, but there would be no escaping the truth if he stayed the night at Manning's place.

"Come along," Strover urged. "I'll feel better when I get inside."

"Go ahead. I don't want to be beholden to anybody. I'll try a hotel."

Stover stopped and swung to face Claney. "You're crazy. You'll pay ten prices if you find a room."

"All right. I'll pay it." Claney wheeled back toward town.

"Wait." Strover caught his arm. "I wanted you to see Manning. You don't ride the fence in this camp. You're on Ford's side or you ain't."

You made your choice when you licked Pasco."

"I'll play my own game," Claney said and jerked free.

Stover swore and let him go. Claney didn't look back until he reached the lights from the saloon on the corner. The shots brought him around, three of them closely spaced. Drawing gun, he lunged into the darkness. He heard Stover fall, and fired at the sound of the killer's pounding feet. Then lamps burst into life along the street and men poured out of tents and shacks.

"It's Stover," a man yelled. "Have a look at him, Ed. I think he's cashed in."

A circle formed around Stover's body. Claney pushed through it to where Ed Manning knelt at the man's side.

"Dead all right," Manning muttered. He came to his feet. "Pasco told him to stay out of camp. Looks like he should of."

There were a dozen of them in the circle, all miners but Claney, hair sleep ruffled, most of them clad only in drawers and undershirts. They glanced at each other uneasily as if feeling Reno Ford's unspoken threats. Then one of them saw Claney, and cried out, "That's the devil who done it. I saw him and Stover go by the Nugget."

THE MAN was panting as if he'd just come from a hard run, a short dumpy man with a beer belly that pushed out the front of his undershirt. He shoved a pudgy finger at Claney and cursed, and a growl ran around the circle. Manning raised his lantern and started to say something. He swallowed it when Claney shook his head, for Jim Claney saw the angle he wanted to play.

"I came in on the stage with Stover," Claney said. "The man who shot him was waiting behind the tents."

"You were close to him," the pudgy man challenged. "Purty dark for a killer to drill him from the back of the tent."

"He fired three times and missed twice. I wouldn't call that good shooting even at night."

"Let's see your gun."

"It wouldn't prove anything. I shot at the man when he ran."

"This stranger didn't do it," Ed Manning said. "He was yonder at the corner."

"You see his face?" the pudgy one pressed.

"No," Manning admitted, "But I saw the gun flashes. The man who done the shooting was back of the tent. I heard his gun before this fellow opened up."

The pudgy man sighed gustily. "Stover allowed he'd be back after he seen his wife and kids. He said that when Ford told him to vamose, but Ford's too smart to put one of his toughs up to the killing, so he brought in a new man. Ed, I don't like the way you're standing up for this feller."

"Hanging the wrong man won't do any good," Manning snapped. "Any of Ford's gundogs could have done the job and got away." He picked up his lantern and turned toward a row of tents. "Let's see if he left any tracks."

"No sense of that," the pudgy man bawled. "I say it's time we was putting a stop to Ford's killings and this is the man to start on. Smith, get a rope. That spruce yonder's got a stout limb."

Money begot power and power begot money; the old devil cycle. Reno Ford hadn't missed a bet. He'd placed a man in the Miners' Guard, and now the man was earning his pay.

"I guess this camp needs some hangings, but not tonight." Claney stepped back, gun palmed. "One wrong job will make you sick of the business, and you'll bust up. That's what this man Ford wants."

"Who are you and what are you here for?" the pudgy man shouted.

"The name's Jim Claney. Figured you boys might need a good man." He shook his head at Manning. "Looks like I made a wrong guess, so I'll have a talk with Ford."

"I say he killed Stover," the fat man shrilled. "Killed him and then tries to bull his way out of it. Let's get him while we can."

"Want to make that talk good, Fat-ty?" Claney asked softly.

The miner swallowed and laid his

gaze on Manning's face. "You're supposed to be the boss, Ed. If you say to get him, we'll get him."

"I ain't saying nothing of the kind." Manning said sourly. "I'm gonna see if there's any tracks over here."

MANNING MOVED around the tent, his lantern held close to the ground. Claney, not waiting to see the drama played out, backed out of the circle of light and ducked around the tent farther up the street. He waited in the darkness, watching Manning and the others examine the soft earth.

"There's where he stood," Manning said in triumph, "And his feet were a hell of a lot bigger than this fellow's. About Taggart's size, ain't they, Zeb?"

The paunchy man growled something Claney couldn't hear. Manning, still holding his lantern close to the ground, followed the row of tents almost to the street.

"Hitting the ground every ten feet" Manning said. "Taggart done his job and didn't hang around to swap lead with this stranger." He straightened and set his lantern down. "Boys, Zeb was right about one thing. It's time we was stopping Ford's killings, but Black Tom Taggart is the man to start on. Any of you backing my play if I go after him?"

They stirred uneasily, none of them looking at Manning. Finally the paunchy one growled, "Maybe it wasn't the stranger, Ed, but you sure as hell don't know it was Taggart."

"I ain't in favor of going after him till we know," another muttered.

"It looks like one of Taggart's jobs," Manning said grimly. "We'll get him and try these footprints on for size. If they don't fit, I'll apologize to him. If they do, I'll put the rope on myself."

"You call that proof?" Zeb jeered "I'm going to go to bed."

"All right," Manning said. "You boys take the body over to Doc's place. I'll nose around some more."

Claney waited until Manning was alone. He moved to the rear of the tents and called softly, "Ed."

Manning came to him quickly, hold-

ing his lantern so that the light touched Claney's face. "You've changed, Jim. Grown up since I saw you."

He held out his hand and Claney gripped it. "It's been a spell, Ed. Taggart didn't know me, either."

Claney told him about the fight at the toolhouse, studying the older man as he talked. Ed Manning was small and tough and wiry as he had always been, but the years had peeled the hair from his head and woven a network of lines across his face. Hard years, Claney guessed, judging from the imprint they made on him.

"I'm sorry it went that way, Jim," Manning said thoughtfully when Claney finished.

"It's all right. I'm going to see Ford, maybe sign on with him. I think that's the end to work from. The bunch of rabbits you've got won't fight."

"They'll fight." Manning sighed gustily. "All but Zeb Vale. Ford hasn't pushed 'em long enough, but it won't take many more killings. Now they'll pay for having their fighting done. I'll guarantee you five hundred dollars a week, starting the minute your stage left Durango."

"I DIDN'T come here for pay, Ed." Claney said sharply. "I'm remembering a damned fool kid who believed Taggart's talk about easy money, and held the horses when Taggart's bunch held up a Leadville bank. I'm likewise remembering how the kid got caught and a gent by the name of Ed Manning talked the governor into letting him out of the pen after a year."

"I knew how you'd pan out, Jim," Manning said gruffly. "I've never been sorry. Heard a lot about you when you were rodding some of the Montana camps."

"What's this trouble about?"

"Just a bunch of little fellers like me trying to develop our properties and getting hamstrung by Ford. He's so damned rich and high and mighty he uses gold bullets and they sing mighty loud."

"How's he going at it?"

"Mostly by working around till he's got a monopoly on everything. The

only things he don't own are our claims and the toll road, but Rawhide Hale takes his orders. Ford's got the stage line. Does all the freighting. Got it fixed so you buy everything through him. Little fellers like us can't stand his tariff. I've got some good ore on the dump, but it might as well be in Timbuctoo. No way to mill it here."

"Why did we have Stover killed?"

"Ford was afraid of him. Stover had enough guts to talk back." Manning cleared his throat. "I had the notion you did, Jim. I thought if you could figger out how to get in with Ford, you might stumble onto some way to nail him. My boys will fight once they see a chance of winning. They figgered that bucking Pasco Wallen's toughs on their own grounds was too poor a bet."

Claney shrugged, doubting that these men he'd seen tonight would ever fight. "I'll fix it so it'll be a better bet," he said. "See you later, Ed." Turning, he left the darkness and strode back along the flare-lighted street.

CHAPTER

3

Gold Camp Boss

UTE SPRINGS was still loud with its brawling when Jim Claney paced along the plank walk. As always when he was in a gold camp, Claney wondered when the miners slept and worked. He found a hotel, took a room, and pulling off his clothes, fell into bed and was instantly asleep.

It was nearly noon when Claney woke. He doused his face with water from the tall pitcher on the washstand, rubbed briskly with the rough towel, and dressed, his mind working on the problem that faced him. A slow consuming anger began to burn in him when he remembered Stover. It was another debt, this time owed personally to Reno Ford.

Claney left the hotel and paced slowly along the crooked street, searching until he found the log building that housed Ford's office. It would, Claney knew, be the nerve center of his many projects. Moving on, Claney found a narrow restaurant

wedged in between two highwalled saloons, ordered lamb from a menu that gave him little choice, and waited for it, restlessness growing in him.

The air was sickening with the smell of grease. The restaurant walls, covered with muslin, had been calso-mined a vague red. Claney was crowded at the pine table where he sat between a miner and a freighter, both eating noisily and rapidly.

Claney ate, drank his cup of lukewarm coffee, and paying for his meal, stepped into the street again and breathed deeply. Ute Springs, the noon-bright sun now upon it, showed the effect of Reno Ford's nickel squeezing tactics. The only permanent-appearing building in camp was Rawhide Hale's two-story house at the upper end of the street. Little over a year old, Ute Springs had been built to sell. Only Hale, Claney thought, had any confidence in the future of the town.

Main Street curved with the gulch, steps leading up to the log buildings on both sides. Tents, brush huts, tiny cabins, dugout; all were scattered precariously along the mountainside. The one exception was the flat between the river and the street. That was where Ed Manning and the members of the Miners' Guard lived; that was where Stover had been murdered less than twelve hours before.

Above him Claney could see the white lace of Tumblebug river as it pitched down the steep slope to the gulch; he could see the twisting cut that marked Rawhide Hale's toll road. Again Claney thought that Hale must be as tough as his moniker, or he never could have built that road. Then he remembered Ann Hale, and Stover saying that if it hadn't been for her, Reno Ford would own the road the same as he owned everything else.

Claney stood motionless for a time in front of the restaurant, the welcome sun warm and penetrating on the back of his corduroy coat. Behind the tight row of buildings on the opposite side of the street the Tumblebug rushed noisily toward the Dolores to eventually reach the Colorado. Somewhere downstream would be Ford's stamp mill, the deep rumble of it slowly drifting up the gulch.

Here was the usual motley mixture of humanity that Claneley had seen in all new gold camps: the strong and the weak, the flotsam and jetsam, those who came to labor and others who came to prey upon those who did. Here were miners and freighters, gamblers and bunco artists, clerks and storekeepers; all living under the shadow that Reno Ford threw across the canon.

BUT THERE was another kind of drama in Ute Springs new to Jim Claneley, this thing of the small miners like Ed Manning trying to operate against all the paralyzing pressure Ford could lay upon them. It took a dogged kind of courage to stay here. Thinking about it now, Claneley wondered if he had been wrong the night before when he'd told Manning that his men were rabbits and would never fight.

"So you didn't believe me when I said you'd never ride the stage out."

Claneley wheeled, hand instinctively moving to gun butt. Black Tom Taggart was standing there, dark eyes narrowed, meaty lips drawn tight in a mocking grin.

"No, I didn't believe it." Claneley saw that the outlaw still hadn't recognized him. He was thankful for that because his right hand was still stiff and bruised from his fight with Pasco Wallen. "You want to fix it so I won't do any more riding?"

"I'll attend to that chore when the sign's right. Right now the boss wants to see you."

Taggart jerked his head for Claneley to follow and moved back along the plank walk in his peculiar rolling gait. Claneley hesitated a moment and then matched Taggart's strides. It might be a smart move on Ford's part, Claneley thought, but regardless of his motive, his summons gave Claneley the opening he wanted.

They slanted across the street, pausing for a huge ore wagon and trailer to rumble past, neither speaking. When they reached the door of Ford's office, Taggart stepped back.

"If you've got any notion about making a play for the boss, you'd better forget it," the dark man growled. "I'll gut shoot you the first move you make."

"You scare me," Claneley murmured, and went inside.

"Over there." Taggart motioned to a door across the big office.

Claneley threaded his way through the desks, feeling the curious eyes of the clerks on him. Glancing back, he saw that Taggart had palmed gun and was holding it on him. He turned the knob, pushed the door open, and stepped across a hall into Reno Ford's private office. There he stopped, a long breath coming out of him.

A smooth smiling man sat at a mahogany desk. The paunchy miner, Zeb Vale, stood beside him. But it was a third person sitting at Ford's left that surprised Claneley. It was Ann Hale wearing a blue dress and a wide-brimmed hat with a white ribbon, as pretty and composed as she had been the day before. She stared at him, sober-lipped. He might be imagining it, but he thought her eyes held a warning for him.

"Come in," Ford said with easy heartiness. He didn't stand nor offer his hand. "I want to see the man who licked Pasco Wallen."

"You're looking at him." Claneley moved away from Taggart so that he stood with his back to the wall.

Ford's smile widened as he glanced at Ann. He was around forty, Claneley judged, expensively dressed with a diamond ring on his right hand. His features were as nearly perfect as a man's could be; his dark brown mustache was as carefully clipped as his hair was perfectly combed. But it was his eyes that held Claneley's attention, bold green eyes that carried no trace of the smile that was fixed on his lips. They were unreadable, without humor and without mercy. Claneley understood now why Reno Ford held Ute Springs in the hollow of his hand.

"Why did you wade into Pasco?" Ford asked.

"He was going to whip hell out of Stover," Claneley flung back. "I can't stomach a big man busting up a little man."

"A laudable reason, my friend," Ford murmured, "but hardly a logical one. It's a tough world and we have to be tough to live in it. Perhaps you can think of a better one

that I can believe without straining my credulity."

THERE WAS no better reason, but Claney could think of one that Ford would believe. He said "Now maybe I can, mister. I wanted a job, and I figured you could pay my price, but you wouldn't unless you knew I was pretty damned good."

Ford's gaze flicked to Ann as if reminding her that was exactly what he had said. He pinned his eyes on Claney again. "What makes you think I'd hire you?"

Claney's grin was quick and wicked. "I've heard of you and the way you do business. When I got into camp I knew my hunch was right."

"Why?"

"By the way you had Stover killed." Claney jerked a hand at Zeb Vale. "Your fat boy wanted to pin it onto me, but he wasn't tough enough to make it stick. If you had some of his lard assayed, it'd come out low grade stuff. Plumb yellow, Ford, and not pay dirt, either."

Zeb Vale let out a squall of fury. He grabbed for his gun, not listening to Ford's warning cry. He was fast for a fat man, faster than Claney had guessed, but not quite fast enough. Claney's gun came up and leveled and filled the room with its roar and smoke a fraction of a second before Vale's finger tightened on the trigger.

The fat man's bullet slapped into the wall a foot above Claney's head. His gun dribbled from his fingers as he clutched the corner of Ford's desk, round face contorted with the agony of death. The last echo of gunfire had died, the last of the powder smoke had drifted upwards and spread across the ceiling when life went out of the paunchy man. He fell full out and rolled over on his side.

"Stay out of it, Taggart."

It was the girl again, the small gun in her hand lined on Black Tom Taggart. The outlaw swore softly, and slid his Colt back into leather.

"Taggart likes his fights second hand." Claney holstered his gun. "Want to make it your fight this time?"

"That's enough for today." Ford motioned to the door. "Pull him out.

Take the carcass over to the saw-bones."

Taggart hesitated, dark face twisted by the rush of inward fury. Ford repeated, "Pull him out," and this time Taggart obeyed.

When Claney heard the door close, he said, "Thanks, ma'am. I'm piling up quite a debt to you."

"I like a fair fight," the girl said.

Ford laughed softly, the lip-deep grin on his mouth again. "I believe in getting things done, Ann. Keeping fights fair is not a point worthy of consideration." He leaned back in his swivel chair, and lifting a cigar from the pocket of his black broadcloth coat, turned it between his fingers. "I like you, fellow. You know why?"

"No."

"You're looking for a job, but you knew I had plenty of guns, so you maneuvered it around until I had one less, figuring I'd hire you. Right?"

IT WASN'T exactly that way. Zeb Vale was a traitor who needed killing, but it was just as well to let it ride the way Ford saw it. Shrugging, Claney murmured, "You're smart, Ford."

"I have to be." Ford bit off the end of the cigar and spit it into the high brass spittoon. "You're hired. What's your name?"

Claney hesitated. Ford might have heard of him, but he had never used another name and it went against his grain to start now. He said, "Jim Claney."

"Claney." For a moment Ford's aplomb was shattered. He struck a match and held the flame to his cigar. He pulled hard for a moment, and when he took the cigar from his mouth he had regained poise. "I've heard of you. Seems to me you were a lawman. What brought you over to this side of the fence?"

"The pay's better," Claney murmured.

Ann Hale was startled. She stared at him, a bitterness coming into her eyes. She said, "I'm wrong, Reno. I should have let Taggart kill him."

Ford leaned back, cigar tilted at a cocky angle between his molars. "On the contrary, my dear, you showed a rare insight. I've seen other lawmen come to the same conclusion this man

has. He'll be of help to me. What are you worth, Claney?"

"One thousand dollars a month."

Ford's dark brows lifted. "High, my friend, but if you work for me, you'll earn it. Get this straight, Claney. I expect two things: obedience and efficiency. I won't be sold out and I won't stand for bungling. Play it straight and I'll see you're protected."

He rose and glanced at his watch. "We'll be late, Ann." He nodded at Claney. "One man in camp has given me some trouble, but it wouldn't look good to have him removed the way Stover was. Find Ed Manning and kill him in a gun fight. Let plenty of people see you. Work up a good excuse."

"No," Ann cried.

Ford smiled easily. "We're playing for all of it, my dear. It's that or nothing."

"How soon do you want the job done?" Claney's face was held under a tight restraint. "It'll take me a little time to find him and make it look good."

"He's easy to find. Cuts a wide swath around here. Too wide." Ford scratched a smoothly-shaven cheek. "Forty-eight hours. No more. Send Taggart in, Claney."

Claney nodded and stepped into the outer office. Taggart was standing inside the street door, dark face still ugly. "The boss wants you." Then, as Taggart came opposite him, he asked, "How much are you getting, friend?"

"None of your damned business," Taggart snarled.

"I think you're worth half of what I get," Claney murmured, "but I doubt that Ford's paying you that much. Better jump for a raise."

Taggart went on into Ford's office and slammed the door hard after him. Crossing the dust strip, Claney built a smoke, and waited. Presently a carriage turned into the street from a livery stable and stopped in front of Ford's office. A moment later Ford and Ann Hale came out. Ford gave her a hand into the carriage and stepped in after her. Then they were wheeled down the street, and Claney, staring after them, felt a wild rush of unreasoning anger. An angel didn't belong with a devil, and this made no more sense than that.

CHAPTER

4

Trouble In The Blue Chip

JIM CLANEY had never been one to hire out his gun indiscriminately. On the other hand, he had seldom taken a deep personal interest in any trouble in which he'd had a part. This had started in the usual way. Ed Manning needed help and he owed Manning more than he owed any other living man. Life, to Jim Claney, had been a matter of paying off his debts and staying alive, of finding a sufficiency in himself. Now it was something else. He hated Reno Ford more fiercely than he had ever hated anybody; he wanted to pull down Ford's tawdry empire more than he'd ever wanted to do anything else in his life.

And there was Ann Hale. He had never much time for women. His mother had died before he was old enough to know her. He'd grown up on a womanless ranch. He'd run away, he'd tied up with Taggart's wild bunch, and there'd been the bank hold-up. Then the year in prison. After that the women he'd known were dance hall floozies or hard-eyed waitresses or perhaps cow-country schoolteachers who had no use for a man who lived by his gun.

Claney understood men. He knew that none were entirely black or white, but women were to be pigeonholed. The trouble was Ann Hale didn't fit a pigeonhole. Twice, with no selfish reason on her part, she'd saved his life by holding Taggart out of a fight. She must hate Reno Ford and the things he did and the things he stood for. Still, she had been in his office. Apparently their relationship was closer than that of mere friends.

It made no sense at all to Jim Claney when he added it up. He knew that the role he had taken had made Ann hate him, a knowledge that raised an uncomfortable disturbance in him.

Regardless of Ann Hale and what she thought of him, Jim Claney's job was cut out for him in high red letters, and he set to work on it. There were a dozen saloons wedged in along Ute Springs' crooked Main Street, a

few smaller ones on the back of the blocks. In every mining camp there was at least one where a man could find anything in the way of sin that he could pay for it. In Ute Springs it was Pasco Wallen's Blue Chip.

Claney spent the afternoon making the rounds of the saloons, leaving Wallen's till the last. He gave the same talk in all of them reeling a little as if he were drunk. He'd come a long way to find Ed Manning, he said, and he wanted to know if the barkeep had seen him that day. Manning, of course, was in his mine. When the barkeep said no, Claney cursed wildly and swore he'd hunt for him till he found him and he'd gut shoot him the second he came within gun range.

Manning was neither a drinking nor a gambling man, and Claney was making a safe bet that he could duck Manning all night while appearing to look for him. Reno Ford had given him forty-eight hours, and a sense of urgency grew in Claney as he thought about it. Something big was coming at the end of that forty-eight hours, and Claney had to play along until he found out what it was.

The sun dipped out of sight and the day became dusk. Claney had his supper in a different restaurant than the one in which he had eaten his noon dinner, but there was little to choose between them. Greasy food, high prices, and a line of miners rushing for his seat the minute he was done.

Flares had come to life along the street when Claney stepped again to the plank walk. Barkers were beginning their chants, music flowed at a faster tempo, and the stomp of miners' boots in the dance hall added to the noisy din.

Claney had not seen Ford or Ann again. He met Taggart who gave him a hostile stare and passed without greeting, but there had been no sight of Pasco Wallen on the street. Now he faced the one last chore. After he had finished it there would be the waiting until the simmering pot came to a boil.

THE LAST vestige of daylight had left the brawling camp when Claney pushed into the Blue Chip. It was by far the most ornate place in town. A polished mahogany bar ran

the entire length of the room. The opposite side was crowded with tables: paddle-wheel, keno, faro, poker, and a roulette wheel. A small space in the back was reserved for dancing. A piano on a dais was being pounded loudly but not well by a small bald man in shirt sleeves, a long cigar clutched fiercely between his teeth, ashes a gray sprinkling on his pants.

Overhead a double row of chandeliers, a fringe of dangling crystal decorating their edges, threw a merciless light into every corner. Here were bronzed brawny freighters, clay-stained miners, pale-faced clerks; all busy filling Pasco Wallen's pockets with their wages. Too, there were the bull-muscled floormen roving the floor, intent on stopping trouble before it started, and the percentage girls tinselled, roughed, and inviting.

Claney's eyes swept the brawling scene, noting every detail and searching for one man, Pasco Wallen. By this time the big man would know Jim Claney was working for Ford, so Claney had another play to make, different than the one he'd been making all afternoon.

It was a minute or more before Claney spotted Pasco in the back of the room idly watching the roulette wheel. Claney stepped to the bar, shouldered through the packed miners, and made his customary request for Ed Manning. He knew instantly it was a mistake. A frigid silence met his words. The barman said, "He ain't here, friend. Never comes in unless he's looking for somebody."

"I've come a long ways to find him," Claney said drunkenly. "When I see him I'll fill him full of lead. There'll be so many holes in him you'll think he's a sieve."

Claney lurched away from the bar and turned toward the back of the big room, the sour knowledge in him that his luck had gone bad. The men at the bar were members of the Miners' Guard. He recognized some and knew they'd recognized him. They wouldn't know the part Zeb Vale had been playing, but they would likely have heard that he'd died and who had killed him. More than that, they'd be remembering that the night be-

fore Vale had charged Claney with Stover's death.

It was hell. No less. There was no telling how long it would take Manning's friends to act, but the odds were good that they would act with a violence that was unlike them. They'd be thinking that if they'd followed Vale's advice the night before, the fat man would be alive now. They wouldn't wait for Claney to find Manning. Ed Manning had said they'd fight when Ford had pushed them enough, and the grim knowledge was in Jim Claney that they'd fight to-night, but it wouldn't be Ford pushing them. Inadvertently, they'd do a job Ford needed done and thereby decree their own destiny.

So Jim Claney hurried his steps toward Pasco Wallen, knowing that only luck and the slowness of the miners to act would save him. He shoved away a percentage girl who clung to him, wheedling, "Have a dance with me, mister." He heard her curse him. He went on, not looking back.

PASCO DIDN'T see Claney until he reached his side. Then he had to peer at Claney a moment before he recognized him. One eye was completely closed, the flesh around it a circle of black and yellow bruises. His nose was a blood-scabbed mass, the lips swollen red sausages.

"Howdy, Pasco," Claney murmured. "Haven't seen you around."

Pasco muttered a curse, big hands fisting at his sides. He turned his one good eye toward a nearby floorman, then swung his gaze back to Claney, torn between what he knew he had to do and the rush of his hatred for Claney.

"I didn't know how good I was," Claney said. "After I got to town I heard you'd never been licked before. I've been thinking we could make ourselves a stake by pulling off another fight here in camp."

Pasco rubbed his big hands and glowered. "I'll kill you if we do. I oughtta kill you anyway."

Claney's laugh was a scarring rasp. "You're not man enough unless you plug me in the back."

"That could be done."

"But you won't, Pasco. Ford

wouldn't want his men mixed up in a personal ruckus." He paused, lips holding a mocking grin. "How much does Ford pay you, Pasco?"

"None of your damned business," the saloonman grated.

"Maybe it is. I'm worth a thousand dollars a month to the boss, Pasco. If he's paying you more, I'm underpaid. If I'm getting more, you'd better jump him for a raise."

It was an old trick, the same he'd used on Taggart, and a good one where the men were concerned whose urgent promptings were their appetites for gold. Claney saw avarice touch the man, then disbelief, and finally a shrewd cunning.

"Thanks, friend. Ford can pay more'n he is to any of us. He'll have a million dollars before forty-eight hours is up."

There it was again. Forty-eight hours! Pretending he knew all about Ford's game, Claney nodded. "We've got some of that coming."

Claney turned away and stopped flat-footed. The Miners' Guard was bearing down on him, twenty or more of them, and it took only a single guess to name their intention.

"No fighting in here," a floorman yelled. "Take it outside."

None of the miners spoke. They made a pointed wedge, hands fisted, eyes sullen and narrowed. Claney, never one to let the fight come to him, struck out, slamming the leader back into the ranks of his men. It was a knockout punch. He lay where he fell.

The others were on Claney then. He flattened another one, felt the squish of a man's nose under his knuckles. That was all. There were too many. He went down under their mass weight, a dozen blows beating him to his knees. Then a gun barrel rocked his head and he toppled face-forward to the floor.

It seemed to Jim Claney's sick aching brain that he was swimming from the middle of a wide sea toward a pin point of light. There was the mutter of talk that at first meant nothing. He stirred and rubbed his head. The lighted area widened until it was all around him and it hurt his eyes.

The talk was closer now. He heard a voice that sounded like Black Tom

Taggart's. "He's dangerous as long as he's alive, Boss. When he was a kid he didn't know what it was to be afraid."

"I doubt if he does now." That would be Reno Ford. "But we can't kill him. Not for forty-eight hours."

FORTY-EIGHT hours! It had been a refrain all day. Forty-eight hours! it came back to Claney now. He had reached the shore and was wading out on a sandy beach. The full memory of what had happened since he had fought Pasco at Two Peaks Pass washed back into his mind. His head ached with a steady pounding beat, the racket in his head like that of an eighty-stamp mill.

"Why not?" Pasco demanded. "Hell, Boss, we're sitting with a pat hand."

"I said we don't kill him," Ford repeated.

"If it's the girl..." Taggart began.

"And if it is the girl?" Ford asked softly.

Claney heard a chair creak as the gunman shifted his weight. "Nothing, Boss, except that I've got a notion this huckleberry came up here to plug me. He's been on my tail ever since he got out of stony lonesome. Talked plumb big about what he was going to do when he caught up with me. I'll feel better after I feed him some lead."

"Wait forty-eight hours," Ford said, "and you can feed him all the lead you've got in your belt. Ann and I will be on our way to Durango by that time and Samson Sheldon will own Ute Springs."

Samson Sheldon! Claney sat up eyes open. Sheldon was a New York capitalist who invested in western mines. Claney had met him in Montana. He was a good man, honest and tough enough to hold up his end in any kind of competition. He wasn't the kind who went into something on a penny ante basis. Montana mining men called him Whole-hog Sheldon because he went in big or not at all. And Pasco Wallen had said Ford was pulling in a million dollars.

"I still don't see no sense in waiting," Taggart said stubbornly. "Take your woman and go on to Durango. Wind up the deal with Sheldon.

That's got nothing to do with beefing Claney."

"I may need him," Ford said laconically. He noticed then that Claney was sitting up. "Been listening to our talk, Claney?"

"A little."

"Get him on his feet." Ford nodded at Pasco. "Sorry we had to save your hide from the miners, Claney. It would have suited me better if they'd hanged you like they wanted to, but it wouldn't do to let them think they'd got the bulge on me. The next forty-eight hours is damned important to all of us. Besides, I didn't want Pasco's boys to think I'd let one of my men down."

Pasco hauled Claney to his feet and gripped his hands behind his back. Taggart had pulled his gun and was holding it on Claney. Ford, the mocking smile on his lips, bold green eyes frosty and unreadable came across the room.

"You almost fooled me, Claney, and I don't like to be fooled. Licking Pasco and plugging Zeb just about did the job."

Ford struck him hard on the side of the head. Ford's grin widened as he rubbed his knuckles.

"Taggart didn't recognize you because you've grown up since he saw you, but he knew plenty when he heard your name. Ed Manning got you out of the pen, and you've always held it against Tom because he put you to holding a pass while he rode off with the rest of the bunch. That right?"

"That's right," Claney muttered between bruised lips. "Tell Pasco to let me go, Ford, and I'll explain it to you with my fists."

"I like it better this way. Manning brought you in to boss his Miners' Guard, didn't he?"

"You're guessing good."

"I have a talent for guessing good, my friend. You have a talent for using your fists and a gun, but you won't live long to practice it." He struck Claney in the face again. "Let him go Pasco."

The big man stepped back, releasing his grip. Claney, strength battered from him, tried to keep his feet and could not. Ford moved to the door,

taking the lamp from the bureau. HE said, "You've got forty-eight hours to live, Clanev." He rubbed a cheek thoughtfully. "It strikes me that it would be fitting if the Miners' Guard had the privilege of dropping a rope over your neck. Well, we'll see. Maybe they'll have the chance. Come on, boys, we'll leave Mr. Clanev with his thoughts. I think they will not be pleasant, especially when he hears that Ed Manning was shot about an hour ago. The Doc doesn't think he'll live."

They went out, locking the door. Clanev tried to lift himself from the floor, but there was no strength in him and he fell back. One thought beat through his head like the rhythmic pound of a pulse. Forty-eight hours to live, and so much to be done.

CHAPTER

5

Hale The Roadbuilder

TIME without measure passed for Jim Clanev. He lay on the floor, hearing the night racket from the street and saloons. He was, he thought, over the big room of the Blue Chip. It might be late. He didn't entirely lose consciousness, but his mind was fogged up, his thoughts slow and disjointed.

The room was apparently a bedroom, probably for one of Pasco Wallen's girls, and was temporarily unoccupied. It was dark, with only a faint moonlight filtering into the room, but he remembered there was a bed, one chair, and a scarred bureau. He reached for his gun. It was gone as he knew it would be.

Clanev pulled himself to the bed and holding to its foot, brought himself upright. Nausea struck at him. The room started to spin. He reeled around the bed and sat down. Outside a miner raised a drunken cry and fired a gun wildly into the night. Clanev laid back. He slept fitfully, always half-conscious. Someone was chanting, "Forty-eight hours! Forty-eight hours!" He woke and sat up, and knew he had been hearing his own voice.

It was still dark. His head had not stopped aching, but his thoughts ran in a clear action-compelling stream. It had taken Reno Ford months to set his game up. Now Samson Sheldon was on

his way to Ute Springs and Ford was ready to skim off the cream.

Time had run out. Ford would have his way with the camp. Clanev remembered what Stover had said about Pasco's men jumping the miners' claims when the sign was right. It had been done on a big scale before in camps like this where law was a negligible thing. It could be done here. Pasco Wallen's ruthless crew would not be beaten off by a Miners' Guard lacking adequate leadership and the cold courage it took to fight.

Again Clanev came to his feet and found that the nausea had passed. He tried the door. It was as solid as the wall itself. He pounded on it with his fists. Kicked at it. Picked up the chair and crashed it against the door. He yelled his demand to be freed. No one came.

Clanev crossed the room to the window and raising the sash, looked down into the dark alley. It was nearly dawn now. Ute Springs, worn out by the night's carousing, was at last asleep. There was only the growl of the river working at its eternal task of gnawing a still deeper channel between the canyon walls, the wind fretting the aspen leaves.

For several minutes Clanev stayed at the window, eyes searching the darkness. The night breeze laid a cool hand on his fever-hot face. He'd get out. He had to. Death was here for him if he stayed. It might be waiting for him on the street, but that risk held a chance. There was no chance at all if he waited.

The utter hopelessness of his position swept in upon Jim Clanev then. Any of Reno Ford's crew would kill him if he was found on the street. The Miners' Guard wouldn't take time to listen. There was only Ed Manning, and Manning, lying between life and death, could not help him.

Clanev was without a gun. He was hungry. He was sick. There wasn't the slightest chance of getting out of the country alive. This country, he thought grimly, was only for the tough, and at the moment, Jim Clanev was far from tough. Rawhide Hale! A hope leaped in Clanev then. He remembered the toll road, his thoughts as he had ridden over it. Hale had to

be tough. And there was Ann. She might hate him, but he was equally sure that she hated Reno Ford. Hale might feel the same way.

A MATCH flamed in the alley below Claney. That was what he had been waiting for. The moon was gone from a black sky. There was this slim chance that gave him a right to hope. Jim Claney was not a gambling man. He liked at least even odds, but he gambled, risking his life on the spin of the wheel, the odds favoring the house.

It took only a moment to tear blankets from the bed, tie them together, and fasten one end to the bedstead. He picked up a leg of the chair he had smashed against the door, and holding it between his teeth, slid through the window. He went down hand over hand, slowly and without noise. He came to the end, hung there a moment while he guessed the distance to the ground, and let go. He'd guessed wrong. He met the ground too soon. He fell flat, jolted by the fall, and rolled away as the guard opened fire, chair leg now clutched in his right hand.

The guard was spreading his bullets. One of them came uncomfortably close, but the man would have done better if he'd held his fire. The roar of it covered the sound of Claney's movements as he rushed the guard, chair leg swinging down in a vicious arc. It caught the man's head and sent him back heavily against the saloon's wall.

The guard wasn't knocked out, but wouldn't be shooting straight for a time. Claney raced along the back of the saloon and around it into Main Street. Lights flamed in the Blue Chip, and Pasco Wallen's great voice rolled out in bellowed curses. Then Claney had left the plank walk behind him. Again he was in the darkness, sprinting along the road, the black bulk of Rawhide Hale's house rising before him.

Claney reached the porch in a headlong rush, slowed his pace and tried the door. It was locked. Down the street men shouted and lanterns bobbed. A minute. Or only seconds. Claney felt along the wall to a win-

dow. It was fastened solidly. If he broke it, there would be the evidence for Pasco to see. He felt on along the wall. Another window. It was locked.

Quickly Claney came back along the porch. They had reached the corner of Hale's yard, Pasco Wallen bawling his orders. Then Claney was back at the door. Instinctively he felt again for the knob. It wasn't there. The door was open. Ann Hale stood in the hall, a ghost-like figure in a light robe.

"A thousand dollars to the man that gets Claney," Pasco roared from the street.

"You're Claney?" Ann Hale asked.

"Yes."

"Come in." Catching his arm, she drew him inside, shut the door and locked it. "Don't move. They're coming in."

"Get me a gun," he whispered. "I don't want to get you into trouble."

"You won't get me into trouble." She shoved him through a door into a side room. "Stay there. I'll handle Pasco Wallen."

A dozen men pounded across the porch and banged on the door. Pasco rumbled, "Open up before we kick it in."

Ann waited a moment before she obeyed. When she did, she held a shotgun on the ready. "What's this about?"

"We're looking for a man," Pasco growled. "I aim to search your house. He came this way and I don't reckon he went on up the road. Anyhow, I sent some of the boys to see. I'm having a look here before I go on."

"You won't search this house, Wallen. What will Reno say when I tell him?"

"I don't give a damn what he says," Pasco snarled. "Jim Claney got away and I want him."

"Claney's Reno's man, isn't he?"

"No. We had him penned up but he got clear."

"Why did you have him penned up?"

CLANEY, watching through a crack in the door, saw Pasco scratch his stubble-covered face as his slow mind fought through to a decision. Two of

his men came from the yard. "No sign, Pasco. He must have gone on."

"All right." Pasco motioned to his men and wheeled away from the door. A moment later Clancy heard the noise of their passage up the road.

Ann came into the room and lighted a lamp. For a long moment she stood looking at Clancy before she asked, "I don't see any sense in this. I heard Reno hire you for a thousand dollars a month and give you the job of murdering Ed Manning. He was shot a little before midnight."

"I didn't do it."

Clancy dropped into a chair, utter weariness crawling through him. He saw now the depth of Reno Ford's duplicity. Clancy had made his threats against Manning, and now that the miner was shot, suspicion would turn to him.

"Ed Manning was my friend," the girl said slowly. "If I was sure you did it, I'd shoot you where you sit."

"Save your powder," he murmured. "Ed was my friend, too. If you'll get me a gun, I'll clear out."

The girl didn't move. She kept her eyes on him as she asked, "Are you really Jim Clancy?"

"I'm Clancy all right."

"If it's true, Ed is the last man in the world you'd shoot."

"That's right. If you'll get me a gun, ma'am . . ."

"No. You can't go out there." She picked up the lamp. "Come on into the kitchen. I'll get breakfast and find something for your face. What happened to you?"

Ann built a fire and heated water. Slumped in a chair, Clancy told her the story. He didn't know whether she'd believe him or not, but she listened closely. When he was done she nodded and he knew that she had.

"I'll get a gun," she said, filling the coffee pot. "But not now. You're going to sleep today."

She washed the cuts on his face, swabbed them with turpentine, and smiled when he gritted his teeth. "Feel good?" she asked.

"Fine." He rose and followed her to the stove. "Look, Miss Hale. I made a run for your place when I got out of the Blue Chip because I figured that a man like your dad who could

build a road into this country must have some sand in his craw. I figured he wouldn't like Reno Ford. I didn't know anybody else to go to and I had to have help."

She sliced bacon and dropped it into a frying pan. "My father can't help you."

"I'd like to see him."

"No." She stood with her back to him, slim and straight and proud. "I saved your life at the pass, Mr. Clancy, because I knew Ed Manning had sent for you and I made a good guess who you were. I knew that if you were half the man Ed thought you were, you might be able to smash Reno. I'd rather see that done than anything else in the world."

HE DIDN'T understand that. He thought about it a moment, thinking of Ford's way with her in his office. He said slowly, "You saved my life again when I cut down Zeb Vale."

"The same reason. Then when you took Ford's offer, I hated myself and you and everybody else in the world, I guess. Ed Manning had told me so much that I had come to expect something else from you." She swung to face him. "You see, Mr. Clancy, Reno Ford is . . . is . . . well, he isn't human. He thinks I'll marry him, but he's wrong. I'll kill him first."

Still it made no sense to Jim Clancy. "If you believe me now, I can't ask any more."

"But you'd like to know why I was in his office and went away with him and why I haven't told him I won't marry him?" She bit her lip. "That story can wait. Right now I'll get you one gun or a thousand guns if you can lick Reno Ford."

"If I had time I could, but he's ready to finish things off. He said something about Samson Sheldon coming in."

"He expects to sell out to Sheldon and leave, but I don't know when Sheldon's coming."

Slippers patted along the hall, the thump of a cane. The door slammed open. An old man called querulously, "My breakfast ready yet?"

He was gaunt, his face deeply lined, his hands like claws. Angry red eyes

swept Claney and came to rest again on Ann as if a stranger in his kitchen was the usual morning sight.

"Almost, Dad."

"You hurry up. Reno's coming pretty soon and I want my breakfast before he gets here. We've got a big deal coming up. Me and Reno are going to make a lot of money."

"I'll bring it right in, Dad."

"You'd better."

Slowly the old man turned, leaning heavily on his cane and dragging his left leg. Claney saw then that it was paralyzed. He shuffled away. Ann poured a cup of coffee. She said, "We'll eat in a moment. I'll have to take Dad's breakfast to him now. Reno won't come for hours, but Dad will build a thousand castles before he comes, and he can't do it on an empty stomach."

"That was Rawhide Hale?" Claney asked unbelievably.

"Yes." Her eyes met his squarely then, and he saw the misery that was in them. "Now you know why he can't help you." She set the old man's breakfast on a tray and walked out without a word of explanation, Claney staring after her.

CHAPTER

6

The Guard Meets

JIM CLANEY slept that day as only a man dead weary can sleep. It was dark again when he woke, and he thought with a sudden thrust of guilt that he had wasted the day when a million things needed to be done.

He had slept in Ann Hale's bed. He rose now and felt gingerly of his face. One look in the mirror was enough. He sank back on the bed again, wondering how any man could have Ann's confidence who looked the way he did. As he dressed, he thought about the night before, about Ann and Reno Ford, but mostly he thought about Rawhide Hale, an old half-balmey man whose life of usefulness was behind him. He couldn't have built the toll road, but Ann had given no explanation, nor had she explained why she hated Reno Ford the way she did.

"I've got to keep you out of Dad's

way," she had explained as she'd led the way to her room. "If he doesn't see you, he'll forget about you. It wouldn't do for Reno to know you're here."

He dressed and doused his face with water from the basin on the washstand, grimacing as sharp pain stung him. He combed his hair, and leaving the room, moved silently down the stairs. The hall was dark, but a pencil of light showed under the door that led into the parlor. Claney eased along the hall and stood listening.

"Just a few hours now, Rawhide," Reno Ford was saying expansively. "Samson Sheldon is coming in on the night stage. I'll meet him myself and make him welcome."

"I'll be there, too," Hale shrilled.

"Why, that won't be necessary. I'll bring him up in the morning. He'll want to sleep tonight. Tomorrow I'll show him around. He's a big man. Rawhide. I want Ann to be nice to him."

"Nice!" The old man giggled. "Say, she'll kiss him if you want her to. She's got as much to gain as either one of us."

"That's right. She'll help spend my million dollars and some of yours. You get to bed now, Rawhide. Don't worry about a thing. I'll see that you talk to Sheldon right after breakfast."

CLANEY heard the floor squeak under Ford's steps. He slipped back along the hall and into the kitchen. He waited there in the darkness, hearing Hale bellow for Ann and the girl's quick light steps along the hall. She stood talking to Ford on the porch a moment and then came to the kitchen.

"Howdy," Claney said softly.

She cried out in sudden fear and then gave a long sigh. "I thought you'd be down before long, but I didn't hear you." She lighted a lamp and began setting the table. "Dad and I have eaten, but you'll need a good meal. You'll have a busy night."

"Sheldon will be in on the stage," Claney said thoughtfully. "When he gets here, Ford will sell out and vamose, and I wasted the whole day sleeping."

"A man isn't a machine," she said quickly. "He can't fight without rest

and food. Sit down, Mr. Claney. Your fighting has just started. Ed Manning died this afternoon."

There was a cold roast, bread, coffee, potatoes, and a wide slab of dried apple pie. Claney ate, but it was a mechanical process, for he had no appetite. First Stover. Then Manning, Ed Manning who was responsible for getting him out of prison and putting him on the right road. Manning's death hit him like a hoof in his gut. Without Manning's influence, Jim Claney would have been another Black Tom Taggart.

"How was he shot," Claney asked.

"He was in his cabin talking to some of the Miners' Guard. He was shot through the window. In the back," Ann explained.

"Taggart," Claney muttered. "I was out cold over the Blue Chip when it happened, but I'll never tell the miners I didn't do it."

"You've got to," Ann said. "They need your help. Their claims were jumped this morning."

Claney had started to lift his coffee cup. He put it down untasted. "What did they do?"

"Nothing. That's why Manning was shot last night. He'd have taken them into Reno Ford's office after the claims were jumped, and there'd have been a fight. Now all they can do is to stand around and feel sorry for each other."

Claney drank his coffee then, thinking about it. He said, "I suppose there's no proof Ford had anything to do with it."

Her smile was tight-lipped, without humor. Claney, looking at her now, saw that there were lines in her face, that her shoulders sagged. She was tired, emotionally more than physically, for this was the climax of a fight that had gone back over the months for her.

"We don't need proof, Jim," she said. "What we do now we'll do as if we had proof. We'll take our fight to the top." She lifted a gun from a shelf and laid it on the table beside Claney. "That was Dad's when he was a fighting man."

Claney picked it up, balanced it, tested the action, and slid it into his holster. It was a good gun, a Colt .44, walnut-butted. It would do. He

lifted his eyes to her face, stretching his battered lips into a grin. Ann Hale was made of finely-tempered steel. The fight would never be over for her until she had won or was dead. Thinking of old Rawhide Hale, Claney was sure that there had been a day when he was a different man than he was now.

"I'll go after Ford," Claney said, and rose.

"No, Jim." She caught his arm. "You'd never get close enough to him. There's a better way. This camp needs Samson Sheldon, but it will never get him unless he sees what Ford is."

"If I'd had a gun just now when he was talking to your dad..."

"You'd be dead. Taggart was with him. Two more men were outside. We've got to have help, Jim. The Miners' Guard is the only help we can get."

"They'll hang me the minute they see me. They'll never believe..."

"You've got to make them believe, Jim. Then we'll make Reno come to us."

HE STARED at her, not understanding. Then he saw it. Samson Sheldon would be the bait. Then he'd see exactly what Reno Ford was. "All right," he said. "That's the way we'll play it."

"The Guard will be meeting in Manning's cabin." She motioned to the back door. "We'll go out that way so Dad won't see us."

Leaving the lamp burning on the kitchen table, they slid out through the back, rounded the house, and crossing the road swiftly, came to the brawling river.

"They won't hear us," she said. "and this way we'll stay off Main Street."

They walked rapidly, stumbling over rocks, coming up hard against spruce trees, stopping once and hardly breathing as two of Ford's men passed within ten feet of them.

"That ornery son wouldn't be here," one of them grunted. "I've looked along this damned river fifty times since sunup."

When they had gone, Ann laughed softly. "Reno has put a dozen men to hunting for you and he can't understand why he hasn't turned you up."

They went on, leaving the river and slanting across the flat where Stover had been shot. Ann stopped at one of the cabins, tapped three times on the door, paused, and tapped three more times. There was a long wait before the door was opened a scant three inches.

"Smoky Hill," she said, and pushed through the door into the crowded cabin, Claney behind her.

The door was slammed shut and barred. Jim Claney, standing with his back to the logs, stared at the crowd of hostile miners and felt the grim foreboding of defeat crawl into him.

"It's Ford's girl," a man cried.

"How'd you get the signal?" another demanded, "and the password? And what are you doing with this killer?"

A ruthless group of men familiar with the ways of violence would have been on Claney the instant they saw who it was, but the miners, stunned by the day's events and Ed Manning's death, were slow to action. That moment was enough for Ann Hale.

"I'm not Ford's girl," she cried, "and the proof of it is my coming here. I want him beaten. You men and Jim Claney can do it." She gestured to Claney. "You want to know how I got in? Ed Manning told me. Today. A few hours before he died."

"He wouldn't tell you," a bearded miner said in cold doubt. "He knew who you are."

"That's right," Ann said quickly, "and he knew how I felt. That was why he trusted me. What have you done today? Sat around and talked and whined when your claims were jumped. You can do something to-night if you've got the courage to fight and you'll let Jim Claney lead you."

"He won't lead me nowhere," the bearded one snarled. "He killed Zeb Vale and I think he shot Stover and Ed. We should of strung him up the night he got here."

HE CAME at Claney now, great fists swinging. He was the one who had led the attack on him in the Blue Chip, the one man in the whole pack, Claney saw, who had the kind of courage this job took. Claney hit

him, not hard, but enough of a blow to set him back on his heels. He cursed, and would have come on if he hadn't seen the menacing bore of Claney's gun.

"You'll listen if I have to shoot the bunch of you to make you listen," Claney said coldly, "but I hope to hell I won't have to. Before I leave this camp, I'm squaring up for Ed Manning's death. I need your help."

"Why, damn you," the bearded man raged, "I heard you tell the barkeep in the Blue Chip you were gunning for Ed."

"If you'll shut up long enough, I'll tell you why I was doing that play-acting."

"No reason for us to listen. If you didn't kill Ed, where were you when he was shot?"

"Ford's prisoner in a room over the Blue Chip."

"We'd have hanged you afore Ed was shot," the miner grated, "if Pasco's toughs hadn't licked hell out of us. We ain't big enough fools to think he'd have saved your hide just to make you a prisoner."

"Ford had to do that because everybody in camp thought I'd hired my gun to him. A man like Ford always has to look after his boys. Besides, he wanted me out of the way when Ed was shot so I couldn't prove an alibi." He paused, gray eyes swinging around the arc of men. "If I was the kind who'd shoot a man in the back, I wouldn't have gone around asking for him."

"You mule-headed fools," Ann cried. "Where do you think he got that face if Ford didn't have him? And why have Ford's men been looking for him all day?"

THE COLD logic of Ann's words broke through the stubborn set of their minds. One said then, "All right, mister. Let's hear your spiel."

They listened, and Claney, watching one and then the other through the blue haze of the smoke-filled room, saw they were believing him.

"I spotted Zeb Vale for a Ford man," Claney finished. "You'll remember he was puffing and blowing like a dog after a run. I'm guessing he killed Stover himself and circled back to where we were standing. He

didn't know me, but I was a stranger, and any stranger was a good man to shove suspicion onto."

"Why didn't Ed tell us who you were?"

"I tipped him off not to. Nobody knew me but Ed. Taggart hadn't recognized me at the pass, so I had a notion I could hire out to Ford and size up his game. If I'd told you boys why I was here, Vale wouldn't have lost any time getting the word to Ford."

"Then who killed Ed?"

"I dunno, but till I find out different, I'd say it was Taggart."

"Don't make no difference who you are or why you came," a miner said bitterly. "We're licked. We'll get killed if we fight 'em. If we won and was still alive, we couldn't mill our ore. We've been warned to get out of camp by midnight. I reckon that's what we'll do."

"There's one thing you can do," Ann said sharply. "Ford wants to sell out to Samson Sheldon. If Sheldon doesn't get to camp, you can make your own bargain with Ford."

They stared at Ann, nuzzling this new thought in their minds.

"I know Sheldon," Claneley cut in. "He's operated in Montana for a long time. He's square, but he wants everything when he comes into a camp, or he won't risk even a nickel. How much of a mine is the one Ford owns personally?"

"The Stampede," a man said. "It ain't much. His little old stamp mill ain't much neither. A big operator would have to own all our properties to make it pay."

"Then that's the reason Pasco Wallen's toughs jumped your claims. Sheldon will get the town and the mill. He'll control the output of all the miners." Claneley looked at Ann. "He'll have the toll road to boot."

Ann was standing at Claneley's side straight and proud and defiant. She asked, "How many of you men will risk your lives in a showdown fight?"

There was an uneasy shuffling for a moment. Then the bearded miner stepped up and held out his hand to Claneley. "I'm Roy Smith. I've tasted your knuckles twice and I'll say

you're the fighting man we need. I'll go along."

"Us, too." A redhead stepped forward a pace, a younger man beside him. "We're the Austin brothers."

"Any more?" Claneley demanded.

"If Ed was alive..." one began.

"No ifs," Claneley grated. "You men will stay here for an hour."

"The hell we will," a miner snarled.

"Ford might have another spy in this outfit. We can't take any chances." He nodded at the Austins. "You boys stay outside. Shoot the first man who comes through the door before the hour's up. Come on."

Outside, with the door slammed on the bitter mouthings of the men in the cabin, the older Austin said. "We'll hold 'em, Claneley."

"Get two horses from the stable," Claneley told Smith. "Meet us behind the Hale house. You've got a horse, haven't you, Ann?"

"Yes."

"I'll get them," Smith said, and disappeared toward Main Street.

Swiftly Ann and Claneley retraced their steps along the river. There was little hope for success, Claneley thought, came a bitterness engendered by the cowardice of the men in Ed Manning's cabin. He'd called them rabbits when he'd first seen them and he'd been right. Men who wouldn't fight for what was theirs couldn't be called men. With Smith and the Austins out, there wasn't a man in the lot among them.

CHAPTER

7

The Coming of Samson Sheldon

CLANELEY Had Ann Hale's mare saddled when Roy Smith, leading a bay gelding, reined up behind the Hale house.

"There are some switchbacks about two miles above here," Ann said. "It'll be easy to stop the stage there."

It was a fool stunt. A madman's trick. For twelve years Jim Claneley had been on the side of the law, the side Ed Manning had put him on. Now, to square up for Manning's death, Claneley was holding up a stage and kidnapping a man. Not just an ordinary man, but a millionaire. If there was anything that would call

half the lawdogs of Colorado to Ute Springs to side Reno Ford, it would be taking Samson Sheldon off the stage.

"Let's ride," Smith said uneasily.

But Claney turned Ann Hale so that the lantern light fell upon her face. Here was pride and courage. No sign of faltering. Now could there be any turning back for Jim Claney.

"You stay here, Ann. Smith and me can do the chore."

She shook her head, hands on hips. and for the first time that evening he saw a small smile touch the corners of her mouth. "It's my play, Jim. We'll leave the horses below a turn in the road and I'll stop the stage. It'll be time then for you and Smith to step up."

"The stage won't stop for you," Claney objected.

The drivers know me. They've been used to finding me anywhere along the road."

"You two gonna gab all night?" Smith demanded.

There was no more talk then. Claney helped Ann into the saddle, mounted, and the three of them swung into the road. A million stars and a bright half moon laid a yellow light upon the earth. There was the smell of dust in the air, raised, Claney thought, by a horse that had recently gone ahead of them. He wondered if Reno Ford could have guessed their plan, or if the Austins had let the miners loose and one of them had carried a warning to Ford.

Close-growing spruce made a black cloak for the mountain that dropped away below them toward the brawling Tumblebug. The air was thin and cold, and sound carried a great distance so it seemed as if the source of it was close.

"Here," Ann said. "We'll leave the horses. Jim, you and Smith wait below this point of rock."

They obeyed, Claney not liking it and feeling the pressure of his growing doubt. For a brief moment they stood listening, hearing the rumble of wheels above them, the clatter of rocks hurled over the edge of the road to come spilling down the slope.

"We'll go with you," Claney said. "I don't like the smell of things."

HE FELT The girl tremble, the first hint of uncertainty he had caught in her. She said, "All right." They moved up the road. Below them Ute Springs made a long curving string of lights wedged into the bottom of the black canyon. The stage was close now, the rumble louder. Then the shot came, close, flame ribbon spilling into the night, the roar of the gun a rolling clap of thunder.

Jim Claney acted with the instinct that twelve years of living by the gun had honed to a fine point in him. He shoved Ann against the rock wall to his left, right hand dipping for gun butt. He knew Roy Smith had been hit; caught the shadowy figure of the gunman on the road ahead. Again the man fired, this time a wasted bullet, for Smith was on his face in the road and Ann and Claney were lost against the black side of the cliff.

Then Claney's gun was leaping in his hand, adding its bellow to the echoes still rolling between the granite walls. The man ahead came toward them, reeling a little as his crooked pace took him to the edge of the road and away from it again. He kept firing until his gun was empty, high bullets that shrilled away into the night or rocketed against the bank and went screaming across the canyon. A dozen paces from Claney, the man broke as if all his controls were gone and spilled sideways over the lip of the road.

The stage had rounded the turn above them, and the brakes fixed, screamed to a stop. "What's the shooting about?" the driver cried.

"Get the horses," Claney said, shoving Ann behind him. He moved on toward the coach. Roy Smith was on his feet, one hand clutching his side. "I want a look inside."

The jehu cursed. "What is this, a holdup?" His arms came up. "We're coming in empty, feller."

"No holdup," Claney said flatly. "If anybody starts blasting, you'll have bad trouble." He came up to the stage and looked inside.

"I've got a sick boy in Ute Springs," a woman screamed. "I'm bringing him money..."

"Shut up," Claney grated. "I told you it wasn't a holdup." He saw Shel-

don then on the middle seat. It had been several years since he'd seen the capitalist, but lank lantern-jawed Samson Sheldon was not one to change with the passage of a few years. "I want you, Sheldon."

"Ransom?" the capitalist asked us if he knew the answer. "You'll be disappointed, friend."

"No ransom, Sheldon. You're among friends. You there," he snarled at a man on the back seat, "try that gun and you'll be ready for boothill." The man's hands came into view. Sheldon was out of the coach then and Clancy called, "All right. Wheel her down."

The big coach rolled by, metal clanging on rock, the driver's curses punctuated by the crack of the whip. "You hurt bad, Roy?" Clancy asked.

"Not as bad as I thought," the miner answered. "Nicked a rib is all. Jolted me for a minute."

"Friends," Samson Sheldon murmured. "How do your enemies act in Colorado?"

"They fool you like hell," Clancy said flatly. "You've got a notion Reno Ford's your friend. You're wrong, Sheldon."

"Who are you?"

"Jim Clancy. I met you in Virginia City. Remember?"

"Hell yes," Sheldon said in amazement. "You were a lawman. Now you're a road agent."

"You're calling that wrong, too, friend." Ann came with the horses then, and Clancy said, "Sheldon, meet Ann Hale. Maybe you've heard of Rawhide Hale."

SURPRISE made the capitalist inarticulate for a moment. "Clancy. Then the Hale girl. What kind of business is this?"

"Two men have been killed by Ford's gunmen," Ann said evenly, "so he'd be ready for your coming. Today toughs jumped more than a dozen claims and the owners were warned out of camp so Ford could show you around tomorrow and everything would be in order. We took you off the stage to tell you that."

"I don't believe it," Sheldon said flatly. "I've been corresponding with Ford for nearly a year. He has written at length about Rawhide Hale. I'm

to buy this road as part of the deal."

The girl caught her breath. She said, "That will be another deal, Mr. Sheldon. My father was injured last winter by a slide. Since then I've managed the road. I have every reason to think that Ford aimed to kill Dad in that slide."

"That's crazy," Sheldon exploded. "I know something about Ford."

"So do I," the girl cried. "He'll do everything from murder on down the list of crimes to get what he wants. After Dad was hurt, Ford sugared up to him until Dad thinks everything he does is all right. I've been playing sweet to keep Ford from freezing us out. The road is all we have."

"If you think that I'll believe this yarn about Ford because you happen to be..."

"I've got proof enough, but there's no court to take it to. We have to fight for our rights here, Mr. Sheldon. I propose to fight for ours. If this deal goes through, we won't get anything. I don't know how Ford aims to work it, but I can count on him having a trick or two up his sleeve."

Sheldon was peering at Ann as if trying to read her face in the moonlight. "Ford set a price of one million dollars on everything in camp, including the road. He didn't guarantee the ownership of all the mines but he pointed out that I'd have a monopoly because I'd own the road."

"Smith needs a doctor," Clancy cut in. "We can talk when we get to the Hale place."

"I'll go on and see Ford," Sheldon said. "I'll talk to you people in the morning."

"No," Ann cried. "If Ford once talks to you, you'll never believe us. He's that smooth. You'll have to see what he does."

"If you're afraid..." Samson Sheldon began.

"We're afraid of just one thing," Clancy said curtly. "You won't believe us after you've heard him."

"Then you're making me a prisoner?" Sheldon demanded.

"You can call it that." Clancy stepped into the saddle. "Take him home, Ann. I'm going to see Ford."

"He'll kill you," Ann cried. "Make him come to us."

"That's what I aim to do," Claney said, and swinging his horse toward Ute Springs, cracked the steel to him.

CHAPTER

8

Empire In The Dust

THE STAGE had not beaten Claney into camp by more than a few minutes. During the short time that it took him to thunder down Rawhide Hale's toll road, Jim Claney made up his mind how he'd play it. Reno Ford was cruel and ruthless and greedy, but there was in him a piece of coward. Claney had seen that when Ford had made Pasco hold him while he vented his anger by slugging Claney on the face. It was Claney's guess, then, that Ford would not venture into the street to meet the stage. There was greater safety in his office with Jim Claney on the loose.

So Claney rode off the lighted street to the rear of Ford's office. Dismounting, he tried the back door. It was locked as he was sure it would be, but there was a window. Claney waited through a lull in the street racket. It broke again, guns thundering from somewhere around the Nugget saloon. Claney kicked the glass from the window and slid into the black room.

Striking a match, Claney saw that it was a small empty room, probably meant for the private office of one of Ford's subordinates, but had not been needed. He opened the hall door, and stood motionless for a moment, eyes raking the murky length of the corridor. The door into Ford's private office was closed.

This took perfect timing, and Jim Claney hadn't found the setup exactly as he'd hoped. Once he was discovered and Ford turned his gun pack loose on him, there'd be hell to pay. The one small chance he had for success would be gone.

Apparently Ford was in his private office, for a thin line of light glowed along the base of his door. There was no telling whether he was alone, or who was with him, or if he had heard that Samson Sheldon had not arrived. All this Claney needed to know if his scheme was to pan out.

Time was one of the things Jim Claney lacked. Still he hesitated, trying to think of something better and failing. Then somebody slammed the street door open and Pasco Wallen bawled, "Boss! Where the hell are you?"

Ford pushed his door open and plunged across the hall. "Where's Sheldon?"

"He wasn't on the stage, Boss," Pasco howled. "The driver said he'd been held up and a couple of men and a girl took Sheldon off. He couldn't see 'em well, but it's my guess one of them was Claney and the girl was..."

"Where was Taggart? He could have stopped that."

Claney slid along the hall to the office door. He paused there, gun in his hand, hammer eared back. "I thought maybe that was Taggart," he said softly, "but the light wasn't good enough to be right sure. You'll find him in the Tumblebug, I reckon. He went off the road with some of my lead in him."

Ford spun to face Claney, eyes twin sparkling emeralds, but he didn't lose his head. "So you got Taggart, did you, Claney? All right. You've settled your debt with him, and I don't blame you. Any man would have done the same. Manning's dead, so I'm satisfied. Step into the office and I'll pay you a month's wages. Then get to hell out of here."

"Taggart killed Manning?"

"That's right, and Stover was plugged by Zeb Vale. Pasco and Taggart brought word from the pass that Stover was on the stage. Now if you'll..."

CLANEY'S grating laugh was a stroke of sandpaper across Ford's taut nerves. "Reckon not, Ford. You see, your plan's got holes in it like the bottom of a sieve. For one thing, Rawhide Hale's wise to himself. He knows and Ann knew all the time that you aimed to crook the old man out of his toll road. You show up around the Hale house, and your goose is cooked."

"I'm not showing up around the Hale house..."

"I think you will, Ford. We've got Samson Sheldon locked up there, and I figure you'll want him. Only you'll

run into some hot lead if you come after him. We'll hold him till you're out of the country and your toughs let the boys have the mines back."

Claney spun out of the doorway and backed along the hall until he reached the room where he had stood waiting.

"Get him," Ford screamed. "Five thousand dollars, Pasco, if you gut-shoot him."

Claney laced three bullets along the hall then, sent them ripping slantwise into the casing of the office door. He reaced across the room and lunging through the broken window, hit saddle and pounded back toward the Hale house. If he had the backing of the Miner's Guard, he could swap lead with Ford's gun crew with a chance to win, but now there would be just him and Roy Smith against fifty. Even with all the luck, odds like that were too long.

Claney reined around the Hale house and hit the ground running. He blew out the lamp on the kitchen table, shoved a chair against the back door, and raced along the hall to the big living room. Rawhide Hale was there, a shotgun in his hands, gnarled old face twisted by rage.

"So you're this Claney feller, are you?" Hale shrielled. He would have brought the shotgun to his shoulder if Roy Smith, standing at his side, hadn't grabbed his arm.

"Where's Sheldon and Ann?" Claney demanded.

Smith jerked a thumb toward a door at the other end of the room. "Ann's got a gun in his ribs," Smith said with grim humor. "There's a girl that's worth ten men. She says she'll bargain with Ford for Sheldon, only Sheldon may have a pound of lead in him before they get done bargaining."

Hale pattered toward Claney, blue veins high in his forehead.

"What did you come here for?" Hale screamed. "I tell you Ford is my friend. He's an honest man. You've turned my girl against him. You're making her hold a gun on Samson Sheldon. I was gonna get one hundred thousand dollars for my road. Ann was gonna marry Ford. He was gonna take her to Europe."

"You bull-headed old fool," Claney snapped. "You wouldn't have got a nickel for your road. Ford pretended to be friendly because he had to have your road. If he's an honest man, why did his toughs jump the claims like they did?"

"I don't believe it," Hale shrielled.

Claney swung on Smith, a new idea blazing its path across his mind.

"Listen, Roy. I figured Ford would bring Pasco's toughs here to get Sheldon, but he can't bring all of them. He'll have to keep some to hold down the claims. Go tell the Miners' Guard that if they're still in camp."

Smith nodded. "I'll find 'em," and started for the door.

"See the doc," Claney called after him.

"I'm all right," Smith shouted, and ran on.

SMITH REACHED the porch and came to a sudden stop as if he'd rammed into an invisible wall. A gun had spoken, and the miner sprawled on the porch and rolled on to the ground. They were there, then. Six. Eight. Ten. Claney had no time to count. They were gamblers and floor-men from the Blue Chip, Reno Ford and Pasco Wallen leading the charge, depending on the power of numbers to free Samson Sheldon.

Rawhide Hale cried out when he saw who it was and ran toward Ford. For a moment the old man was between Ford and Claney, and Jim Claney was forced to pitch his first bullet at Pasco Wallen, knocking the big man off his feet.

Claney might have opened the gates of hell with that shot. Guns roared, their thunder amplified within the confines of the room. Flames licked out from Colt muzzles in long orange ribbons. Smoke belched with the screaming lead and ballooned upward and thickened the air with its haze. Somehow, shot to ribbons as he was, Jim Claney kept his feet. His hammer fell, his .44 bucked in his hand, and Reno Ford's men went down before that leaden hail of death.

Then Claney's legs gave with him. He fell and came to his hands and knees. Somebody else was shooting from behind him. Ann, Claney

guessed, and Roy Smith had crawled back across the porch and were firing with fatal regularity.

Everything was turning before Claney's eyes. He knew vaguely that the shooting had stopped, that the biting smell of powder-smoke was still in the air. He brought himself to his knees and wiped the blood out of his eyes.

Reno Ford and Hale were the only men in the room still on their feet. Reno was hit, for he was clutching the corner of a table and he was swaying like a young aspen under a hard wind, his eyes the terrible eyes of a madman who has been lured into making a fatal mistake.

"You old fool," Ford flung at Hale. "You'd have signed your road away and I'd have thrown it in as part of the deal and been out of the country before you'd have caught on." He must have seen Ann then, for he brought his gun up. "You broke me," he screamed. "You hated me. I knew it, but I was fooling the old man. I was taking you around to make him think I was going to marry you. Now I'm going to kill you."

"Don't, Ford," Samson Sheldon shouted. "Another murder won't buy anything for you."

But Reno Ford was past the point where he could be warned, past any power to reason. He pronged back the hammer of his gun, his hair uncombed, blood streaking his shirt front, knuckles of his hand white with the strain of holding to the corner of the desk. And Jim Claney's gun was empty.

Claney's hand trembled as he pulled a shell from his belt and thumbed it into the cylinder. *There wasn't time. There wasn't time.* But Ann Hale didn't die, for old Rawhide had wiped a claw-like hand across his face as if tearing the cobwebs from his brain, brought up his shotgun, and drove a charge of buckshot into Ford's back.

Claney saw the motionless bulk of Roy Smith by the door, knew that some of Ford's men were dead and some had fled, knew that the fight was over. Then the lights went out for him. His gun dribbled out of his hand. He fell face-down on the floor again, but he wasn't there when he

came to. He was back in Ann's bed.

THERE were the sweet moments when Ann was in the room; he heard her voice and felt her cool hand on his forehead. Sometimes he reached out and touched her and once she stooped and kissed him. His feverish mind nursed that kiss and he babbled about it. When someone else, the doctor or Samson Sheldon was there, and Claney started talking, Ann fled from the room, her face scarlet.

But there came a day when the medico nodded approvingly. "He's the most indestructible patient I ever had. By logic he should have died, but it isn't logic that controls a thing like this. Maybe it was your nursing or maybe it was because he had something to live for."

"And maybe both," Jim Claney whispered.

"Aye, I'd say that was it." Samson Sheldon stood in the doorway, a lantern-jawed, long-boned man, a smile lengthening his mouth. "I've got some things to say, my friend."

"I've been wanting to listen, but this sawbones kept saying to be quiet." Claney glowered at the medico. "Quiet, hell. I've got to know what happened."

Ann sat down on the edge of the bed. "Roy Smith will live," she said, "although we didn't know for awhile whether either of you would make it. The Miners' Guard have all left town, all but the Austins and Smith."

"As cowardly a bunch of men as I ever saw," Sheldon grunted. "Anyhow, I bought them out. I don't have Ford's mine and I wouldn't have his mill if you'd give it to me. When I started nosing around, I found out he didn't have anything I wanted but some stages and freighting equipment, and I've got plenty of that. It's these little mines that'll pay out. Of course it's yours that looks the best..."

"I don't own a mine," Claney said, "unless I got up and staked one when I was out of my head."

"Ed Manning's," Ann told him. "He willed it to you."

Claney lay thinking about that while Sheldon went on, "I've got a

MAN - BREAKER

deal with Ann on her road so I won't go broke paying for what I have to haul over it. That means I'll ship a stamp mill in here that'll be eight times as big as the one Ford had. I want a man to run things, Claney, and while you've been lying in that bed, I've been sending some wires to Montana. All I've heard about you is good. I'm too busy to stay here, so I'm offering you the job. If you'll say yes, I'll get to work on my end of it."

A man couldn't say anything but yes. Not with Ann sitting there beside him and smiling at him the way she was. Jim Claney, thinking back over the years, saw how empty his life had been. So he said, "Yes," and Samson Sheldon's grin widened.

"I'm a stubborn man, Claney," he said, "but what impressed me most about you was the way you brought Ford and his bunch here. I never would have believed you if you'd killed Ford in his office."

CLANEY shut his eyes then, for there was too much to think about and he was tired. When he opened them again, Ann was there but the others had gone.

"About Dad," the girl whispered. "I wanted you to know. He was a great man until he was hurt in that slide. I've sent him to Denver where he's being taken care of. No worries and plenty of rest. He'll be all right. The last time he wrote he wanted me to thank you for all that you've done."

"I didn't do anything," Claney said. "It was you."

"Not me," she said. "I was just hanging on waiting for you to come. Ed kept telling me you'd fix things when you got here."

Looking at her now, her blue eyes, her full-lipped friendly mouth, her pert little nose, Jim Claney knew that life could hold no more for him than it did this moment. He could only hope that Ed Manning knew how it was.

"Maybe it was a dream," Claney said softly, "but seems to me that when I was out of my head, you kissed me. If I was just sure..."

"Why no," Ann said, "it wasn't a dream. I just wanted to help you get well."

"I'm a sick man. Keep up the treatments." Reaching for her, he drew her lips down to his. ● END

THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

(cont'd from page 63)

him crumbled before their murderous blast.

Mel and Bud stood there staring at each other for a moment in the smoke-filled room with Torrant, Larson and the other man lying on the floor. Then Mel raised his gun again. "We're taking that money back, Bud," he said quietly, his jaw muscles working, "or one of us is gonna stay here."

"Look, you damn fool," said Bud, "we haven't got time to stand here jawing. All the guns in town will be searching for this loot. Burt sent Lige back and that means there ain't a single law-abidin' citizen this side o' Frisco!"

"You—you mean—"

"Sure, I had to jump you because them guys were about ready to walk in on you. Except I didn't know Lar-

son was one of them." He tossed the sack to Mel with a mischievous grin. "Maybe I did think I would," he added enigmatically, "but when I thought it over, I couldn't."

A wide grin broke across Mel's face then too. He said, "You son of a gun, you mean it."

Outside, they stood together in the darkness. Mel shoved the sack of money back into Bud's arms again. "Get this to the express agent in Frisco, Bud," he said.

"Sure you want me to deliver this?" Bud asked him.

"Sure," Mel answered.

"But what about you—what're you going to do?"

"I gotta see Tina," he said. "We gotta figure out how we're going to keep that stage going, Bud. Better shine up that shotgun, kid!" ● END



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