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COMPLETE

WESTERN

BOOK MAGAZINE

18TH YEAR

ALL
BRAND NEW
NOVELS

1 → VALLEY of DESTRUCTION
FLAMING FEATURING-
GRASS WAR NOVEL
by STEVE FRAZER

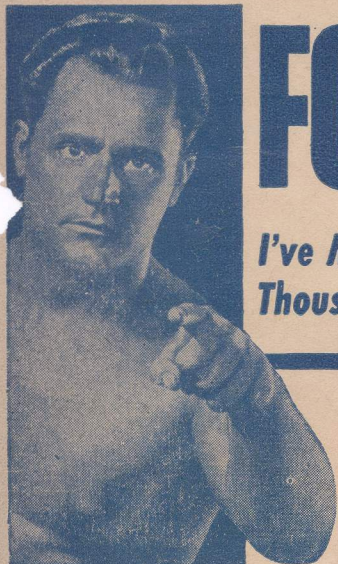


ADMAN on his
CKTRAIL
MATIC BOOK-LENGTH
R-NOVEL by
NEWTON

2 → TEXAS GUN GAM
ONLY HARDCASES WITH
GREASED LIGHTNING IN
HOLSTERS COULD TAKE
IN THIS COLDDECK SHOOT
SMASH BOOK-LENGTH
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COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

Vol. 18, No. 4

Aug. 1951

Robert O. Erlsman
Editor

18th YEAR OF
PUBLICATION

★ ★ 3 BRAND NEW NOVELS ★ ★

VALLEY OF DESTRUCTION

By Steve Frazee

6

"Remember, stay out of trouble!" Marge's words this time. Mell Dunbar knew, were meant to be a serious warning—but what did a man do, crawl-fish to the Destruction crowd when they threatened to devastate the whole valley? . . . "And leave your gun at home!" Marge added vehemently. And fight with his fists, did she mean—take on a bullet-bristling army with his two bare hands?

BADMAN ON HIS BACKTRAIL

By D. B. Newton

24

The big, sentimental outlaw called it his good luck charm—for having once stopped a bullet with his name on it. Maybe, the owlhooper opined, it would bring Chick Bronson luck too, and gave the fateful coin to the youngster just before going to the gallows. . . Could that have been what darkened his backtrail wherever he rode thereafter, Chick wondered? Might the dead man's dollar indeed have put a curse on him, so that only hate and bushwhack guns and death would await Chick now on Lost Wolf River?

TEXAS GUN-GAME

By Theodore J. Roemer

86

Fellow Texans they were, but there the similarity ended; any ruckus Wade McLean took cards in must see Tex Dwyer and his merciless cutters on the other side of the table. And bucking the Dwyer gang here would be only part of it—McLean knew he could count himself lucky to live to get that chance. Because hell was afoot on this range, every stranger that rode in was being tested and those not willing to sell their sixes to Satan were slated for permanent residence in Indian Valley—six feet under!

★ ★ SPECIAL FEATURE NOVELET ★ ★

AMBUSH

Cliffon Adams 115

Melesso the kid could take a herd of cattle out of San Romano, like he claimed. But he couldn't have killed a man riding in . . .

★ ★ PLUS AN EXCITING SHORT STORY ★ ★

STAGE TO SUNDANCE

Lloyd Eric Reeve 77

The girl from the East said her intended was waiting for her, but the marshal knew she'd be running into the arms of a killer . . .

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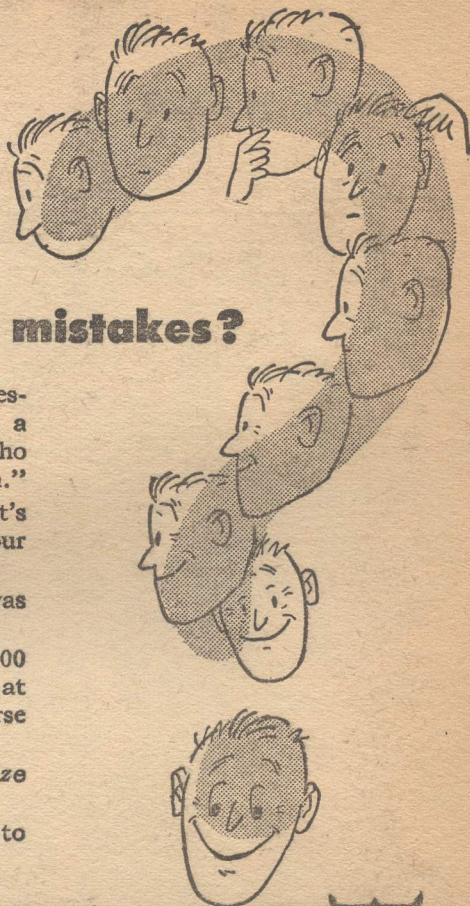
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VALLEY OF DESTRUCTION

By STEVE FRAZEE

ALL STORIES

BRAND NEW



He took Dunbar into a counter of tinware . . .

CHAPTER I

TROUBLE IS ANYWHERE

AT THE BIG bend of Whiskey Creek below the Bar Box ranchhouse, Mell Dunbar found Joe Watrous, the Box owner, looking at four dead steers. Watrous

was slumped in the saddle, both hands on the horn, his heavy back more bent than usual.

Dunbar cursed under his breath and rode over and sat there a while without speaking. Whiskey Creek was low, running milky from tailings dumped into it at Malta, the county seat twelve miles up the stream.

HOW LONG MUST THEY USE THEIR GUNS ON DYING CATTLE — INSTEAD OF ON MURDERING MEN?

BRAND NEW FLAMING FEATURE-LENGTH GRASS-

★ ★ ★ **WAR NOVEL** ★ ★ ★



THE KID WANTED PEACE, SURE, BUT NOT WITHOUT JUSTICE, AND NOT SIX FEET UNDER!

“Remember, stay out of trouble!” Marge’s words this time, Mell Dunbar knew, were meant to be a serious warning — but what did a man do, crawfish to the Destruction crowd when they threatened to devastate the whole valley? . . . “And leave your gun at home!” Marge added. And fight with his fists, did she mean — take on a bullet-bristling army with his two bare hands?

Outside of killing fish, the tailings did not hurt much.

It was cyanide waste water from Destruction Mine that was bringing death to the valley.

"They got to drink, don't they?" Watrous asked. "Can a man watch 'em every second to keep 'em away from the creek?" His voice was shaking. "I never saw the beat of this, Dunbar."

Across the stream magpies and crows were hopping on the carcasses of cattle that had died the week before, and the week before that. Destruction Mine was indeed well named.

Heavy in the saddle, just a trifle stooped, Joe Watrous was older than the average rancher in Whiskey Valley. He had come a few years later than the rest, which meant he had worked harder to get what he had. His eyes were deep-set, brooding. There was not much fight in them when he looked at Dunbar.

"What do we try now, Mell?"

"I'm on my way to Destruction now."

"Alone?"

"We all went up the last time. We all got mad and tried to yell at once. Where'd it get us with Bogler?"

Watrous looked at the gun on Dunbar's hip. No rancher on the Creek had found it necessary to wear a sixgun for several years.

"Not that," Dunbar said. "I've been using it on cattle that were too far gone for help, my own and a few others I saw on the way up."

"They get one drink and any of them are too far gone for help," Watrous said. "Want I should ride up with you?"

"Wish you would, Joe. You're the only one that held his head the last time."

Although the Creek route offered the easiest riding, they pulled away from it and turned toward the mountains on bumpy ground where the grass was already brown from the worst drought in the memory of Whiskey inhabitants.

"I dunno," Watrous said. "I'm

about ready to quit her and move over the hill."

"Trouble is anywhere, Joe."

WATROUS was not listening. "I was the only one that cleaned out with spring roundup, and of course I got the springs on Squaw Creek—if I had any riders to keep the stuff there. I ain't lost like the rest of you, but only because I didn't have as much to lose."

"We'll work it out," Dunbar said. "Sam Bogler would have listened last time, maybe, if we all hadn't got so mad."

"Bogler's no good. What the hell does he care? He's a mining man. Make no mistake about those clothes of his, or his big words—he's rough, Dunbar. He's probably thicker than fleas with the outfit that wants to set a dredge in Whiskey Creek."

"Dredge" always pulled a trigger of anger in Dunbar's brain. He looked at the valley. There would be good grass here again. Droughts did not last forever in the mountains. There was water enough, normally, back on the range, and the cattlemen used the valley only for wintering what they did not ship in the fall.

But a dredge set in the valley would leave nothing but boulder waste-piles—and it would never be green, not even after the dredge rotted at its moorings.

"I'm about ready to sell to that dredge fellow that's been coming around," Watrous said.

"You sell, and then one by one the others will start scaring," Dunbar said curtly. He had about enough of Watrous' groaning. "Hang on, until we see what we can do." Dunbar scowled. "There's folks already saying you were born in scary weather, Watrous."

Watrous checked his buckskin. "You one of them, Mell?" The question was quiet, bleak with challenge.

There never had been any physical fear in Watrous, and there was not now, Dunbar saw.

"No, I'm not," Dunbar said. "I just think maybe you've worried too much about what's happening."

Watrous nodded, his eyes still dark with challenge. "It's some better when you put it that way." He moved the buckskin ahead once more.

He was all right, Dunbar thought. It was only that, like everyone else in the valley, he had been driven so far by cattle losses and inability to do anything about them, he was ready to lash out at anyone.

They went on, without speaking. Dunbar was conscious of every thump of his gelding's hooves on dry, hard ground. Drought was bad enough. Cyanide poison was woe on woe. The law was in Malta, and Malta was a mining town that said to hell with ranching, except when a miner wanted a stolen beef. The territorial legislature said the same in more words.

It must be recognized that mining is the primary activity of this Territory, and that any act which conflicts with the pursuance of mining...

In other words, Dunbar thought bitterly, the ranchers in Whiskey Valley were interfering with mining by allowing their cattle to be poisoned by Destruction. The valley was not very large. It would never give many votes to anyone. It was not very important, except to the few who had worked their hearts out to make a home and livelihood there.

Riding beside gloom, Dunbar began to get gloomy himself. He wondered how much the dredge company would give him for the Rolling Y valley lands.

He threw the thought out quickly. Selling would be treachery. The ranchers had looked to him for advice and leadership, even sent him before the legislature to plead their cause.

"You out of something—tobacco, maybe?" Watrous was perking up a little. "Have to make a little stop in Malta?"

FOR A FEW moments Dunbar could not follow, and then he realized that Watrous was guying

him about stopping at Shannon's store, where Marge Shannon would wait on him. Before Malta boomed, her father had run the general store in Bannion, the valley crossroads.

Dunbar grinned. "Now that you mentioned it, Joe, I believe I do need a spool of green thread." He looked at the sun. "Anyway, we want to catch Bogler after he's eat dinner."

Hell rode high in Malta at all hours. Watrous and Dunbar had to back off Main Street and go around the block to get past a place where the street was blocked with miners watching five men fight. The marshal was standing by to see that no one was killed—unfairly. There was a lesser fight on the side street, not a very interesting one, so that the few spectators had time to watch the cowmen pass and yell insults.

"Cow nurses! Selling any sour milk today?"

"Looking for an honest job of work?"

Watrous growled at them. "Crawl back in your holes before the sunlight blinds you!"

He told Dunbar, "There oughta be a law that says miners over three years old be drowned in a cold crick."

Music blasted out across the walks from the open doors of saloons. A red-faced bouncer threw two drunken men from the Lead Palace. Miners yelled at three flossies tripping down a muddy walk with silk parasols held daintily.

A fine place for Marge to be living, Dunbar thought. She would have been married to him and down in the valley where she belonged if this trouble had not started in earnest during the summer.

Watrous stopped before the Hematite Saloon. "Drink?"

Dunbar shook his head.

"I need about four to stand this place. See you at the store after while."

It occurred to Dunbar that Watrous was in a mood for trouble, which was available at all hours in

Malta; but Watrous was old enough not to need advice.

Dunbar talked to Marge Shannon at the quiet end of the store, where rolls of ribbon and spools of thread were displayed in a large mahogany case. She was a slender girl, with her father's dark brows and eyes, but none of his heaviness of manner. Dunbar knew that old man Shannon was not going to be well pleased when Dunbar took his chief clerk and bookkeeper away.

"The poison is still coming down?" she asked.

Dunbar nodded. "I've been wondering when you've going to do the same. We had a dance last week at the Bonnet, and—"

"You don't fool me a bit, Mell." Her eyes were serious. "You're worried sick."

Dunbar dropped his pretense. "It's not good, but I think it can be worked out, and then—"

"All Sam Bogler has to do is build a settling pond. If you don't order him around, if you don't let that temper of yours get away, you may get somewhere. Did you come alone?"

"Joe Watrous and me."

"Joe is level-headed."

"You mean I'm not?"

"No, Mell, but your temper—"

"Look, Marge—this means a lot to me. If we don't win some way, it means that I—that we—" He could not be sure of what he saw in her face.

"A lot of trouble won't help any, Mell."

"A lot of dead cows ain't much help either."

Up front, Shannon began to complain about something he could not find. There were two miners there. One said loudly, "I never see a cowboy buy so many ribbons. What do they do with 'em—tie 'em on the tails of cows?"

His companion laughed. "I hear the cows are all dead."

"Let me know what happens," Marge said. "Remember, stay out of trouble." It was a warning as well as

advice. She had given it often since the first time he took her to a dance, and got into two fights, and she went home with somebody else. She had not spoken to him for a month afterwards. And then there had been a few other times...

CHAPTER II

DANGEROUS DUDE

"**Y**OU'D BETTER leave the gun," Marge said.

"I intended to." Dunbar unstrapped his gun belt and put it on the counter. It looked odd near ribbons and thread, so he moved it toward the coffee grinder.

He wished that he had thought to remove the gun before she mentioned it.

"That's the stuff, cowboy," one of the miners said. He was a short-coupled man, deep-chested, with a face pale from recent shaving. "Someone up here might take that thing away from you and jam it down your throat."

The man was not drunk. He was not even angry. It was just the old story of the mines against the valley, and this miner was having a little fun. Both he and his companion wore machine drill wrenches on their belts, a custom which differentiated them from common muckers.

It was a silly custom, Dunbar thought. Not all drillers were that vain. He said amiably enough, "There's no one in here who would have jammed that sixgun down my craw, is there?"

The taller of the two miners laughed. "I reckon he's all right, Tapper."

Tapper grinned. "Maybe so—for a cow nurse. You going to work on the dredge when it goes through your pasture, son?"

There was the word again, bringing the blackness of everything it meant. "I reckon there'll be enough—" Dunbar looked at the wrenches—"muckers for that sort of work."

"Muckers?" Tapper's features

pinched in. "Who you talking to, cowhand?"

Dunbar was in. He had never learned to back out.

"You," he said.

For a short-coupled man who used a windmill style, Tapper was pretty good. He knocked Dunbar into a crate of fresh tomatoes before Dunbar got him with two blows in the stomach. The machine drill wrench on Tapper's belt spun clear around as he bucked away and sat down, trying to gasp.

His companion was a wrestler. He took Dunbar into a counter of tinware. The counter went over. Shannon was yelling angrily, "Outside! Outside!" But still the tinware went clattering, and a sack of potatoes spilled across the floor.

Sprawled across Dunbar, the tall miner said, "You shouldn't ought to done that, cowboy," and hit Dunbar a whale of a jolt in the jaw.

They got up together. The miner threw a potato and then rushed in to wrestle some more. Dunbar ducked and lunged. He saw stars when his head struck the swaying wrench, but his head went on into the miner's midsection to drive air out of the man in a great grunt. The miner hinged and struck the floor.

Dunbar reached for a counter that evaded him on the first try.


"Butting your head against things is about all it's good for," Marge Shannon said. "And holding this." She put Dunbar's hat in his hands.

"They started it. They said—"

"He started it." Tapper had some wind back. He said—

"Get out! Get out, all of you!" old Shannon said.

His was the final word.

 ON THE WALK, Tapper took a few deep breaths and said, "Shall we fight some more, or go have a few drinks, cowboy?"

His companion said, "Let's have the drinks."

It was Watrous who had to get Dunbar out of a saloon, instead of the other way around.

Tapper Light and his companion,

Slim Buroughs, turned out to be friendly men after all. Tapper gave Watrous and Dunbar some parting advice, "Whatever you say to Bolger, don't tell him he's got to do it. Me and Slim worked at Destruction. One day we told Bolger how the mine ought to be run. Now we're working at the Apex Wonder." Tapper felt his jaw. "He sure hits hard. If things don't go just right, don't try that butting stunt, because Bogler will tear your head loose with an upper-cut."

"I don't figure on any trouble," Dunbar said.

He and Watrous rode across the creek and past the lowest terrace of the Destruction mill, where clear water from a waste pipe ran into the stream. Four section hands had drunk of that clear, cold water once, and three of them had died in minutes.

The thumping of mill machinery made the horses nervous. A trammer coming from the snow sheds with four loaded cars yelled profanely for the cowmen to clear the rails. A huge blacksmith bawled from his shop door for them to take their nags somewhere else for shoeing, then laughed uproariously.

Sam Bogler, the general superintendent, was in his office near the portal. He wore a corduroy coat and blue-green tweed pants that a Chinaman pressed every day. A red cravat stood out against his white shirt like blood on snow. His hair was close his jaw receded a little. His eyes cropped on a long head. If anything, were soft brown. He was not a big man.

Every time Dunbar saw him he thought the same thing: how could a dude like Sam Bogler boss a sprawling mess of dusty buildings and gopher holes in the mountain inhabited by hard-bitten men who fought for fun in the streets of Malta.

"Gentlemen!" Bogler said. "Take the wide bench there, the one that has the less prominent protusion of nails." He sent a keen look at the marks on Dunbar's face. "What can I do for you, boys?"

"Quit killing our cattle," Watrous said.

Bogler nodded. "In spite of all the harsh words we had on your last visit, I regret that fact that Destruction is causing some difficulty in the valley, and—"

"Difficulty, hell!" Watrous said. "It's ruining us, and you'd better—"

"Slow down, Joe," Dunbar said. "Look, Bogler, we've got call to be on the warpath, but we ain't—right now. We're up here to ask you man to man if you won't do something about that cyanide."

Bogler frowned. "Is it really as bad as that? I've heard the talk, but after all, it's ten miles or more to the first meadow, and there's a lot of beaver dams in between that should help settle the poison."

"Are you calling us liars?" Watrous asked.

"No." Bogler leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers against his knees.

H E HAD VERY large hands and wrists, Dunbar observed, but still there was nothing about him to make him as tough as the miners seemed to think he was.

"It wouldn't be too hard to build a settling pond up here, would it?" Dunbar asked.

"A trifle expensive, considering that we're running short of dump room in the gulch," Bogler said. "Still, it could be done."

"Cows are expensive, too," Watrous said. His voice was shaking. He had taken one or two drinks too many, Dunbar thought. That, on top of the anger that had been eating him the last few weeks. Dunbar wished now that they had not stopped in Malta.

"I've no doubt that they are." Bogler said coolly. "But let's not shout, please." He fingered his red cravat. "At the moment Destruction enterprises are in a state of flux. We contemplate changes, depending on certain factors—"

"Damn your changes! Damn your factors!" Watrous leaped off the bench. He put his hands on Bogler's desk and thrust his face at the superintendent. "Are you going to

keep that cyanide out of our water?"

"Not immediately." Bogler's face had not changed much, except that his eyes were tightening. There was not much softness in them now.

"Dunbar was angry, too, but he said, 'Now, Joe, let's take it easy.'"

"I've had enough of that talk!" Watrous slammed the desk. "I've worked my guts out to make a ranch, and now I see all my work going to hell because a dude in a red necktie sits here and says, 'Not immediately.' " Watrous cocked his head. "Bogler, you build a settling pond, or whatever you have to do, and do it right away, or—"

"You're telling me what to do?"

"I'm warning you!"

"I'm afraid you gentlemen have wasted my time, besides insulting me," Bogler said. "Now get out."

"I got more to say!" Watrous hit the desk again.

Dunbar shouldered his companion away from the desk.

"Look here, Bogler—" Dunbar said.

"Now you're telling me how to run my business." Bogler pointed with his thumb toward the door.

Dunbar brought patience up from he-didn't-know where. "I'm only trying to say that—"

"Get out," the superintendent said. "Get out before I throw both of you over the dump. You whining cowmen make me sick. I'll be glad when you're gone and a dredge is working that valley!"

CHAPTER III

ONE BOX OF DYNAMITE

D UNBAR was at once past thinking, past the point of further talking. He reached across the desk to grab the red cravat. He was going to haul Bogler in and slap all the taste out of the superintendent's mouth.

Bogler and the tie did not stay put. The superintendent was out of his chair and Dunbar afterward could not recall the movement. All he knew was that he himself had reeled across the room and that both sides of his jaw were sore now.

Watrous went in with a roar, his jumper bulging across his powerful shoulders. Dunbar heard the two quick sounds. They went *clop, clop*. Suddenly the head of steam had gone from Watrous. Bogler took him by the jumper and spun him before he fell, then shoved him hard. Watrous went through the door and fell outside.

"Next man," Bogler said calmly.

Dunbar worked his jaw as much as it would move. He was a bigger man than Bogler, and he was hardened. Even now the superintendent did not look tough. Dunbar came away from the wall. He fainted with his left, and then he faked with his right. He let the left go, straight and hard. There were men in the valley who had said afterward they did not know where the left came from.

That was in the valley. Up here, the left went over Bogler's shoulder when he moved his head to let it pass. Dunbar had reached too far with his weight. Something nearly caved his middle in. He tried to wrap his arms around Bogler and slam him into the wall. He wrapped his arms around air. The wall hit him in the face.

A fancy boxer, huh? Dunbar turned around and blinked. The red cravat was out of focus for a while. Bogler was over in a corner. That footwork wasn't going to do him much good now. Dunbar moved in, expecting Bogler to dance away along the wall. When he tried to, he was going to be tripped, then hammered into the floor.

But Bogler did not dance away. Dunbar had him now. He closed, taking two hard jolts in the face. Then he was ripping away with short blows. Fancy boxers, they couldn't take it when you got them pinned.

Bogler could take it. And he kept returning it.

After a while Dunbar backed away, while he still had a chest and stomach left. For the first time in his life he knew what a bad pain in the heart was. While he still had a little steam left he'd better finish

Bolger. There was just one thing to do now. He ducked his head and lunged.

He was slumped against the wall outside, with one foot in an empty carbide can, when his left eye began to make out the wavering outlines of the mill. All the machinery in it was pounding in his head. His neck was broken, surely. His right eye would not open at all.

"Get up," Joe Watrous said. "We're a fine pair."

Watrous helped Dunbar to his feet. They wobbled away toward their horses, brushing against miners and mill men who jeered at them. One of the mill men had a chain tongs in his hand. The crazy fool, Dunbar thought. Didn't he know his boss didn't need that or any other kind of help?

The horses were gone.

From the doorway of his office Bogler called, "Who ran those animals off?"

AFTER A WHILE a black-bearded trammer said, "They was on the track, boss. Hell, I was just having a little fun with them."

"That's underhanded," the superintendent said. "Go get your time." He said to someone else, "Find those horses for those two men."

"We'll find our own horses," Watrous growled. "To hell with you, Bogler."

"The feeling is mutual," Bogler said. "Good day, gentlemen."

Dunbar turned to have a last wondering look at Bogler, but all he could see was a big splash of red against a white shirt. He knew the crimson was not blood, as much as he regretted the fact.

Tapper Light and Slim Burroughs met the cowmen at the foot of the dump. The two miners were leading the horses.

"Thought there might be a fight," Tapper said, "but I guess we're a little late to see it." He studied Dunbar's face. "You tried to butt him?"

"I tried everything."

"Trying to butt Sam Bogler is a mistake," Slim said.

"So was everything else I tried," Dunbar said.

"It's a shame about them cattle, all right," Tapper said. "What you boys going to do now?"

"I'm going to sell out to the dredge company," Watrous said.

"No! Hang on a while, Joe." Dunbar tried to shake his head, but stopped quickly.

"Hang on, hell!" Watrous said. "You and your ideas. Where did any of them get us? We went over there peaceful—and you started a fight to kill our last hope."

"I started it?" Dunbar scowled, and his bruised scalp made him wince. "You were on the prod from the minute we started to talk, and I brought you along because you're supposed to be level-headed!"

"Who hit him first?"

"Not me," Dunbar said. "I don't think either of us hit him at all."

Watrous got on his horse. "The devil with standing around and letting my cattle die. I'm selling!" He rode away.

The steady thumping of the big stamps at Destruction mocked Dunbar.

"You need a drink or two," Slim suggested.

Dunbar looked sourly at the miners. "It seems I paid for all the last ones we had. What's the matter, you fellows saving for your old age?"

"As a matter of fact," Tapper explained, "we're temporarily out of a job. We had a little argument with the shift boss at the Apex Wonder in the saloon a while ago..."

"That's all you miners do, is fight, huh?"

"Well, Tapper said, "it does help pass the time between shifts."

"Do you boys know anything about cyanide mills?"

TAPPER squinted across the creek at Destruction. "Let's see," he muttered. "About one full box of dynamite under the main boiler house—"

"No! Hell no!" Dunbar said quickly. "Not that. I mean—" He sized

the two men up again and an idea took form. "Meet me in about ten minutes at that saloon where we were."

"Make it the Mandarin Cafe," Burroughs said hastily. "Quieter in there."

"Yeah," Tapper agreed. "Much better for discussing deals." He cocked his head at Destruction. "Too bad you don't want her blowed sky-high, Dunbar."

Dunbar rode down to get his gun.

Marge took it from under the counter and passed it over without a word. Her eyes were frosty, and her expression, after examining Dunbar's battered face, said there was no need of asking how the interview with Bolger had gone.

"Uh—Watrous sort of lost his head," Dunbar said. "Not that I blame him, of course, but he—"

"Who made the first swing?"

"Me."

"I thought so." Marge nudged the gun a little closer toward Dunbar and glanced at the door.

"I can take a hint," Dunbar said stiffly.

When he was going out, he heard old Shannon clear his throat and rumble, "Most likely he'll get soaked to the gills. I've told you about cowboys, Marge—"

Dunbar slammed the door. He looked back through a window to see how Marge was taking her father's words, but she was going toward the back of the store. Something in her posture made Dunbar think she might be crying.

Somebody else would cry before this thing was over.

Between large bites at the Mandarin, Tapper and Slim said they thought a little fresh air would do them good. They would be glad to come to the Rolling Y. There was a small matter of two weeks room rent, which they had not been able to pay because of the crooked monte dealer at the Golden Palace, but once that was settled...

"As a matter of fact," Tapper said, beating his knife against his cup for a refill. "I was born on a

ranch in Wyoming. "Stayed there until I was sixteen, then suddenly I seen the light."

"Another piece of your wonderful apple pie, sweetheart," Slim told the waitress. "And an egg sandwich to go."

Dunbar wondered if he could feed them on poisoned steers when the grub ran out at the Rolling Y.

CHAPTER IV

STAMPEDE

NEITHER of the miners was a stranger to horses, he observed at the livery stable, where he rented two return mounts, horses trained to carry miners to high workings on the mountain, then to return riderless to the stable without letting any petty chisellers intercept them on the way.

Luke Glidden was windlassing water at the well behind the ranch-house when the three arrived. Dunbar's other two riders were on the creek, hazing cattle away from the water toward the corrals, where a V flume ran into a trough from the dump-box at the well. Cattle in the corral were pawing at the trough and bawling.

Lean, with a face like Spanish leather, Glidden swiped his shirt sleeve across his forehead. He turned the windlass bucket over and sat down on it.

"She's about dry, Mel. She don't run in fast enough now for a grass-hopper to wet his whistle. Been sloughing bad all afternoon, too."

That was a blow Dunbar had not expected so soon.

Glidden looked curiously at Tapper and Slim. "Buck Fenters come by from the Rocking R a bit ago. Says his well is plumb done. Said the others was just about as bad." Luke spat wearily. "Any luck up there in Phewtown?"

His face said he knew the answer before Dunbar gave it.

Tapper rode to the creek and returned a few moments later. "A

horse sure won't drink there, will it?"

"You didn't think it would, did you?" Glidden asked.

Dunbar introduced the two miners. "They're going to give us some help, Luke."

Glidden was dubious. "Somebody better—or we'll see that floating—business—smack here in the yard before we know it." He rose, flexed his back, and lowered the bucket again. It came up about a quarter full, rattling with gravel.

"Let me crank her a spell," Slim said.

He brought up three buckets before the well caved in with a sickening thump. It kept caving until it was choked almost to the collar. "That's just jim-dandy," Glidden said dully. He kicked the tilted dump-box, already drying in the hot sun. He looked toward Malta and began to curse.

"Save your wind," Dunbar said. "Get the boys at the crick and ride to every ranch in the valley. We'll have a meeting as soon as everyone gets here. Tapper, you and Slim try to hold the stuff away from the crick. There'll be more wandering in about dark. Do the best you can."

"Can't you fence—" Slim asked.

"You can't fence fifteen miles of crick," Dunbar said, "especially when there ain't ever been a foot of barbwire shipped into this county. I don't know where you'd have to go to get it."

"Anyway, a cow dead of thirst ain't worth no more than one dead of poison," Glidden said, and went toward the corral on saddle-sprung legs.

DUNBAR rode up the valley to see Watrous. They should not have quarreled, but they had. Watrous ought to be cooled off by now. Even if he had sold out before leaving Malta, he had to listen to reason.

The Box was a one-man deal, the smallest spread in the valley. In spring and fall Watrous hired

drifting hands, but the rest of the time he had worked like four men to keep going. He was standing near his spring house at the creek, looking gloomily at two steers ready to drop across the water.

"Sell out yet?"

Watrous shook his head without looking around. "I couldn't find the fellow in Malta. I'm going back tomorrow." He pointed across the creek. "Look there."

"I don't want to." Dunbar swung down. "Joe, the springs on Squaw Creek—can we all use them?"

"Everybody in the valley? There ain't that much water at the springs."

"I know, but there may be enough for us to hold out until we can think of something else."

"Help yourself. Long's there any water we got to share it. I'm clearing everything that's still alive off my place in a few days anyhow."

"You won't consider hanging on? Like I said, one man sells out, the others start to get shaky—"

"I got enough, Mell."

Dunbar looked down the valley. Gray rolling hills came into it on both sides, running back for miles toward the timber. Ordinarily, those hills were pale brown, rich with crisp tufts of forage, and the valley was hip-deep with native hay. But now...

It was still a beautiful place, Dunbar thought, and the old blackness came into his mind when he pictured a monster floating dredge inching down the valley, pushing ruin out on all sides of it.

"Everybody's going to meet tonight at my place," he said, and rode away, not caring whether Watrous came or not.

Watrous came, exuding gloom, although he had little to say while he waited with the rest for everyone to arrive. Men waited in the yard, sat tensely on the porch, or wandered to the corrals and back, not talking much, or talking of familiar things apart from the big problem.

Most of them were still firm in their courage, Dunbar thought. They could not have made the

valley what it was if they had been another kind. They were still looking to him with hope, and he did not know why, because he had not helped them any so far. Perhaps he had made things worse by his last visit to Malta.

The ranchers looked at Tapper and Slim, then sidewise at each other, and asked no questions.

AT LAST they were all here, the last to arrive Buck Fenters, haggard from sleepless nights of riding the creek, bleak with worry.

"May as well do our pow-wow-ing out here," Dunbar said. He knew no one wanted to go inside, even if there had been room. To the last these men would want to stand on the land that was fast slipping away from them. Some sat on the porch, their feet on the hard-packed yard. Fenters began to whittle a toothpick he would never use. Ike Robbins of the Flying M squatted on the ground, tracing brands with his fingers.

Others leaned against their horses, smoking.

They looked relaxed, but they were tense with hope. Most of them had come armed. There seemed to be a carbine in every boot.

Dunbar was ashamed of how little he had to offer.

"I guess you know," he said, "Joe Watrous and me didn't do no good with Sam Bogler today."

Yance Ashford grinned. "Yeah, we can see that on your face."

A small laugh ran and died and they were all looking soberly at Dunbar once more.

"Joe, here, has said we can share his water at Squaw Creek springs. I figure some of us can go up tonight to build five, six little dams below the springs, so the cattle won't tromp each other to death. The rest can bring all the stuff in the valley up there. We'll work out shifts to watch the cattle and hold them from breaking toward the crick."

Fenters let out a long breath. He shook his head. "I figured you had

a plan to ride in to Malta and make a proper fight of it."

Many of the rest had thought the same, Dunbar saw. He grinned, deady sober underneath. "I tried that today. It won't get us nowhere."

Robbins did not look up from his finger tracing. "There's four hundred men at the Destruction alone, maybe six thousand miners in the whole gulch. Damn few of 'em wouldn't like to take a crack at a cowman."

"The water won't hold out forever at Squaw springs," Ashford said.

"We know that. But maybe before we're stumped again, we'll have something else worked out." Dunbar knew that movement alone would help them, so he did not let them think too long. "Well, let's see who builds the dams and who takes charge of bringing the cattle up."

"Maybe, like Watrous says, selling would be the best," Robbins said.

"Sell, hell!" Fenters shut his knife with a snap. "I been here too long to run away. Come on, let's try what Mell's said. I'll ride up and shoot Sam Bogler smack in the middle of his white shirt before I let him run me out!"

The big pool at Squaw springs had dropped two feet during the last week, Dunbar saw. The others saw it too, but the dam crews went to work by the light of fires built along the small overflow of the springs. It was a hot night. The fires threw stinging smoke into lungs and eyes. The ground was rocky, and it was a sweating scramble to get enough dirt to build dams two feet high.

They had three of them built when the first cattle came. Before they got through the aspens the herd broke and the flankers could not turn it. In a bawling rush the cattle came down on the smell of sweet water. They scattered the fires, knocked the diggers sprawling, and broke the handles of tools.

In minutes the dams were trampled down. What little water they had held was mud.

Tempers ran. The diggers cursed the herd crews. Yance Bedford, whose quiet good humor had helped considerably during the night, was down with a broken leg. Other herds came up and added to the confusion.

It was dawn before Dunbar and Fenters got order restored. The cattle were held in aspen parks above the spring. Men rebuilt the wrecked dams and made three more. Cooks from the ranches came up with chuckwagons and made wash-boilers of coffee.

The work at hand was done, but it would be night again before there was enough water in the lower dams to bring cattle down to drink. Then it was going to be an almighty task to keep the dams from being wrecked again, no matter how few cattle were brought down at one time.

CHAPTER V

COLDDECK COURT

THEY TRIED six yearlings at the source spring, thinking to let them drink two or three at a time from the lower end of the spring. Three sides of the pool sloped sharply downward in the granite, making approach to the water tricky when the spring was low.

Tapper, who had told no lie about being born on a ranch, got his rope on one yearling at the rear. Dunbar missed his throw. Two yearlings broke around the others and plunged into the pool. One of them snapped its front leg. In an agony of anger and weariness, a rider shot the struggling animal in the head as it lay in the spring.

Another rider knocked the gun from the first one's hand and cursed him as a fool. They slugged each other from their saddles until they fell to the ground, and other angry men separated them.

In order to drag the dead animal

from the pool two men had to put their horses over the first dam. They broke it.

Tapper said, "I'd forgot what a lot of work ranching was."

Lying on a tarp with his leg in a splint, Ashford said, "Somebody butcher that yearling while it's hot. I'm going to have one square meal before I bust another leg."

Long before noon the crews learned there was no way to water the cattle and preserve the slowly filling dams without bringing down one animal at a time to each watering place. Then, even with ropes on them, the cattle tried to congregate at the same place.

A rider whose rope broke under the impact of a big timber-popping mossyhorn stepped out of the saddle while his horse was still sitting. "Who thought up this mess?" he asked the world at large.

"I did," Dunbar said. "Get another rope and go to work."

The rider, a Rocking R hand, considered for a few moments. "No, I don't want no more of this. It ain't ranching, it's murder. I think maybe I'll get me a job up at Malta, where they work only so many hours out of twenty-four."

Paid off on the spot, the man rode away. Trivial as the incident was, it had its black effect on the others. It was worse a half hour later when two more riders quit. That's the way it would go with the valley when one rancher faltered and sold out, Dunbar thought; and maybe Watrous was already completing his deal right now.

Ashford called after the two quitters, "Don't come back to valley looking for a job when your bellies get lank."

"There ain't going to be any valley before long," one answered.

Fenters rode over to where Dunbar sat on a tired horse. Dunbar was looking at the sky, and the sky was like it had been all summer, cloudless, without a promise of rain.

"No help from up there," Fenters said. "We do it from down here,

or else she ain't going to get done." He looked at Tapper and Burrows. The former had a rope on a drinking steer, and the latter was patrolling the dams with a shovel on his shoulder. "What'd you have in mind when you hired them two?"

"I wanted to find out all I could about cyanide milling, and then I had an idea or two besides."

"We'd best try one of the ideas then." Fenters looked grimly at the spring. "In two, three days a soda cracker tossed in there would stay dry as ever." Fenters spat. "We're about beat, Dunbar."

"The first idea I had was to build a settling pond of our own above the Box. I misjudged the water in the springs here. It won't hold out long enough. My second idea was to have Tapper and Slim put my well down another thirty feet. Tapper says no miner would go in a hole in gravel, unless it was timbered every inch. Anyhow, the well caved in."

"So did mine—last night, my foreman said. There ain't even drinking water for humans on the place now."

"My last idea," Dunbar said, "was to take Bogler away from Destruction and hold him down here someplace until he wrote an order to shut down the mill until a settling pond is built."

Fenters grunted. "That sounds like a rough piece of business. He slapped at a deer fly on his sweating neck. 'Well, let's get started. The two of us will be enough.'"

"I changed my mind. I got another idea." Dunbar had not changed his mind. He was going to do it alone, with some help from Tapper Light.

A LITTLE later he rode away with Tapper, headed toward the Rolling Y to pick up guns, a rope and a spare horse.

They caught up with the spring wagon that was hauling Yance Ashford home. The injured man yelled for the cook to stop. He raised on one elbow on his mattress, his face

fever flushed. "Stay with it, Dunbar," he said. "Fight that Bogler to a standstill. Even if he runs us out, we still don't have to sell the valley."

"He ain't run us out yet," Dunbar said. "Don't worry, Yance."

But Dunbar was worrying. He did not like his own plan, and admitted as much to Tapper. Sam Bogler just wasn't the kind who would be scared into anything. He was an odd sort of man, Dunbar thought, remembering how he had fired a trammer for running away from the horses. Still, the plan was all that was left.

"May as well ride past the Box," Dunbar said. "I want to know if Watrous has sold out yet."

The Box ranchhouse was deserted. They rode out through stubby weeds that were dead for lack of water, and went down the creek toward the Rolling Y. The only cattle in the valley were dead ones.

When they started to cross the creek, the horses jerked their heads down and sniffed at the water. Automatically, Dunbar pulled up on the reins. The horse kept its neck snaked down and took a drink. It really was not thirsty. Dunbar knew, for the animal had drunk at the spring not long before.

Tapper's mount too was exercising a horse's privilege of stalling when crossing a stream.

The two men stared at each other.

"The mill is shut down!" Tapper said.

"Probably busted down last night, but they'll be going again before long."

Tapper was scowling as they rode on toward the Rolling Y. "You know, the solution of cyanide they run through the mill ain't so awful strong, not maybe enough—"

"It killed three men, didn't it?"

"That was before they got everything adjusted. Of course, I still wouldn't want to drink any of that waste water, but—"

Dunbar pointed at dead cattle

along the river banks. Some had died in the stream, going back to drink again even as they were dying. "I wouldn't either," Dunbar said.

"It still sticks in my mind that the poison here shouldn't be so strong," Tapper said. "Now, you take over at the Sunnyside, where I worked once—"

He stopped, staring toward the ranchhouse. Dunbar had seen too.

SAM BOGLER was standing by the caved-in well. A livery rig from a Malta stable was in the yard. The only difference in the superintendent's attire this afternoon was that his tie was green instead of red.

He came from the well, walking erect and carefully.

"I see you ranchers don't know—" he was a trifle surprised to see Tapper Light "—know much about diggin in gravel."

"What do you want, Bogler?" Dunbar asked.

"I came down here to see for myself what's going on." Bogler looked across the meadows at the dead cattle. "I still don't believe what I see."

"That sounds like you," Dunbar said.

"Just take it easy, cowboy. My temper is as good as yours." Bogler looked without expression at Dunbars bruised face and swollen eyes.

"Mill shut down?" Tapper asked.

Bogler shook his head. "It wasn't when I left. There will be someone fired if it's down when I get back."

"Maybe you won't go back for a while," Dunbar said.

Bogler smiled. He pulled out a gold watch and unsnapped the case. "I'll be in my office in about two hours. If I'm not, there will be more trouble down here than you fellows have got already. You wouldn't want to pull everybody away from your work at Squaw springs to try to fight a couple of hundred miners, would you?"

That, all the time, had been the weakest part of a poor plan, Dun-

bar knew. "How do you know what we're doing down here?"

"I met the fellow who was with you yesterday, on my way down. He was on his way to Malta to sell out to the dredge company that's forming." Bogler walked over to the porch and sat down stiffly. "I suppose you don't mind if I get out of the sun. Yesterday in my office before the festivities began, I at least offered you boys a bench."

"What are you after, Bogler?" Dunbar asked.

"I came down here to satisfy my mind about what was going on. Frankly, I've thought all along that you fellows were trying to pull something fast, killing off culled stock and planning to slap a big lawsuit against Destruction."

"You want to look real close at some of that culled stock?" Dunbar asked.

Bogler shook his head, wrinkling his nose. "No, I couldn't tell when I examined the brutes, but I have seen enough to convince me that your losses are not exaggerated. In fact, this is not a happy situation down here."

"Maybe then you've seen enough to build the settling pond we asked for?"

"There *will* be one built—even-
tually." Bogler touched the edges of his tie. His knuckles were peeled. "It isn't just a simple matter of saying, 'Let's build a dam tomorrow, boys.' I would have explained that the first time your fellows came up, if the gathering hadn't turned into a dog fight at the start.

"We have to buy land in the gulch. At the moment the owners are holding it at an outlandish price simply because they know a large company wants it. That part of it will drag out a long time until our lawyers get the price beaten down to a reasonable figure. Then, we contemplate certain changes in our milling process." Bogler waved his hands vaguely. "It all takes some time, naturally."

"How much time?" Dunbar asked.

"Until next summer, perhaps."

WITH MIGHTY effort Dunbar held his temper. "How about building us a pond down here, somewhere above the Box?"

Bogler nodded. "I considered that on the way down. Frankly, I can't see that a settling pond anywhere is going to help you, because if those large beaver dams at the head of the valley don't act as natural catch basins—" He shook his head. "Cattle must be very sensitive, because our solutions are not, it seems to me, powerful enough to—"

"It's powerful enough," Dunbar said. "It's ruining us."

"I doubt very much that you could prove in court that Destruction is ruining you. Have you ever had trouble with this water before?"

Once more Dunbar struggled with his temper. "Are you tied up with the dredge outfit that wants this land?"

Bogler rose unhurriedly. "Not in the least." He looked at the valley, taking his time. "It would probably be a profitable investment, at that, considering that this valley has acted as a settling basin for gold for centuries."

"You don't give a hang if this valley is torn up?" Dunbar asked.

Bogler's eyes moved quickly. He considered the heat in Dunbar's voice and the expression on his face.

"I'm a mining man, Dunbar, but still I wouldn't like to see a lot of people driven from a place like this. I can understand your side, yes."

"But you're not willing to help?"

"Building a settling pond here is not going to help you, at least not very much."

"Sending us down cribbing for a well and a big pump would help," Dunbar said.

Bogler blinked. "How deep are you with your wells now?"

"About sixty feet."

"Uh-huh. Another forty and you might hit all the water you need." Bogler considered. "I can spare you a pump. I've got two old smoke-

stacks you can cut in sections to make well lining quickly. They will have to be replaced in time, of course—"

"We'll need one of those big-gear windlasses," Tapper said quickly.

"I can spare one. I'll start it down with the other material this afternoon."

"We'll need a boiler to run the pump," Tapper said.

Bogler shook his head, "That, I can't give you."

"I'll take care of that," Dunbar said. He knew where there was a boiler at an abandoned sawmill eight miles away. He thought he could have it here in a day and a half. The energy of enthusiasm was driving him once more. Working the clock around on the well, with the equipment Bogler had promised, the ranchers could lick their trouble; at least temporarily, and then there would be time to work out the rest later.

CHAPTER VI

VALLEY TERROR

ARIDER WAS coming down the gray slopes when Bogler walked toward his rig. The Destruction superintendent climbed up, using the step, moving somewhat gingerly. He settled himself in the seat.

"You probably don't know," he said to Dunbar, "but you cracked three of my ribs yesterday." He winked at Tapper. "That's farther than you and Burrows got, eh, Tapper?"

"Could you close the mill for three days?" Dunbar asked.

Bogler shook his head. "That would cost a fortune."

"It wouldn't cost you anything," Tapper said.

"Just my job and reputation."

The rider came across the creek and into the yard. It was Robbins, the Flying M owner. "The spring

is blamed near dry right now," he said. "By night I misdoubt we'll have more than a seep."

Dunbar looked at Bogler. "One day?"

Bogler shook his head. "Sorry, Dunbar. I have my orders, and a schedule to follow." He drove away.

"The crick!" Tapper yelled. "It was clean enough our horses drank on the way here. Maybe the mill is busted down. We can give the cattle one good watering—"

"What do you mean, your horses drank out of the crick?" Robbins said. "Mine wouldn't a minute ago."

Tapper and Dunbar were already swinging up. They rode to the stream. Robbins was right. The horses would not touch the water. Tapper cursed. "The mill was down for a spell, and then it started again."

Dunbar stared at the water, a long time in thought. "Robbins, have some of the boys get the boiler from the old Spruce Gulch sawmill. Set it up near my caved-in well. Tapper can show you all about it. We're going to put a well down that will give us all water in the dryest year. We're—"

"How long's that going to take?" Robbins asked disgustedly.

"Three, four days."

"I told you the water was almost gone at Squaw springs!"

"Make it last another night."

"How's that going to help?" Robbins asked. "I say—"

"Make it last another night! Do what I say!"

Robbins and Tapper were riding up the gray slopes when Dunbar came out of the house with his gun. He went past the Box on the gallop. Where the road from Malta ran close to beaver dams, he got down and went into the willows, spending most of his time below the last dam.

When he came back to his horse, muddy to the waist, his face was strained with desperation. Another

idea had not panned out. He hesitated a while before he swung up and took the road toward Malta.

THE OFFICE of the Sunbeam Dredging Company was two doors below a saloon, and the walls between were thin enough to let tinny music into the silence of the room where Dunbar faced a big, rough-hewn man, Jim Okerberg, president of the dredging company.

Okerberg was thirty pounds heavier than Bogler and twice as tough appearing, but the Lord had not put the same stuff inside the two men, Dunbar knew now, for Okerberg was scared clear through.

Dunbar's face and the gun in his hands had done their work.

"Admit it," Dunbar said, "before I kill you."

"You're wrong! So help me, nobody connected with this company has poisoned your water!"

"Yes, you have. It finally dawned on me that the cyanide, after the first few days the mill ran, hasn't been strong enough to kill a steer in two, three minutes. You've been dumping cyanide into Whiskey Creek to drive every rancher in the valley into selling out. You got it started, Okerberg, when you drove Watrous into selling today, but that's as far as you're going."

Dunbar cocked the sixgun. "Spill it, Okerberg. Admit it."

Okerberg's face was a greenish cast. He shook his head and kept shaking it. "I haven't doped your water, and I haven't hired anyone to do it. It's coming from the Destruction mill. Everybody knows that!"

With a sudden move that caused Okerberg to cringe lower in his chair, Dunbar put his gun away. He stode out of the office and was riding down the street before Okerberg staggered to the door, yelling for the marshal.

The man had lied, Dunbar was sure. Thinking that he was going to be killed no matter what he said, he had taken the course that seemed to give him a little chance.

Without stopping at the Box

ranchhouse, Dunbar rode straight to Watrous' springhouse at the creek. There was a lock on the door. He smashed it with his first shot.

The second shot came from behind him. It tore into the springhouse inches from Dunbar's ear. He whirled and put his gun on Watrous, walking toward him with his shoulders hunched. The gun in his hand was cocked and ready.

"Hold it, Watrous!"

Joe Watrous came on, walking slowly, walking straight at Dunbar.

They shot almost at the same time. Dunbar felt the bullet rake across his ribs under his left arm, catching enough bone to knock him back a step. He saw Watrous double slowly. The gun dropped from his hand and he fell forward on the dead weeds.

Dunbar went over to him. Until Watrous spoke in a hoarse gasping voice Dunbar was still thinking of him as a friend and neighbor, not as the man who had tried to ruin the valley.

"Work...nothing here but killing work," Watrous said. "I made the deal with Okerberg...five thousand if I got all the ranchers to sell out..."

Dunbar knelt beside him. "What can I get—what can I do for you, Joe?"

"Take the cyanide out of the springhouse...bury it somewhere." Watrous hunched on his side, holding his arms tight across his chest. "...a lifetime with cattle, Mell. How do you think I felt every time I dumped poison in the water?"

The dying man coughed, and it was sometime before he could speak again. "Take it out of the springhouse, away from the water..."

He lived until the job was done, and then he seemed glad to die.

DUNBAR RODE his horse into the water above the springhouse. It sniffed, and then it drank its fill. He rode toward Squaw springs. The ranchers could still use the big well. It would be a

smart investment, serving all the valley.

"Why hell yes!" Ike Robbins said, when cattle were banging against each other to get into the water above the springhouse sometime later. "You should have seen the lay of things when Joe pushed that fight with Sam Bogler, and then when the horses drunk when Watrous was away, and wouldn't drink after he come back—"

"For ten gallons of whiskey I once sold a mine that turned out to be worth a hundred thousand dollars," Tapper Light said. "I left that part of the country because folks kept telling me I should've been able to look right down through the rock and seen what was under there."

Robbins had no more to say.

Fenters said, "Well, Dunbar, you seem to have fixed things up pretty well down here. How's your account at Shannon's store in Malta?"

That would be taken care of tomorrow, Dunbar thought. He eyed Tapper, who should prove very handy in preparing part of the program for Marge.

Dressed in his Sunday best, Dunbar leaned against the ribbon counter the next day. "I'm really a peaceful man, Marge. I've learned the error of my ways. As a husband—"

"I know you couldn't help it about Joe Watrous, Mell." Marge eyed him dubiously. "You weren't really going to shoot Okerberg, were you?"

"Bluffing! Of course not. I tell you I've learned my lesson."

Dunbar took only a casual look at the burly miner who came in, but it was enough to know that Tapper certainly had picked a hard looking man for the role.

The miner wasted no time. "So you're the valley terror, huh? What are you doing at a ribbon counter, cowboy?"

"Buying ribbons, of course, my friend."

"Don't call me friend. I heard say you made your brags about being

able to whup any two miners in Malta."

"You must be mistaken, my friend." Dunbar heard a small sound of surprise from Marge. "I never seek out trouble."

The miner hesitated. "Your name Dunbar?"

"That's right, Mell Dunbar."

"I'd like to see you outside. I want to talk to you by hand. Any man that says he can lick Judd Root with one mitt tied behind him—"

"You're Mr. Root?"

"Danged right I am!"

"Never heard of you," Dunbar said. "But if you're a fighting man, I'm sure you can find someone in Malta to—"

"I've found him. You're it!" Root grasped Dunbar by the coat. "You coming outside, cowboy?"

"No." The man was a good actor, Dunbar thought.

"I'll take you out then!" Root gave a jerk that made Dunbar's head snap.

"Don't carry things too far, please," Dunbar said with double-edged intent. "I'm not going outside with you."

"Inside, then."

THE MINER knocked Dunbar past the ribbon counter, past the coffee grinder, beyond the potatoes, and into a sack of onions. It was, Dunbar thought hazily, the hardest wallop anyone, including Sam Bogler, had ever struck a fellow human being. Tapper Light had made some sort of mistake.

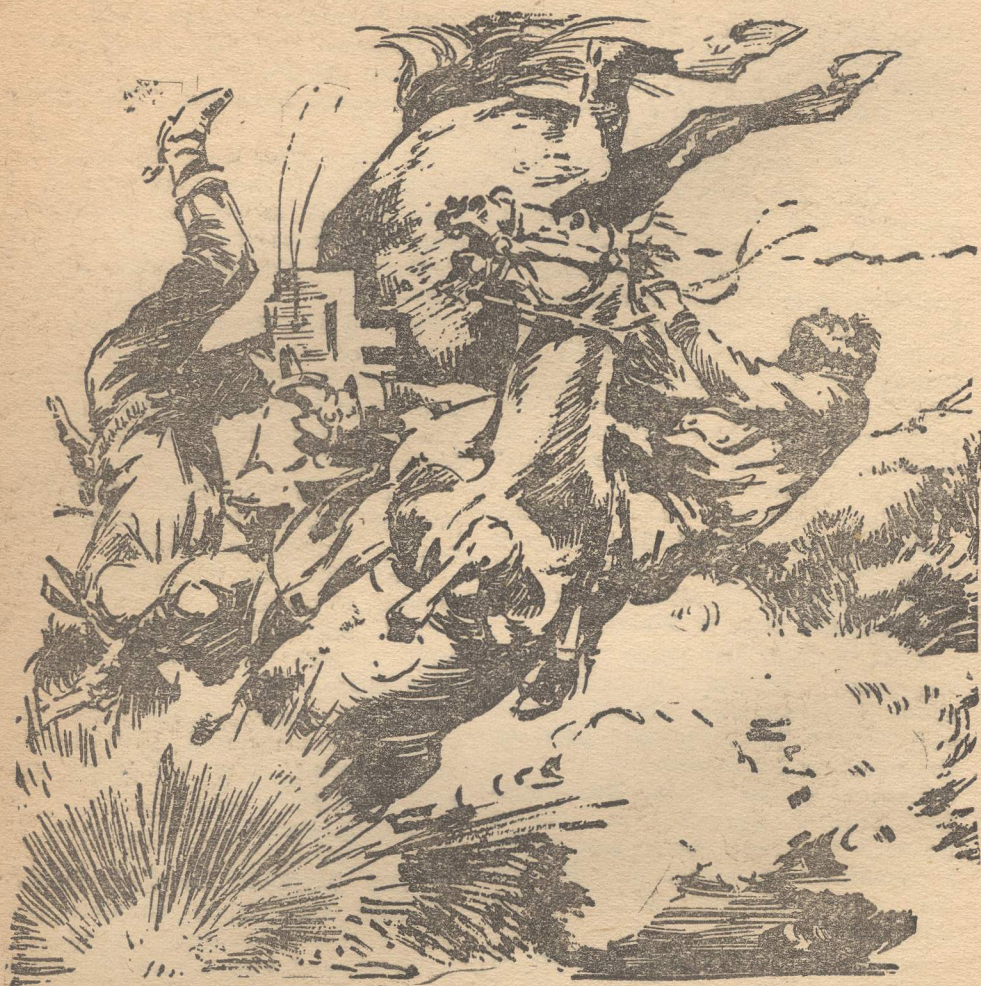
Dunbar knew he was still alive when he felt the pain of onions pressed between his back and the floor. He got up groggily. Root was down, inert. Marge was standing over him with a brand-new cast iron frying pan in both hands. "You—you stub-jawed brute!" she said to Root.

She dropped the pan on the miner's stomach and ran to Dunbar. "Are you all right, Mell? Are you hurt, sick—or something,

(please turn to page 127)

TODAY'S TOP
WESTERN AUTHOR
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BADMAN ON HIS



CHAPTER I

Dead Man's Dollar

SOMETIME toward midmorning, they came to the jail for Ward McCarey.

It was a small army that filed through the bull pen. In addition to the local sheriff and the jailer, a bunch of trail-dusty men followed a hardbitten character whose badge proclaimed him to be the lawman from the neighboring county seat of Three Pines. Chick Bronson stared

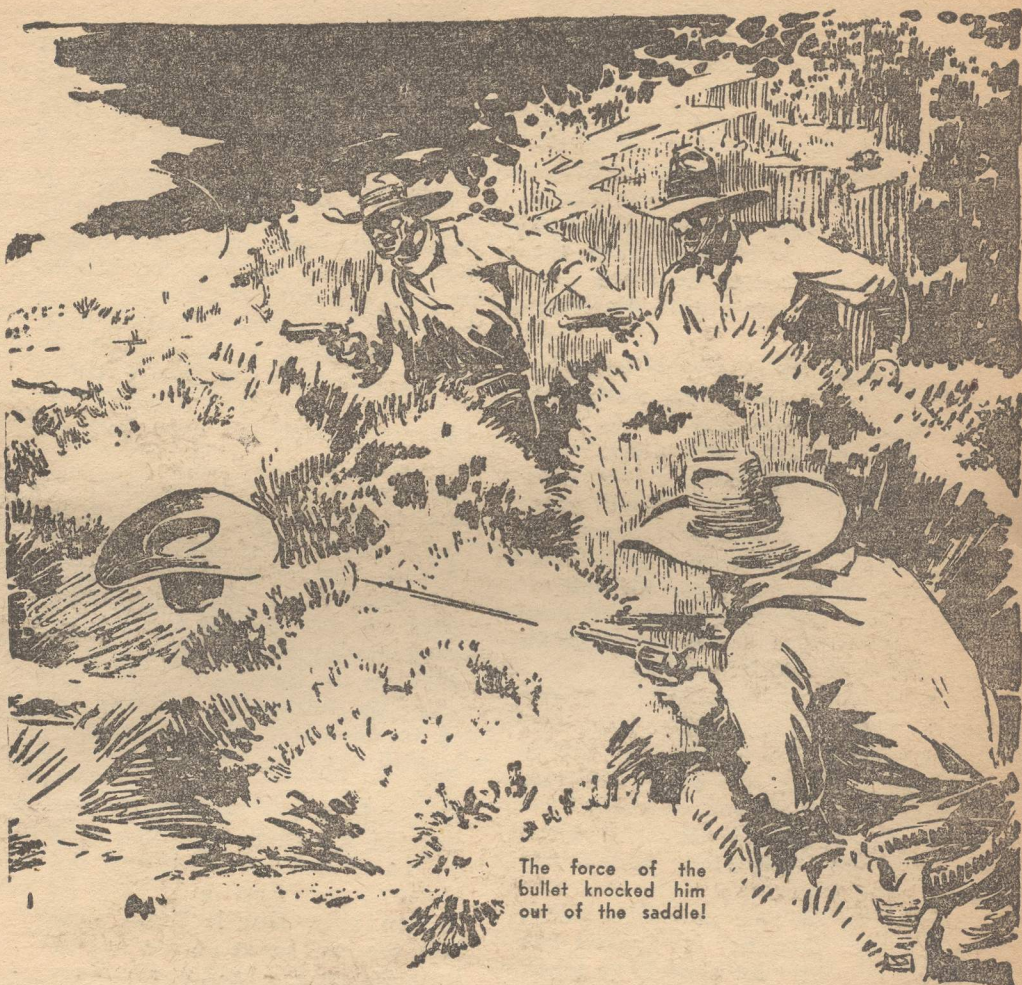
from his own cell while they paraded past him, spurs ajingle and gun harness creaking. More than one of the sheriff's escort, he noticed, carried shotguns and saddle weapons openly.

"All right, McCarey," he heard the Three Pines lawman grunt with savage pleasure, "let's go! A noose is waitin' for you—and there's no use thinkin' you can pull any funny stuff to cheat it!"

The jailer's key unlocked the cell; there were a few moments of delay and muttered comments, and after

BACKTRAIL

NEW SUPER NOVEL
by D. B. NEWTON



The force of the
bullet knocked him
out of the saddle!

The big, sentimental outlaw called it his good luck charm—for having stopped a bullet once with his name on it. Maybe, the owlhooter opined, it would bring Chick Bronson luck too, and gave the fateful coin to the youngster just before going to the gallows Could that have been what darkened his backtrail wherever he rode thereafter, Chick wondered? Might the dead man's dollar indeed have put a curse on him, so that only hate and bushwhack guns and death would await

Chick now on Lost Wolf River?

★ HE HAD THE OUTLAW'S LUCK . . . ★
BUT NOT HIS GUNSPEED!

that the procession was coming in a ragged rhythm of boots along the narrow corridor.

Chick Bronson waited, curious for a glimpse of the outlaw who had become a legend because of his daring style of lonehanded bank robberies...who had eluded all efforts at capture until that last fatal job at Three Pines a week ago, when a teller had gone down before his gun. Now, the law had him at last—and the law was going to see that McCarey hanged.

It surprised Chick a little when he got his first look at the notorious man who had been his fellow prisoner for a night. He saw a big, well-built figure, with a sandy mustache and a flowing mane of reddish hair. None of these others was exactly a small man, but McCarey topped them all. And when he came abreast of Chick's cell he suddenly halted and the angry nudge of a gun against his ribs failed to budge him.

"Cut it out!" he growled. "You got all the time in the world to hang me. Lemme have one minute to say a word to this kid, will you?" And not waiting for an answer, he turned toward the bars and thrust a hand through—his left hand, Chick noticed. For McCarey's right arm was strapped to his side in a dirty sling, apparently broken; it looked as though he hadn't let himself be taken without a fight.

"So long, kid," McCarey grunted. "Thanks for keeping me company, with your talk and your mouth harp. You make real music on that thing, no fooling—helped me through a bad night, anyway! Well, good luck; don't let these characters get you down none!"

"I won't," mumbled Chick, and reached to take the proffered hand. "Keep your own chin up, McCarey."

He couldn't help the flickering of astonishment that passed over his face, then, as their palms met; but McCarey was turning away abruptly and hurling his heavy voice at those who guarded him: "All right, you damn' lawdogs—let's go, if you're in such a hurry!" So that, Chick

thought, probably no one had noticed....

HE WAITED until the men were gone, the steel door shut and locked again. Only then did he look at the thing Ward McCarey had left in his fingers.

There was a scrap of paper, and folded inside it a single silver dollar. The coin was badly battered and misshapen, with a shimmer of brightness near the hollowed center where some small but powerful missile must once have struck a smashing blow. Turning it over in his fingers, Chick saw that the outlaw's initials—"WM"—had been scratched onto both its faces.

After staring at this a moment, he smoothed out the paper and saw the writing. Apparently McCarey had scribbled the note that morning while waiting for the Three Pines sheriff, and had kept it and the coin palmed waiting for the chance to slip it through the bars to the other prisoner. The lefthanded writing was hard to decipher, but he worked it out, with growing wonder.

Kid, this is my lucky dollar. It stopped a bullet once that had my name written on it, and the worst I got was a couple of broken ribs. But it looks now like the luck must of ran out of it as far as I'm concerned. Maybe it will work better for you.

If you ever get over toward Lost Wolf River, show this coin to Vince Kimbrough. He'll recognize it, and if you need any help he'll give you some. Stand you a square or get you a job maybe. Vince was always a good friend of mine.

Such was the note; and something seemed to choke up inside Chick Bronson as he read the crude scrawl. Superstitious as any outlaw, Ward McCarey had nevertheless yielded up his precious lucky piece to help a stranger who had befriended him. It didn't seem right, somehow, to take it.

Or maybe McCarey really felt,

with a fatalistic conviction, that whatever power to bring him good fortune the coin had ever held, was indeed run out. And that no charm could save him now from the rocky road that must end, inevitably, under the gallows in Three Pines.

Chick swallowed hard, and his hand tightened on the battered coin. Suddenly, he knew that he had formed a strange liking for the big, sentimental outlaw. And he knew also, with a grim certainty, that he would never see Ward McCarey again.

This was a dead man's dollar that he gripped within his sweating palm....

It was past noon the next time anyone came near him. Chick Bronson had got hungry again and he hoped they were bringing his dinner, but the jailer's hands were empty except for the key ring. Chick watched dumbly while his cell was unlocked and the door swung wide. "Step out!" he was ordered. "Sheriff wants to talk to you." And he thought the sour-faced man gave him a peculiar look as he shuffled past.

Seated with spurs hooked into the top of his desk, the sheriff was using a pocket knife to pare the nails of broad, splayed-fingered hands. He looked up with a scowl.

"Chick Bronson, huh?"

"Yeah."

THE SHERIFF pursed his lips, the ends of the mustache sticking straight forward as he did so, and fiddled with the knife. A fly droned against the window, in the heated quiet of the stuffy jail office.

"I'm uncertain what should be done about you," grunted the lawman, finally. He snapped the knife shut, unhooked his spurs and swung his swivel chair around. "It all hangs on Ott Stanger. If he cares to make an issue out of it I'd say you'll probably end up with a term for vagrancy."

Chick insisted doggedly, "I told you before, I'm not a vag. I'd be glad to take a job if I could find one; but the outfits just ain't hiring. There's so many grubliners going the rounds now, they run you off with

a shotgun when you ride in the gate!"

"Yeah, I understand times are bad. Somebody in Wall Street plays the wrong card and the cattlemen lose their shirts. No telling when things are apt to pick up, either."

The lawman scrubbed his grizzled head. "I reckon I understand about that doin's over at the saloon yesterday, too. Stanger is a pretty hard character. To him, any man without a clean shirt and money to jingle is a bum and he won't allow him on the place."

"How could I be expected to know that? I was a stranger and thought maybe I could earn a meal. I never intended to start trouble—and I didn't either! It was him, and that tough bouncer he calls Dugan."

The sheriff made a face. "I can believe it!" he shrugged. "I'll tell you what, kid. I don't want to get tough with you. There's enough big-time crooks, like that McCarey we got rid of this morning, to keep a man busy without picking on every drifter that's down on his luck."

"So I'm gonna turn you out—but I mean *clear* out; I don't want you still around an hour from now, because if Ott Stanger sees you're loose he's sure to make trouble. For both of us!"

"Don't worry! I ain't aiming to tangle with him again. And there's nothing else to hold me in this town!"

"You got any plans at all?"

Chick fingered the battered dollar in his pocket. "Not for certain. But there's just a chance I might be able to promote something over on the Lost Wolf. A job, maybe. I got sort of a line on it."

"Oh. Well, that country's not in my bailiwick.... Anyway, I wish you luck."

The sheriff pushed back his chair, across splintered floorboards. "I'll get your stuff for you. That bonebag you call a horse is in the county corral, eating his danged head off. Quicker you take him off my hands the better I'll like it."

"You won't like it any better'n I will...."

The clean tang of fall sunshine and fresh air against his face was good, after the jail. He stood for a long moment with hat in hand, savoring it. But there was fifty miles to cover, or thereabouts, to Lost Wolf River and the possibility of a job and grub, and it looked as though he was scheduled to miss another meal. Determined to waste no time hitting the trail, he took up the slack in his belt and went hunting for the county corral.

IT DIDN'T appear to him as though the sorrel had been gorging himself any on the sheriff's grain. He looked every bit as gaunted as he had been—droop-headed and miserable, peering at Chick through the tooth-gnawed bars. Yet he managed to dig up a whicker of greeting from somewhere; and Chick, touched, gave the bony neck a grateful slap.

"My first pay," he promised solemnly, "if I ever do land another job, you draw a feed that'll put an inch-thick layer of fat across all them ribs of yours. You'll have oats running outa your ears!"

Minutes later he was leaving this town, as inconspicuously as he'd entered it, a scarecrow figure with empty pockets and with rundown clothing and gear, and no apparent future ahead of him.

Though it was late season the sun still held considerable of its summer heat; sometimes a rider could sweat as much in October as in the heart of July. He traveled westward through a sandy, red-soiled country that became bunched and crumpled as the near hills took shape on the horizon. It was new range to him but he had asked questions; he knew the empty trail he followed would skirt those timber ridges, keeping them to his right as he swung south and west toward the valley of the Lost Wolf.

Some nice grass down that way, he had heard, with a number of small-tally outfits working it as well as one or two big-size spreads. Not that he held out much hope, any longer, for a riding job anywhere. He'd been willing to wash glasses in the saloon

back yonder for a meal. If this friend of Ward McCarey's—this Vince Kimbrough—would offer him any kind of job at all, Chick knew he'd take it. Even though Kimbrough ran a livery stable and was looking for someone to shovel it out twice a day....

Toward sunset he had, for once, a piece of luck. He knocked over a jack rabbit—spilled it running with a snapshot from the back of his sorrel, and saw it flop lifeless in a little puff of reddish dust. This was good shooting for Chick Bronson, who had no more than the working cowhand's proficiency with a sixgun and generally did little good against a moving target unless his own feet were solid on the ground. But he made a clean shot, this time, that took the jack's head off its shoulders and left the rest of it unmangled; and then and there Chick decided to make camp and cook him a meal.

Tough and stringy as the meat promised to be, it removed the pressure of trying to reach his destination tonight. Meanwhile, he had handy a sheltered spot at the foot of a pine-clad hill spur, with grass for the sorrel and a trickle of seep water, and plenty of scattered down-timber branches to keep a fire going. But most important, he had food; and his belly threatened to collapse against his backbone at the thought of any delay in getting at it.

So he offsaddled, picketed the sorrel, and gathered the makings for a small fire. He dismembered the jack with his case knife, skewered the sections on sharpened twigs and set these in a circle about the tiny blaze. And, that done, leaned back in comfort against a log to keep an eye on his cooking.

Flames danced and crackled; the seep spring trickled musically in early darkness; the white-stockinged sorrel pulled at grass nearby among the pines. Chick Bronson looked up at the stars, that were coming out now in a darkening sky, and at the gently rocking treeheads above; and, remembering what night in the jail had been like, he knew sudden peace at the contrast between that and his present freedom. He dragged a deep

breath of the piney air that blew against him.

Somewhere to his left, a twig snapped.

He heard the sound plainly, but for a moment its warning failed to register; then he saw that his sorrel had left off grazing and, with lifted head, was staring past him into the shadows. Belatedly, Chick Bronson realized the possible meaning of these things. He started to twist about for a look and that was when the harsh voice at the edge of the trees said sharply, "Careful, fellow. There's two guns here. Leave yours alone, and sit easy!"

Slowly he came around—and, in that awkward and helpless position, stared numbly at the half-seen figures that were only black and formless shapes in the darkness. They moved forward now, deliberately. Firelight picked a metallic glint from a leveled hand gun, and then the face above it swam into gradual clearness.

Chick Bronson blinked, stupified. Because the last thing he would have expected to see out here in this wilderness was the cruel and predatory face of the saloon man, Ott Stanger.

CHAPTER II

Valley Of The Lost Wolf

STAMMERING something, he scrambled to his feet. Stranger had halted a pace or two away, the gun rock-steady in his fingers, and now the second intruder had moved up and Chick recognized that one also. He was Dugan, the bouncer in Ott Stanger's county seat whiskey mill; and the back of Chick's neck began to ache again as he saw the broad, hairy fist that had struck and smashed him into oblivion.

Ott Stanger said, "Take the gun off him, Dugan. He might try to use it."

The big, hair-matted fingers came forward and plucked the weapon from Chick's waistband. Chick Bronson was beyond putting up any resistance; he could only wait with arms raised, head shaking a little as he looked at the well-groomed, sleek figure of the saloonman, and the

blocky-shouldered giant who outtopped them both by half a head or more.

He said, huskily, "The sheriff told me you'd likely want to string my hide for what happened yesterday—but looks like this is going kind of far!"

Ott Stanger's mouth warped into a curious and unreadable expression. "Listen to him, Dugan!" he grunted to the other man. "Playing dumb.... You don't really think I'd give a hang about small stuff like you, just because of yesterday?"

"Well, I dunno what else I ever done to you."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the saloonman's free hand flipped sharply, across and back; the open palm smacked neatly against the prisoner's face, jarring him. "As long as you keep talking funny," grunted Stanger, "we'll act rough. Watch your step or I'll have to turn Dugan loose on you!"

Dazed, Chick stood with a fine red thread of blood dribbling down his cheek, and stared at the man with the gun. Fury was swamped by an utter lack of understanding—and sick dread at thought of big Dugan unloosing the murder in those fists of his.

The stench of scorching meat rose to his nostrils from the forgotten jack roasting over the flickering fire, but he had no thought for that now.

"If you'd just tell me what you want—" he began, half pleading; and then ducked away wildly as Stanger's sixgun lifted in a threatening gesture. His foot slipped on slick pine needles. He went to one knee, crouched there peering up at his captors.

And Ott Stanger was saying, "You know what we want, all right! The money—the bank loot! We were with that posse that picked up Ward McCarey's trail after the Three Pines job. He lost us for a space of three hours, while we went on a false tangent into the hills instead of heading on toward Lost Wolf River; and sometime in those three hours, before we caught up with him in that haybarn at the Lazy F,

he managed to get rid of the saddlebags with the loot.

"Fifty thousand dollars! It wasn't in the barn when we took him—he must have buried it someplace. We mean for you to show us where!"

"Me?"

"Quit stalling! The jailer tipped us off that you had words with McCarey this morning before they took him away. He even seen McCarey slip you something. And then, as soon as the sheriff turned you loose, you struck out in this direction as fast as you could travel. The sheriff might be a dope, but to us, that all adds. McCarey told you where those saddlebags are buried, knowing he'd never have a chance at them himself. And you're on your way now to dig them up."

"No!" cried Chick Bronson, staggered. "There was never a word said about the money! I swear! I'll show you what it was McCarey give me—just an old, bashed-up silver dollar. Look!"

He was starting to fumble in his pocket as Ott Stanger, with a look of extreme disgust, shrugged and turned away. Stanger jerked his head at the giant. "He's all yours, Dugan!"

CHICK CAME up off the ground, fighting desperately; but he never had a chance. Dugan met him with a hurled rock of a fist that smashed into Chick's face and sent him back-peddalling, thrown half around by the blow. He struck the bole of a tree and before he could pull away Dugan was moving in on him.

And then, with cold efficiency, Dugan went to work.

Presently, Stanger grunted, "That'll do for now—don't want him unconscious. I'll talk to him again." Dugan stepped back, panting a little, and his boss added, "Whatever is making that stink, kick it out of the fire and throw some more wood on—it's dyin' down." Then Ott Stanger moved forward and nudged Chick Bronson with a toe of his shoe. "All right—come to!"

Chick lay face down where Dugan had dropped him. His insides seemed

ablaze with pain; Dugan knew where to hit to make his blows count for the maximum of punishment. Chick groaned, and lifted his head.

As new fuel added to the fire's effectiveness, Ott Stanger's cruel face came into focus. Chick looked at it through a reddish haze. It was a narrow face, the nose long and sharp, the eyes heavy lidded, the mouth thin and without mercy. It looked to Chick Bronson about the ugliest sight he had ever laid eyes on.

The saloonman said, "You can see now, I hope, that I'm not stringing you; I mean business. And don't think stalling will net you anything—my time's too valuable for that! I intended to follow and watch you dig up the money, but I couldn't wait out here all night while you made camp. Now, if you know what's smart you'll stop giving me trouble and do what I tell you."

Chick Bronson, huddled there, shook his head wearily and hopelessly. "I've already said I don't know anything."

"Well, might be you'll change your mind! While you think it over, we'll be moving on toward Lost Wolf River. We should make it by morning, and I think by that time you'll have decided to use some sense.... Dugan!" He turned, yelling orders to his henchman. "Bring the horses. And take this guy's sorrel off the picket and throw his saddle on for him. We got distance to cover!"

"Let him saddle his own bronc!" growled the giant. Nonetheless, he did as he was commanded.

Watching dully, with one of his eyes throbbing shut under a punishing blow of Dugan's mauling fists, Chick Bronson wished he'd been told to put the gear on the sorrel himself; there might have been an unguarded moment, however brief, when he could have made an escape in the darkness. But most likely, that was the very thing Ott Stanger had in his careful mind. He would not be one to overlook many bets.

Finally, while Stanger kicked dirt over the last embers of the fire, Du-

gan came out of the timber edge leading a pair of horses. Stanger said, harshly: "Up!" And as Chick came slowly to his feet a helping shove sent him lurching toward his saddle. Dugan, already mounted, held the reins. Chick climbed into leather and a moment later the saloon man had him bracketed on the other side.

"Let's be rolling!"

They hadn't bothered tying him; all too plainly, it wasn't necessary. Exhausted, bruised, and hollow-bellied, Chick Bronson swayed over the saddlehorn and tried futilely to think ahead, as they struck out across a fine, silvering spread of moonlight.

WITH FIFTY thousand dollars dangling before their eyes, and a firm conviction that they had the means of getting their greedy hands on it, it was plain these two were ready to go to almost any lengths. They wouldn't actually kill him, of course, but they wouldn't stop far short of it; and the fact that Chick didn't have the information they were determined to drag out of him wouldn't save him.

For these captors of his were obviously cruel and without heart, driven only by their money-lust and capable of anything. At least, this was true of Ott Stanger; the other—big, slow-witted Dugan—was merely a tool who would obey orders and let his boss do his thinking for him.

Now, if ever, was a time to make a man wish desperately for some Samaritan to aid him. And Chick Bronson—a nobody, a drifter in a strange country, utterly unknown and friendless—knew he was in this thing alone. Unless.... Suddenly, with a start, he recalled the silver dollar in his pocket.

Vince Kimbrough, whoever he might be, was somewhere ahead on the Lost Wolf. Chick toyed a bit with the possibility of stalling long enough to discover who Kimbrough was, and then using the coin somehow to appeal for help. But next moment his stirring hopes plummet-

ed again as he saw just how unlikely such a chance really was.

So he rode in deepening despair, through a seemingly endless darkness. His captors said little; there were only the normal night sounds, the jingle of harness trappings, the ragged rhythm of hoofbeats. Ott Stanger set a comfortable gait that a mount could keep up for hours without tiring. But every once in a while he would order a halt to breathe the horses; and in those times, while the three mounts grazed on slipped bits and loosened cinches, he was apt to start bearing down on Chick again.

"Ready to be sensible yet, kid?"

"Let—let me think a minute...."

Chick had found by this time that if he continued to protest his ignorance it got him nothing, except to be turned over to Dugan for further treatment with those smashing, hurting fists. He was already torn and bruised and bloody, with one eye nearly shut and the iron tang of blood in his mouth from a cut lip, and his insides so punished that each jolt of the saddle sent pain spearing through him. He sat on the ground now, too exhausted to stand, and squinted up at the shapes of the two who loomed over him, silhouetted against a sky turning pearly with dawn.

Nearby the tired horses pulled at high grass. The birds were waking. Ahead, beyond a steep breakoff of red granite, the wide and level valley of the Lost Wolf lay sleeping in mists that rose from the broad and looping river, with the rosy light of sun-up spreading across the far escarpments. It would have been a beautiful moment, under better circumstances.

The saloonman shifted impatiently. "You've had all night to think. There's the valley, and the loot is down there somewhere. You either make up your mind to talk—right now—or what's happened to you so far will seem mild compared to what you'll get!"

Chick looked at him, dully, and at Dugan. In the strengthening light, both their faces were tight and

strained from the all-night trek, and Stanger's mean regard held a violence that he seemed to be holding back by main effort. In Dugan's heavy features, however, Chick found something else—the beginning of uncertainty. Scowling, the big man shook his head and for the first time voiced a protest.

"I dunno, boss. I've hurt him plenty, and he still won't talk. He's a game little rooster. Much more and I'm apt to kill him, and we still wouldn't know anything."

Stanger shot him a hard look. "What of it? If he don't talk, hanged if I care if you do kill him!" He turned back to the prisoner. "Last chance, fellow! Talk, and keep your hide. Otherwise—"

CHAPTER III

Gun-Talk And Gold

CHICK BRONSON lifted a hand, shakily; ran the back of it across his battered mouth. Past the legs of his captors, he looked down into Lost Wolf Valley that was glowing now with misty morning colors. His thoughts were forming themselves, taking shape with desperate haste.

He said, stalling for time, "Supposing I show you where the money is—how do I know you won't kill me anyway? That loot belongs to the bank. You'll want to make sure I don't tell on you."

A sour grunt exploded from Ott Stanger. "I'm not afraid of that. You couldn't prove anything, and it would be the surest way of asking for murder. No, you get me the money and I give you my promise to let you go. I'll even let you have a couple hundred dollars out of it for your own poke. Is that fair enough?" Chick drew a deep breath, let it out.

"I reckon you take the pot," he muttered. "I—I've had about as much as I can stand."

A look of triumph warped Stanger's fatigue-pinched features. "Deciding to be sensible! All right, bucko—tell us where it is."

"I'll have to show you. I ain't too sure, from McCarey's description;

but I think I can find the place once I'm in the Valley. Besides, I want to be sure I get that two hundred you promised."

Dugan voiced an objection. "But boss! We can't take him down there in this shape. How would we explain if anyone saw him?"

The saloon man considered this a moment. Then he shrugged. "We can clean him up a little. Wash some of the blood off his face. We're not apt to run into anybody. We'll make it a point not to."

So they went down into the valley, the three of them, on weary and droop-headed horses that took the shelving drop-off trail with legs stiffly braced. The golden banners of sunrise streamed out half across the sky, and the last of the night rose with the river mists out of the long, wide trough.

To Chick's bloodshot gaze it looked like good range, down there—browned by the fierce sunlight of late summer; ready for the first frosts. He made out scattered ranch headquarters that spotted its length, and yonder the criss cross of streets and buildings that would be a town. After that they had come down across the rim and were on the valley's floor, themselves, and Chick lost perspective.

"Well?" demanded Stanger, cutting in on his thoughts.

Chick had an answer ready. "I think it's a little to the south of us," he said. "I noticed a sandstone butte that looked like one of the landmarks McCarey spoke of."

"Can't be very much south," Dugan muttered. "I ain't far to the Lazy F, where we picked him up that day."

"Lead out, fellow," Stanger grunted.

They picked up a wagon trail angling off through the bunch grass and followed it. This pointed generally outward but—more important from Chick Bronson's point of view—it skirted the base of a rise, just ahead, on which he had already settled for his purposes. He was going to have to try a break and that immediately. The chances of getting

away with his life were slim enough but he figured he was going to die anyway if he didn't make the attempt.

In maneuvering single file the switchback rim trail his rein ends had been freed and Chick still had them; otherwise there would have been no hope at all of doing the thing he envisioned. He rode silently between his captors, swaying in the saddle—a pathetic, broken figure of a man; but with senses alert and his one good eye keeping a careful check on the two who bracketed his stirrups, and on their slow approach to the hill he had in mind.

Then, at just the proper moment, he turned completely limp and, without a sound, went sliding headfirst out of the saddle.

He hit the dirt and lay there, eyes closed, bloody face turned up to the blue morning sky. Ott Stanger pulled in his own mount, with a startled curse. He looked at the man on the ground and his thin mouth quirked contemptuously. "Pick him up!" he ordered his henchman.

BUT FOR ONCE, Dugan refused to obey orders. "You pick him up!" the giant retorted. "You're the one wanted him beaten out of shape. It ain't the first time I killed a man with my fists, but something about this kind of makes me sick!"

Down in the dust, Chick Bronson caught his breath and held it as he waited for the outcome. He had hoped it would be this way, but without much confidence. He knew he couldn't handle Dugan; Stanger on the other hand was closer to his size. Though, in his present state, he hadn't many reserves of strength left in him.

There was a moment of quiet; then saddle leather creaked and he knew it was Stanger who had given in. He tensed, gathering himself. A shadow slid across his face. A boot toe prodded him sharply and he gave to it, showing no life as the saloon man, standing over him, snarled: "Come on! Get your pins under you!"

Stanger kicked him again. After-

wards, getting no response, the man leaned and grabbed Chick's arm and started pulling him up to a sitting position. His breath was sour against the prisoner's face. All at once Chick Bronson came to life and he hurled himself against the other, trying for a hold about the waist.

Ott Stanger yelled once and leaped backward, letting go of Bronson, dragging at his holstered gun. Chick struck his hand just as the gun cleared leather, and knocked the weapon spinning. He cursed inwardly; he'd hoped to capture it for himself. That being out of the question, he got his grip about Stanger's thighs and hung on, while he tried to maneuver his feet under him.

Still in saddle, Dugan was shouting incoherently. Dust spurted up chokingly about the struggling figures as Stanger fought to break loose. He drove a blow at Chick's head and the latter felt his grip slackening on his opponent's body. If he lost that hold, he was done for; the knowledge gave him a last desperate spurt of strength. Then he had a boot set into the road ruts and, pushing up, he hurled all his weight against Stanger and whirled him around, slamming his body against the shoulder of Dugan's mount.

Stanger hit heavily, spilling down as the startled animal danced away—out of control, for the instant. And, in that brief space of time while Ott Stanger sprawled in the dirt and Dugan was fighting his horse, Chick turned and flung himself at his own tired sorrel.

He caught the saddlehorn and was scrambling for a stirrup as the sorrel took off, spurred by his frantic yell. Somehow Chick Bronson found the oxbow, and with a supreme effort dragged himself into leather. Just as he settled astride, a gunshot broke the morning air.

Looking back, he saw that Dugan had control, and with a revolver smoking in one hand was already spurring after him. Stanger, on his feet by now, was just leaning to recover his last sixgun. He had it, and ran with it toward his own horse

that waited on trailing reins.

Jaw tight, Chick straightened about again to beat his tired sorrel into greater speed with flailing kicks of spurless bootheels. He figured he had perhaps a thirty foot lead. It would be very thin.

HE PULLED to the left, circling that rise of land and laying it momentarily between him and his pursuers. Beyond, a gentle slope dropped away in front of him; and at its foot sat the sprawled buildings of a ranch headquarters. He had spotted them from the rimtrail, and hoped and counted on the chance that they might give him shelter. Right now, the chances didn't look too good—there was a long distance yet to cover.

The sorrel spurted over the bunch grass slope, and now the two pursuers swept into view and came after; they went down that way, strung out, with Dugan's big gelding hard behind Chick, and Stanger a little farther back. And those two were both shooting, their sixguns cracking sharply and their bullets making angry, tearing sounds as they ripped past the fugitive. They didn't want to kill him—they were trying to drop the horse, spill him from leather.

The ranch buildings seemed to sweep upward to meet him, getting larger as he neared. This was a small spread; just a house of three or four rooms, a fair-sized barn, and a few sheds—not even a separate bunk shack. A one man, twenty-cow outfit, apparently, and showing no sign of life just now except for a wisp of woodsmoke that curled up from the kitchen chimney. The shooting chase bearing down on it hadn't yet brought anyone out into the open. Probably whoever lived there would be lying low, afraid and hugging cover.

Since the barn was the nearest of the buildings, Chick pointed toward it. He had picked up a little distance in his mad, downhill plunge. Now, glancing back, he saw that his pursuers were actually starting to draw rein, convinced apparently that

he was going to make cover. And this gave him heart.

At that very moment a bullet struck him, high in the shoulder. The force of it knocked him spinning out of saddle.

He lit rolling; sky and earth whirled about him in a dizzy kaleidoscope. But necessity brought him clawing back to his feet and he saw that the gaping barn door was only yards away. He staggered on toward it, his enemies spurring harder again at sight of him aground and his horse racing off without him.

Lead clipped the edge of the door's closed leaf as, panting and stumbling, Chick plunged into its shelter. He thought he couldn't have run another step; he lay in loose straw, sobbing for breath, with the fire of his shoulder wound pouring fiercely through him. Still, he wasn't safe yet. The horsemen outside were clattering into the barnyard and it looked as though they would come right in after him.

He raised up, hunting a weapon of any kind. There was nothing handy; only an axehandle leaning against a roof support a few feet away. Chick went scrambling after that, without much hope, and snatched it up.

He climbed to his feet, braced himself with shoulders pressed against the upright and the futile club gripped tightly, as he fought the numb weakness of his hurt. A horseman flashed briefly past the door, raising a film of dust, and driving a shot into the darkness of the barn. Chick saw the muzzle flame; smelled the cordite as the gun spoke only yards away.

And then, somewhere, a screen door slammed and all at once another gun was sounding: the sharp, flat whine of carbine. Neither Stanger nor Dugan, he remembered, had had a saddle gun. Whoever this one belonged to was using it, hard and fast—firing as quick as he could work the lever and kick out the spent shells. Chick counted four shots, and after that a pause that was filled by the startled shouts of his pursuers. An angry voice

cried, "Now, get out of here or I'll put the next one under your hats instead of over them. Go on—scoot! I mean it!"

The bawling voice of Ott Stanger cried, "Don't mix in this! We want that man in there and we mean to take him."

"I don't see any law badges on you," retorted the one with the rifle. It struck Chick Bronson, suddenly, that the voice belonged to a woman—incredible as that seemed. "And if this is some private feud you can get off Lazy F with it. Whoever that man is, I'm blamed if I'll let you have him. He may already be dead!"

Lazy F.... It struck a resounding echo in Chick's dulled brain, but at the moment he couldn't place the memory. He discovered that he had lost his club, that he was down on hands and knees in the straw with the dim interior of the barn revolving slowly about him. His shoulder and whole upper body seemed gripped in fiery pain, and he knew consciousness was slipping from him—even as he realized the desperate plight he was in, the need to stay on his feet and protect himself if that valiant woman couldn't drive his enemies away from him.

He remembered, suddenly, about the *Lazy F*. According to what Stanger had told him, this must be the ranch where a posse had run Ward McCarey to earth and captured him, not many days past. This was the very barn in which McCarey had taken cover—where he must have lain, like Chick himself, hurt and waiting for his enemies to close in on him.

That was as far as he got with his thinking. After that, darkness came over him and he knew no more.

CHAPTER IV

Lazy F

HE LAY ON straw tickin', in a wooden box bunk slung with rawhide. It was dark, but as his senses cleared he saw that this was due to the drawing of a curtain across a window, and that the light

was strong enough beyond it. He looked around, still dazed. This was a bunk room, simply enough furnished, with three other wooden frames, like the one in which he lay, fastened to the walls. None of them were spread with blankets; he was the room's sole occupant. Yonder a door stood slightly ajar but he couldn't see much through the narrow crack.

Chick pushed into a sitting position, and the lancing of pain through his upper body made him gasp a little. His shirt was gone, and there was tight bandaging across his chest and shoulder, on the left side. He felt a bit shaky and yet decided he wasn't hurt badly, because after the first shock of torn and aching muscles he could endure to move all right.

Probably, that bullet had only grooved him and done comparatively small damage to the tissues. He had taken as much punishment from big Dugan's fists. Touching his face, he found court plaster on the cuts there. He could see distinctly out of only one eye; the other was closed nearly shut.

Swinging bare feet over the side of the bunk, he fumbled at the drawn curtain and took a look through the window. He was in the *Lazy F* house; for out there, past an expanse of barren yard and a well, sat the barn where he had been chased by his enemies. A single horse was in the day corral behind the barn; he saw with pleased surprise that it was his own white-stockinged sorrel, which somebody must have caught up and put there for him. From the length of shadows on the distant red-rock rim, he figured the hour as late afternoon. That meant he'd slept out the day in this bunk; certainly, he'd needed it.

There was a table by the window and on it Chick saw a familiar object—his own battered mouth harp, from the pocket of the shirt that the unknown benefactors had cut away to fix his hurt. He picked it up, saw that the reeds were clogged with dirt and putting it to his lips ran the scale to blow the openings free.

He was slapping grit from the instrument against a palm when a footstep in the doorway brought his head up quickly.

"Hullo!" he blurted.

The girl was no beauty but she looked awfully good just then to Chick. She had brown curls and full red lips and a skin that had been tanned darkly by much time spent in the open. There was a stubborn bluntness to her chin, that he thought gave her features a certain strength of character. More important, she was smiling at him, her eyes full of friendly concern; and it was a mighty long time since anyone—man or woman—had looked at Chick Bronson with any other expression than what they might have shown an unpopular stray cur.

She said, "I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever wake up, mister. How do you feel?"

Chick told her, uncertainly, "I dunno yet. I seem to be all of one piece, though my left wing is stiffer than hades. Did you do the job of patching me up, like this?"

"Grandpa did it," she said; and, as though reminded, she turned back to the door and called through it: "Come here, Grampa. He's talking." She added, looking at her guest: "I bet you'd eat something if it was forced on you."

The very mention of food holloed Chick's insides so that he almost clutched the edge of the cot to support himself. "Golly!" he breathed. "I've lost track of the time since I ate...."

"You wait right there!"

She hurried out of the room. Starving after her, he was not too muscle-sore or hungry to be affected by the pleasing shape of her, the unconscious sway of her hips inside a simple but well-fitted house dress. A species of slow astonishment was growing in him; for now he knew beyond any question that he recognized that clear, warm voice of hers. He'd heard it once before, through a haze of pain, as he crouched in the litter of the barn and waited for Dugan and Ott Stanger to come after him and finish him off. This

girl, unbelievably enough, had been the one with the rifle—the one who sent them packing. Chick shook his head, in utter bewilderment.

A MAN CAME into the room, through the doorway the girl had just vacated. He was an old man—incredibly old, and so frail looking you thought you could break him in two with one hand; but he walked as straight as a ramrod and his white-thatched head held the same stubborn carriage as the girl's. He had a snowy beard that reached to the third button of his shirt. He walked in and sat down on a stiff chair facing the bunk, and gave the hurt man a keen, sharp-eyed scrutiny.

He said, "What's your name?"

Chick saw no reason to take offense—with all that these people had done for him, they deserved to ask pointed questions. He answered this one, and continued: "I'm much obliged to you and your granddaughter. It was a bad risk she ran, holding that pair off of me. And afterwards, I suppose, you must have had a lot of trouble carrying me here into the house, and working me over. That's a lot to do, for someone you never seen before; someone that had all the markings of a first class saddle tramp—"

The old man shrugged. "Never mind that, for now. Here's Josie with the grub. Might be an idea if you stopped trying to talk until you'd taken on a little of it."

Grub consisted of a plate of beef stew and biscuits, with wild cherry jam and watermelon pickles and all the coffee he could drink. Josie brought it to him on a tray and he wasted no time tying into it. Since breakfast yesterday morning, in jail—that was how long he'd been waiting for this.

"Shall we have our talk now?" the old man suggested as Chick set aside the depleted tray and sank back, stuffed and satisfied. He tossed his guest a sack of makings to finish off with, and hooked bony, blue-veined hands around his knee. "Freeman is our name, I'm Matt. You're in the

bunkroom of the Lazy F—where our crew sleeps when we can afford to hire one."


Of course, Chick Bronson understood the purpose of that comment. The old man was taking care to remind him that times were tough and that it wouldn't do any good to ask here for a job; he knew a grubline rider when he saw one, and he aimed to begin by being plain discouraging. Chick went on with the cigarette he was building, feeling no particular resentment.

"You don't look so hot, fellow," Matt Freeman remarked, as he looked at the other critically. "They must have used a meat grinder on that face of yours. Can you see out of your left eye, at all?"

Chick touched the puffed and swollen cheek, and winced. "Just barely!"

Josie Freeman had returned from carrying out the tray of dirty dishes, and she stood behind her grandfather's chair, looking at their visitor with sympathy. It seemed to him they deserved an explanation, after the trouble he had cost them, so he told them the story briefly—about Ward McCarey's missing loot, and the saloon owner's unfounded belief that Chick knew its hiding place, and the measures that had been taken to try and force information out of him.

He ended, "This ranch was the only hope I saw of getting away before they finished me. I never meant to put anybody in danger, by heading for it. I guess it's the second time in a matter of a week you've had a manhunt staged in your barn!"

 LD FREEMAN nodded, clawing at his beard. "Yes, it was there that McCarey holed up when they run him to earth. That's a sort of coincidence, although our ranch being the first you hit on the rim trail into the valley, I guess it ain't so odd, at that—I mean, you both picking our haybarn for a hiding place.

"We didn't either of us happen to be around when McCarey snuck in, but we heard the posse's shootin'

from a distance and that brought us in a hurry. They were all over the yard, bayin' like hounds on a warm trail. McCarey had been bad hurt and at the last I guess he wasn't too careful about buying his sign. They run him down, all right, and drug him out—too weak to put up a fight. I got no idea at all what he could have done with the money."

The younger man heard this version of the story with great interest, though it didn't really add a great deal to what he had already pieced together. He rubbed a hand across his scalp.

"Well," he said, "I guess there's no call for me to be sitting here any longer. I've been on your hands long enough; and I feel a hundred per cent better since that grub started working inside me."

The girl said, "It may not be so easy leaving here. You haven't forgotten your two enemies?"

He looked up at her, startled. "Are they still after me?" he exclaimed.

"They've been waiting in the brush, all day long. I've kept an eye out, and caught glimpses of them now and again. Nothing I could use the carbine on—they're too careful for that, of course. But they're out there."

Chick twisted quickly and pawed aside the window curtain, for another look at the sea of sage and bunch grass that stretched away beyond the barn and the well in the ranchyard. A wind was rising, in the tail end of afternoon, and it tossed the sage clumps so that you couldn't have told whether anyone was hidden there or not; but with a bitter certainty settling within him Chick knew the girl was right.

Ott Stanger wouldn't give up so easily. He hadn't dared rush the house, in the face of the girl's carbine, but he could see to it that his escaped prisoner didn't try to leave. And with nightfall, he and Dugan might attempt something more drastic.

After all, there was no one here but a hurt cowhand, an old man, and a girl. Fifty thousand dollars was at stake, according to the sa-

loonman's figuring, and come dark he would make his play. Chick felt sure of this; and he was also certain that he couldn't expose Josie Freeman and her grandfather to any further risk.

SWEATING a little, he looked at the two of them. "I gotta get out of here!"

"You haven't a gun," the girl pointed out. "And we've nothing but the carbine. You could take that, but with your hurt shoulder you're probably not strong enough to sit a saddle long!"

"Keep the carbine," he told her quickly. "I wouldn't want to deprive you of your only protection. And don't worry about me—I'll wait until it turns dark and see if I can't figure a way to sneak past that pair; after all, there's only two of them and they can't cover all sides of the ranch."

"And once you get through them?" the old man prompted.

"That depends.... There's a gent somewhere in this valley who'll give me help, I think, if I can only manage to reach him. Maybe you folks can tell me where I'd be most apt to find Vince Kimbrough...."

He was utterly unprepared for what happened then. It was as though a kind of chill came across the room, like a cloud passing the sun; its shadow touched the faces of the Freemans and, watching, Chick saw them stiffen. He saw Josie's firm brown hands tighten on the back of her grandfather's chair.

Josie answered him, the words bursting from her and tense with some unnamed feeling: "Is Kimbrough a friend of yours? Is that—?"

The old man broke in quickly, one blue-veined hand lifted to silence her. He sounded stiff and formal and, somehow, tired as he answered Chick Bronson's question.

"It ain't hard to find Vince Kimbrough. Generally, town is the place he hangs out. Got an office there. Anybody can direct you—if you're sure you want to find him!"

Abruptly, then, he stood up, and there was a finality about his whole

manner now. "I reckon we've talked as much as will do us any good. You look like you need more rest. Josie and I will keep watch on that pair in the brush, and when dusk comes you can leave."


He looked at the girl; she nodded and slipped out of the room, not meeting again Chick Bronson's stunned glance. A moment later the old man followed, his back stiff and his white-thatched head held high. The door closed behind them, and Chick was left alone with his bemused and puzzled thoughts.

As quick as that—with the bare mention of Vince Kimbrough's name—the atmosphere had changed, and these people lost all their friendly interest in him. Sitting there on the edge of the cot, he could only shake his head and wonder.

The grubline trail he followed had certainly got twisted and complicated, in these few hours since he slipped Ward McCarey's lucky peso into his jeans....

CHAPTER V

Escape

 LD MATT FREEMAN was at least right about one thing—despite the rest he'd had, Chick was still weak from the shock of his hurt shoulder and the weight of food in his stomach made him groggy. He lay back on the cot and presently even slept a little, fretfully; but even then his mind was busy and his thoughts were feverish, grotesque.

He woke to a lurid, reddish light that filled the room and, sitting up, peered through the window and saw that sunset was on the world. The dying of day had brought a sheet of tumbled cloud across the sky. Against the western horizon the sun lay heavily, a swollen drop of blood behind that broken layer of tattered gray. Shadows were already spreading through the windwhipped stretch of sage beyond the ranch yard.

Chick Bronson rose and prepared

to attempt an escape from the Lazy F.

In the kitchen, which opened off the bunkroom, Josie Freeman had a lamp lighted and was working with pots and pans, preparing supper. The shades were drawn and Matt prowled from one window to another, peering out into the growing, windy darkness. The old man didn't even look at Chick Bronson; the girl had little enough to say to him.

At his request she poured out a basin of hot water and, using Matt's razor, Chick worked carefully at his tender face, scraping off a much of his beard as he could manage; though when he was through it looked patchy enough, with its squares of court plaster and blotched, livid bruises. Josie had brought him a shirt, too, that belonged to her grandfather. Taking it, Chick tried to thank her but she turned away, without answering.

His jaw set hard. These people had clearly lost all their liking for him and were now being no more than coldly civil; he felt that they were in a hurry for him to be gone and leave them alone, and he made up his mind that he would oblige them just as quickly as he could manage.

He put on the new shirt, replacing the bloody ruin they'd had to cut off him in tending to his wound. He felt in his jeans pocket to make sure the lucky dollar was still there, that would be his introduction and token of assistance from Vince Kimbrough. He checked on his other few belongings; then, taking his shapeless Stetson from the back of a chair, he returned to the kitchen.

Josie Freeman stood by the big range, looking at him with a kind of sullen animosity. "I've got coffee ready," she said, in a dull voice.

He shook his head. He'd taken enough from these people. "No, thanks, I reckon I'll be going now. Any sign of them?" he asked, turning to old Matt.

Freeman, at a window, shook his grizzled head without turning. "They're still someplace around. They keep circling the place. But

it's so dark outside now I've lost 'em."

The girl said, "I went out a little while ago and tied your horse to the corral gate—I thought it would be easier for you to saddle him that way."

He showed his appreciation for her clear thinking. "Why, that's fine," said Chick, and going to the door, lifted the latch; with his hand on it, he looked at the girl, and nodded to the lamp burning yellowly on the center table.

"If you'll douse the light just for a minute, until I can get the door open and shut again...."

A minute later he was on the roofed-over porch, with the door closed between him and the warm security of the kitchen. Shoulders against the rough clapboards of the house siding, he felt the wind pull at him, heard it rattle a loose shingle overhead and sigh among the eaves, and an uneasy jumpiness began kicking in his belly.

Somewhere, in the windy darkness, two men were waiting, listening for sound of him. And remembering Ott Stanger's gun and the man-breaking fists of big Dugan, the sweat came out upon his face and the palms of his hands. He didn't want to leave this shelter—he didn't want to walk out there to meet that danger a second time. But he had it to do.

HE WIPED his slick palms across his jeans, as he probed the shadows with eyes that were gradually accustoming themselves to it after the lampglow of the kitchen. Not that there was much that anyone could see, in a night so devoid of any gleam of starlight. Mainly by guesswork, he fixed the location of the corral and started for it, stepping high and feeling his way with the greatest caution.

It didn't help any to know that the corral was one place they would most surely be watching for him.

His outstretched hand found one of the rough wooden bars and he trailed along it, hunting the gate. An iron-shod hoof stomped the dust. He murmured, anxiously, "Easy, horse!"

He found the end of the rope, where Josie had tied it. He slipped between the bars, and at his sorrel's side patted the twitching flank a time or two, saying, "Let's be quiet about this!"

Blanket and saddle were racked across the top pole near the gate, the bridle hooked to the horn. Chick located them and got them on the gelding, working by feel. When everything was ready he unhooked the gate and swung it open—and it gave forth a long-drawn, dismal creaking sound that turned him cold with horror.

Frozen motionless, he waited to see what would happen but nothing did. Maybe the noise hadn't been as loud as it had seemed to overwrought nerves; or maybe it had failed to carry any distance above the whipping of the wind. After a moment of this agonized waiting, he decided there was nothing to do but move ahead.

He took the bridle, and walked forward through the gate leading the sorrel.

The ground slanted away a little in front of him; at the very bottom of the slope, he knew, the brush began. He had decided that if he got that far without stirring trouble, he would then mount and take his chances in flight. But crossing this open space—maybe moving straight toward a waiting gun—the less target he could make by staying on the ground the better he figured his chances. And so he went ahead like that at a cautious prow, leading the sorrel, and searching every sound in the windy darkness for the presence of his enemies.

It seemed to him that time had halted. The blackness distorted distances. After a few rods he couldn't say how far he had traveled or how much ground lay between him and the dubious haven of the brush. He did know that he had left the hard-packed surface of the ranch yard behind him and that bunch grass brushed the tops of his boots now. Once he glanced back toward the house and saw the dim square of the shade-drawn kitchen window, and

it was so far above and behind him that he was surprised to see how much ground he must actually have covered.

Moments later, his sorrel's iron shoe struck some wooden object and booted it away, with a startling clatter. And somewhere within yards of him, the voice of Big Dugan exclaimed: "Hey! What's that?"

Chick Bronson dropped at once to his haunches, horrified at the thought that he had almost stumbled into the big man. He crouched like that, listening, and after an endless, trembling moment Dugan's voice came again, in hoarse whisper: "Boss! That you, Boss?"

A fiery constriction in his chest told Chick Bronson that he was holding onto his breath, and he let it out, slowly. His hand, as he groped to balance himself, touched something hard then. It was a length of wood, his fumbling fingers told him—a spoke from an old wagon wheel. This must have been what the sorrel's shoe had struck, to betray him. Hardly even thinking, he picked the thing up and tested its balance.

THE FEEL of the crude, heavy club put a thrill of reborn confidence in him, poor a weapon as it was; at least, it was a weapon, and until that moment he'd had nothing. Silently he shifted the reins to his left hand, cradled the splintered length of wood in his right; silently he came up onto the balls of his feet, hefting it.

Once more—louder, this time—big Dugan called: "Boss?" And, getting no answer, fired.

He had misplaced the origin of the sound he'd heard, so that his shot was far off. The stab of muzzle-flash showed him standing with big legs wide-spread, body crouched above the gun, his horse a black shape behind him. He was perhaps a dozen yards away.

Chick drove himself hurtling forward with a lunge of cramped leg muscles, letting the club fly at arm's length in a wide, flailing swing. If the first blow failed he knew there would be small chance of getting in

a second one. But it didn't fail. He felt the impact as it struck home against solid bone; a sound of pain broke from big Dugan's lips.

Then Chick was swept off his own feet by the carry-through of the swing, losing the club completely. Hastily he scrambled forward, and found himself pawing at Dugan's crumpled body. The big man was motionless—not dead, but knocked out by the blow.

He sank back, shaky from the closeness of the thing, his wounded arm hurting. Still, there wasn't time to relax; for Ott Stanger would have heard that shot.

Chick stirred himself and began hunting the weapon Dugan had dropped when he fell. He couldn't find it, though he groped for it in widening circles over the black ground. The blow of the club must have sent it spinning.

He slapped the other's pockets in the faint hope of finding a second gun, but there was none. And now, above the whipping of wind in the brush close by, the thud of hoofs sounded, drawing quickly nearer.

Frantic, and giving up the search, he scrambled to his feet. The sorrel had spooked a few yards but he groped his way to it and caught the reins before it could move farther away. He got the stirrup, shoved his toe in and swung up. That other rider was quite close now.

An inspiration drove Chick forward, jumping his sorrel into the brush beyond Ed Dugan's prone shape. Dimly he saw the man's horse and he rode straight at it, whipping off his battered Stetson. With a yell he brought the hat down on its rump; and that was all the scared pony needed to send it off at a hard gallop, cutting straight through the thick brush.

YONDER OTT Stanger heard the crashing and he let out a bawl of excitement: "Ed! Ed, where are you? Damn it, he's getting away. Stop him!"

Reining in to hold his sorrel quiet, Chick waited. And he heard the sounds of Stanger's bronc veer

sharply, take off in the wake of the galloping horse. As he listened to crashing sounds both animals made shouldering through the dry brush, a grin split the pinched, taut-muscled planes of his face.

"I'd thought he was too smart a fish to rise to that bait!" he grunted.

At best, it was only a minute or two that the trick had gained him; the loose-running horse would likely soon get its trailing reins hooked up and Stanger would learn what he had gone chasing after, and then he'd be back. Quickly, Chick pulled his sorrel around and gave him a kick. He started away from there at a good pace, cutting a wide angle from the direction the other horses had taken.

The lights of the Lazy F, at the base of the slope, dwindled behind him and finally dropped from sight, as the brush-choked bunch grass hills intervened. After that he was all alone, with the scudding clouds over head and the stiff, chill wind slapping against him. At intervals he reined in and keened that wind for horse-sound, hearing nothing but the noises of the night.

Still, he couldn't feel safe; after each pause he kept pushing ahead some more, riding blind in these unknown, chopped-up valley bottomlands. His only impulse was to put so much distance between himself and that other pair, from whom lucky circumstance had freed him, as to earn some measure of confidence that he wouldn't fall into their hands again.

At last some of his panic settled and he pulled rein to let his tired horse take a blow. Even so he found himself starting for a quick look around him, at every unexpected noise in the gusty darkness. The third time this happened he hauled himself up, figuratively speaking, by the nape of the neck.

"Come on!" he told himself, scornfully. "Catch holt of yourself! You've lost them now, and after the clubbing you gave that Dugan gent it's not likely he's even come to yet. So forget 'em both! The main thing

now is to try and find a way into town. It's no night to spend in the open—not with the rain that's blowing in behind that wind!"

An occasional warning drop had already lashed at him, cold and stinging against his face and the backs of his hands. Chick Bronson shook out the leathers. Going by instinct, he pushed ahead, using every rise of land as a vantage point from which to search the darkness ahead for light which should mark the buildings of Lost Wolf.

CHAPTER VI

A Job

HE FOUND the town, eventually, but the storm found him first. It hit with a fury of wind-driven icy arrows, and added the final discomfort to Chick Bronson's bruised and bullet-torn soreness. Caught without a slicker, he hunched suddenly, in the saddle, quickly chilled to the bone. His hurt arm ached. He was wondering if he would ever be comfortable again when, quite unexpectedly, the trackless course he was following took him across the shoulder of a juniper-clad ridge, and through the gnarled and dripping branches he caught his first glimpse of the town-lights scattered below.

A grunt of lifted hope broke from his chilled body, and he gave the sorrel a kick. Minutes later, having maneuvered the tricky descent of the slope, he dropped at last into a level wagon road angling across the ridge and this took him finally into the head of the main street itself.

It was nothing more than a cow-country center, like a hundred Chick had seen during these last, disheartening months of hunting a job. It lay on a bank of the river, a huddle of buildings along a criss cross of wide streets, the latter turning muddy now and the rain making long, glancing spears of brightness wherever it crossed a lighted window. But it looked wonderful to Chick Bronson, after all he'd gone through reaching this place.

Nevertheless, he knew his first

qualm of misgiving. He had nothing, after all, but that battered silver dollar in his pocket, and McCarey's vague promise that it would stand him in good stead with this unknown Vince Kimbrough. It seemed suddenly foolish, to have banked so heavily on such slim assets. But he possessed no others.

The streets were almost deserted. Chick stopped a lone passerby that went slogging past him and, leaning from saddle, asked, "Where would I find a man named Kimbrough?"

This question earned him a curious look. "Tried his office?"

"No. Where is it?"

"Middle of the next block. If you don't find him there, you might ask at the Bull's Head—he owns that, too."

Chick said thanks and rode on, searching now for something that looked like an office. He found the place at last—a small, box-shaped structure with a sign that was dimly visible through the rain: KIMBROUGH LAND AND CATTLE COMPANY. The windows were dark, however. A little further on, and across the road, a saloon made a splash of light and noise; he decided that might be what he was looking for, and angled toward it.

And it was the Bull's Head—a big, two-storied frame structure, standing with its back to the silent flow of the river. Chick Bronson put his sorrel among the few other bronses that stood hump-shouldered, tails into the storm, and swung down to wrap stiff rein-leathers about the soggy pole. He reached into a pocket, fumbled out the battered silver dollar.

"Well, better wish me luck, pony!" he grunted. "What happens now determines whether you get anything to eat, and a warm stall tonight!"

He clumped across the walk and up the three steps to the double glass doors.

The Bull's Head was not very lively. A pair of men stood at the bar, talking quietly over their drinks. Four or five more were clustered around a card table, near the big iron stove that had a fire crackling in it

against the chill of the rainy evening. A mechanical piano jangled away but no one appeared to be listening.

A few heads had lifted as the door opened, but after a curious glance at the bedraggled stranger they turned away. Chick pulled off his soggy hat, beat it against his leg to knock some of the wet out of it, and dragged it on again. Then, dribbling a trail of water from his dripping clothes, he walked over to the bar.

The bartender was a mean-eyed individual, and something in his chill regard put Chick in mind of the welcome he'd got last time, in Ott Stanger's place. He swallowed, and gave the man a nod that he tried to make pleasant and at the same time businesslike.

"Is Mr. Kimbrough around?"

SLOWLY, THE barkeep's fishy stare traveled the length of this stranger's shabby figure. The thick lip curled. "No handouts, bud!"

Chick felt the flush begin to creep up into his battered features. "This isn't a handout," he retorted. "I want to see him about a—a business matter."

"Likely!" snorted the bartender. But now one of the other pair of men standing at the bar interrupted before Chick had to make an answer.

"It's all right, Joe. I'll talk to him."

Chick turned quickly, guessing that this was Vince Kimbrough himself. He saw a tall and gaunted figure, with heavy brows and a prominent nose and dug-out cheeks, and a long, clean-shaven jaw. His hair was thick, graying at the temples. His eyes were gray, too, and brooding, his deep voice mild. Vince Kimbrough gave you the impression of great reserve; no man was apt to know very clearly what went on behind his high and bony forehead. Had he worn a beard, Chick thought he would have looked considerably like Abraham Lincoln.

He said, pleasantly, "Just what was it you wanted?"

"Why—" Chick Bronson took in

a long breath, decided on his approach. "To buy you a drink, Mr. Kimbrough." And he placed Ward McCarey's battered lucky dollar onto the shiny mohagony between them.

Vince Kimbrough's bushy brows drew into a frown. He looked at Chick, and at the coin. And then he picked the dollar up, turned it over in his long and tapered fingers; the bar lamps glinted light, from the spot where a bullet had pitted the silver.

The gray eyes lifted, speared Chick Bronson's. "This belongs to Ward McCarey—and McCarey is in jail. What are you doing with it?"

In the fewest possible words, Chick told him the story. Kimbrough heard him out, with that brooding expression settling deeper about his mouth and the gaunted lines of his hollow cheeks. He shook his head as the other finished.

"Too bad—too bad!" he said, darkly. "I'm sorry about Ward. He was a good man, but foolish in his way; like so many others, he thought he could stay ahead of the game—he couldn't see that, going on that way, knocking off one bank after another, he was bound to have a poor ending.

"I wish there was something that could have been done, but once he let himself get caught—and with a murder charge on his head—it was too late. They'll hang him, now; while other men, and worse ones, will get rich and die in bed of old age because they had just a little more brains!"

Then, throwing off this mood with a shrug, Kimbrough turned his attention once more to the man beside him. "So you're looking for a job," he said, and his voice and his smile were suddenly friendly. "Well, if McCarey promised with practically his last breath that I would help you, I certainly don't see how I can let him down! But in the meantime, what about that face of yours? And your hurt arm? Looks to me the first thing you need is to see a doctor!"

"It's all right. The people out at the Lazy F were real kind to me, and fixed me up. They did a good job."

HHE THOUGHT Kimbrough's glance deepened a little. "Lazy F? That's the Freemans, I guess you mean. . . ." He didn't pursue the subject, but asked instead, "Where did you get so bad beat up? In that jail?"

Briefly, Chick explained what had really happened. And Vince Kimbrough's expressive face turned thunderous under the heavy brows.

"I know Ott Stanger!" he grunted. "And if he understands what's good for him he'll keep his small-town crookedness away from this valley! I won't put up with him!"

"That gorilla of his, Ed Dugan, is pretty dangerous," Chick observed.

"Bob Creel, here, is dangerous himself!" Vince Kimbrough nodded toward the man with whom he had been drinking at the bar.

Creel was a slight man, no bigger than Chick, and with a wrinkled, sun-darkened visage whose age was hard to determine. If he was dangerous, Chick decided, it would have to be in a different way from the bruising muscular power of the brute, Dugan. And then, looking into the man's cold, slate-blue eyes and at the gun strapped down against his slabby thigh, Chick thought he could guess where the danger lay.

"They'd better not think they're going to get away with anything here," Kimbrough was saying. "Right, Bob?"

Unsmiling, the gunman nodded. There seemed to be a complete understanding between these two, and Chick began to wonder a little if Bob Creel might be on the other's payroll. It hardly seemed possible that so quiet-spoken and seemingly sincere a man as Vince Kimbrough should feel the need of a bodyguard. But then he remembered, in a flash, the way the Freemans had acted at mention of Kimbrough's name, and it created in him a moment's confusion.

Still, he supposed, that was how it would always be. Let a man rise in the world and there were always others bound to resent and hate him for it. . . .

Now Vince Kimbrough shoved back toward Chick the battered

lucky dollar, and to the man behind the bar he said, "Give him his drink, Joe. On me." He reached into the inside pocket of his sack coat, drew out a long leather wallet and removed a couple of bills from it, placed them on the bar in front of the stranger. They were twenties, Chick saw, and his eyes boggled slightly.

"This should do you for tonight," said Kimbrough. "Get a place to sleep and a meal under your belt. I still think, too, you had better see that doctor. Tell him I sent you."

Chick swallowed, not yet touching the money. "I meant just what I said, Mr. Kimbrough. I didn't come here for a handout. It's a job I want—a chance to earn my way—"

His benefactor cut him off with a smile and the wave of a hand. "Of course," he said. "I understand that. Believe me—if I didn't think you were worth my help I wouldn't give it, even to please Ward McCarey's ghost."

"There's something about you I like, Bronson, and I can usually find ways to use a good man. You look me up tomorrow morning, and we'll see what we can work up in the nature of a job."

Chick Bronson nodded. "Yessir," he said, lamely, his gratitude past forming itself in words. "I—I want you to know I—"

But another smiling shake of the head dismissed his attempt at thanks. Vince Kimbrough walked away a moment to watch the card players; and Chick Bronson picked up the two twenty dollar bills, feeling their crispness with fingers that trembled a little at his good fortune as he folded them, stowed them away in a pocket of his rain-soaked jeans. A shot glass of whiskey had been placed before him and he nodded to the bartender, lifted the drink and downed it slowly.

Ward McCarey's silver dollar still lay before him. He took it up, turned it over between his fingers, and tossed it thoughtfully on his palm. For Chick Bronson, at least, it was indeed proving itself a lucky charm!

CHAPTER VII

Off The Grubline Trail

WITH THE drink warm inside him he left the Bull's Head, a considerably lighter-hearted man than the friendless derelict who had entered a few minutes earlier. Money in the pocket, and the promise of a job however indefinite the nature of it still remained—these were enough to open an entire new world; and his good fortune in meeting Vince Kimbrough had Chick almost unconscious of the driving, needling rain which had so tormented him before.

His first concern was for the sorrel gelding, waiting miserable and droop-headed at the hitching rack outside. After the patient animal had been taken care of, would be time enough to think about his own belly—empty again, the generous grub he'd eaten at the Freeman's having worn itself out—and a hotel and a warm, dry bed. For tomorrow, he'd rely on his luck and on Vince Kimbrough's promise.

He untied the sorrel, climbed into the wet saddle and went looking through the rain for a public stable. A lantern swaying above the wide doors and wooden ramp led him to one a block from the river.

As Chick rode into the musty interior a man in horsey-smelling overalls came out of the cubby hole office at the front of the barn. Giving a suspicious look to the stranger's outfit, he muttered something about payment in advance; but his expression changed when Bronson dug out one of the twenties and offered it to him.

"Hell's bells, mister!" the night barnman grunted. "I ain't got no change for that kind of money. Pay me when you leave."

He started to take the sorrel, but Chick said, "I'll look after him myself. Just tell me where to put him."

"Any stall that's empty." The man clumped back into his room, and Chick proceeded to take care of the gelding.

The bridle leathers and the latigo were stiff to his numbed fingers, the

blanket soggy and heavy with soaked up moisture. He got them hung up, and pailed out oats from the bin, and gave the gelding's gaunt barrel and legs a quick rubdown. "There," he said, that finished. "Maybe now you'll feel less like you belong to a no-good tramp!"

He tossed aside the gunnysack he'd used, straightened reaching for his coat that he'd thrown across the stall partition while he worked. Shrugging into it, he walked out of the stall, leaving his starved horse muzzling busily at the grain—and saw Ott Stanger and big Ed Dugan in the straw-littered runway, waiting for him.

Somehow, in the changes of the last half hour, he had almost lost sight of that pair; had almost forgotten that, even here in town, he wasn't necessarily free of danger. He stopped dead in his tracks, a sick horror rising in him. Motionless and sinister, they stood with the yellow light of a wall lantern gleaming on rain-shiny black slickers, on the six-gun in Ott Stanger's fingers.

"Put the gear back on him!" growled the saloon man. "You're coming with us!"

Chick swallowed without effect at the constriction in his throat. He noticed that big Dugan had a piece of white rag tied about his skull, just visible beneath down-pulled hat-brim; and the rag was stained with blood. The big man saw him staring at it and his lips curled.

"Yeah—you see what you done to me!" growled Dugan, in a voice that was thick with hatred. "You'll pay for it, too!"

"First, though," Stanger cut in, "you'll take us to that money. And there'll be no foolishness this time—no tricks! One more phony move, and it'll be the last you ever make. I guess you see by now you aren't going to get away from us!"

Somehow, Chick Bronson found his voice. He thought of the man in the barn office, up toward the front of the building; but there was no chance of calling for help. What he said was, "You might as well go ahead and kill me, then. I was only

stalling you. I don't know a blame thing about the money!"

His hopes had lifted so high after his talk with Vince Kimbrough that now, finding himself right back in the hands of this pair, his tired spirits took a plummeting drop into despair and the irony of the thing left him beaten, almost indifferent. They couldn't hurt him much more than they had already, he reasoned, dully; let them get it over with, since it was plain he could not really hope to escape.

"You don't get off so easy," said Dugan. "Not after the trouble you've given us!"

HIS BIG hands lifted, the fingers crooking and twisting into fists. He took a step toward Chick Bronson, and the latter only stood and watched him moving in.

Then a voice said, into the taut stillness: "Hold it—right where you are, big boy! Stanger, you can drop that gun and step away from it!"

A shock went through the pair of them, visibly. Slowly, their heads turned; and past them, Chick stared as the gunman, Bob Creel, eased into view around a partition. Creel's weapon was leveled in lean, iron-hard fingers, its muzzle trained straight at Stanger's slicker-clad shape. Creel's slate-blue eyes were narrowed dangerously, his tight mouth quirked in a ferocious, humorless smile.

"Don't make any mistakes," he warned, quietly. "Just do like you're told!"

Either they knew Creel by reputation, or they read the warning of peril in his voice and in the catlike grace of his movements. There was no argument. While Ed Dugan stood just as he was, in mid-stride, hands half raised, his boss let his drawn weapon thump against the straw-littered boards of the aisle. Then, at a gesture of Creel's gunbarrel, he moved back where there would be no temptation to change his mind and try to reach the discarded sixgun.

"Pick it up, Bronson," Bob Creel suggested. "After that, see what kind of artillery the big guy has on him."

Chick obeyed, hurriedly. He breathed a lot easier as soon as he felt the butt of the weapon against his palm. He moved over to Dugan, jerked open the man's slicker and lifted the gun from the holster strapped about his middle, beneath the garment. Dugan had evidently had better luck than he, hunting for it in the brush.

To play safe, he also checked Ott Stanger for a hideout gun but found him clean. He told Creel, "That's it, I guess. They took my gun from me but I don't find it on either of them. I guess they must have thrown it away."

"Why, in that case," grunted the gunman, his smile widening, "I think they should make it good to you. Do you like one of those?"

Chick looked down at the guns he was holding. "Well," he admitted, uncertainly, "This silver handled job I took off Ott Stanger is just the kind of a gun I've always wanted to own."

"Keep it, then!" And as Ott Stanger surged forward, bellowing protest, Creel shut him up with a crisp warning.

"You ain't runing the show now, Stanger! You've beat hell out of this young fellow and you owe him something!" He looked at Chick Bronson. "Go on, kid! Pocket the gun—and while I'm holding them, why don't you go ahead and give these skunks back some of their own medicine? Have yourself a little fun!"

CHICK LOOKED at the dark face of Stanger, that was missing some of its old arrogance now. He thought with pleasure of a fist smashing against that cruel mouth, flattening that hawkish nose like a ripe tomato; but he shook his head.

"I guess I don't need that kind of revenge," he said, "if they'll just get the heck away from me and let me alone! But I think I will keep the gun!" He added, "I want to thank you, mister, for turning up when you did!"

"Thank Kimbrough! He figured this pair would likely have the nerve to trail you into town and make a

try at you, and he told me to keep my eyes open."

Bob Creel turned to his prisoners. "All right, you've got five minutes. Use them to get out of this town—and don't show yourselves here again. The boss has already told you, a time or two, that he wouldn't stand for you meddling in his affairs, Stanger!"

"Nobody can run me around!" cried Ott Stanger.

Creel's enigmatic smile only widened. "A big shot, back home—but you're not home here in Lost Wolf. And those five minutes are ticking off, fast!"

Even though he was in no position to argue, it actually seemed as though the saloonman would defy the ultimatum; but finally he lifted shoulders in a shrug, and turning away threw a look at his man. "Let's go!" he grunted.

Dugan obeyed, though with pure murder in his ugly face. Under the menace of Bob Creel's gun, the two went clumping down the aisle of the stable, wet ponchos swishing. There was a side door by which they'd entered the building. They disappeared through this, and after a moment came the sound of a couple of horses, striking off through the stormy night. These sounds quickly faded; and, nodding satisfaction, Bob Creel let his sixgun off cock, shoved it back into a hand-tooled leather holster.

A long breath escaped from Chick Bronson. His own hand was shaky, as he thrust the captured, silver-budded sixshooter behind the waistband of his trousers. Looking at the other man he said, "Things happen too fast for me! I hope you, and Mr. Kimbrough, don't have any trouble because of me—"

"Forget it!" said Creel. "This ain't the first time we've tangled with Ott Stanger. He'd like nothin' better than to spread over onto this range—only, he never will as long as Vince Kimbrough is around to keep him out!"

He laid a friendly hand on Chick Bronson's shoulder. "Don't you worry about a thing, kid. I can tell when the boss likes a man, and I don't

mind saying he's taken a liking to you. You're in!"

"Well, that—that's fine!" said Chick. "Swell! Only—" He blurted out a thing that was troubling him. "Do you suppose Mr. Kimbrough could think the way Stranger does—that I'm holding out about that fifty thousand? That I really do know where Ward McCarey hid it? I swear I'm telling the truth!"

"Listen, kid! The one thing Vince Kimbrough ain't got any use for is a liar. If he didn't think you were playing square with him—right across the board—he wouldn't have another thing to do with you. That answer your question?"

Chick Bronson nodded. "I reckon."

"All right. Shove a good meal under your belt—maybe let the doc look you over—and then get some sleep. Come morning, things will look a lot different to you."

"They look different already," Chick admitted. "Just to know I won't be ridin' the grubline...."

CHAPTER VIII

Saddle-Tramp

HE SLEPT long and hard and when he finally levered himself out of a bed at the hotel it was to find that he felt at least a hundred per cent better. The bullet-hurt shoulder was still stiff and needing to be favored; but his face, as reflected in the streaked mirror nail-hung above the washstand, had lost a good deal of its swelling, and much of the battered soreness had left his body. His breakfast appetite was enormous.

Filling his lungs at the window, he looked out over the streets and houses of the little town, over the shining river that poured rain-swollen beneath the plank bridge and curled in a band of molten sunlight across the rolling valley bottoms. Last night's storm had blown itself out, but today would be cooler because of it—full of wind, and sun, and scudding cloud-shadow. He hoped it would prove a good day for him.

Determined to make a presentable appearance when he reported to Vince Kimbrough at the latter's office, Chick located a barber shop as soon as he had eaten, and ordered the clippers run through his shaggy mop of hair. Afterwards, at a dry goods emporium, he proceeded to equip himself with a new outfit to replace his worn-out duds.

This took much of the forty dollars Kimbrough had advanced him; but he felt now he looked at least half way human, in new denim jacket and jeans, with copper rivets shining as though polished, and a red-checked shirt and blue cotton neckerchief. He hadn't been able to promote a new hat, but he'd picked up a pair of second-hand boots that were better than the ones he had been wearing. The tag of a Bull Durham sack dangled from his shirt pocket, and the gun he had taken off Ott Stranger was stowed away in a pocket of the jumper.

When he walked into the land company office it was to find Vince Kimbrough ready to leave, and giving a few last-minute instructions to an elderly clerk who sat writing at a desk stacked high with account books and important looking papers. A wide-brimmed, high-crowned black hat accented the gauntness of Kimbrough's dugout cheeks as he nodded greeting.

"Their figure is too high," he said, finishing his business with the clerk. "Tell them to come down three cents on the pound and I might deal. As it is, there's plenty of cattle, in better condition than that Arrowhead stock, that's begging for a buyer; and I'm holding more now than I've got grass to feed."

Turning to Chick, then, and buttoning a dark alpaca coat across his gaunt frame, he said, "I'm just riding out to see about some property—looks as though I'd make a deal this morning. So I'm afraid I won't be able to talk to you now." He glanced over the new clothes. "You're some improved! That must have taken quite a chunk of money I advanced you; do you need any more?" He started to reach for his wallet.

Chick Bronson assured him quickly, "There's a little of it left. I don't want to take any more from you until that job is settled, and I'm sure I'm going to be able to earn it."

The other nodded approval. "Stick around then—and if I close this deal for the Barnes property there'll be a job for you all right. On second thought," he added, "maybe you better come along. I might need you to witness the signing of some papers. Get your horse, will you? And join me here as quick as possible."

"Sure thing, Mr. Kimbrough."

Returning from the livery, he found his new boss mounted on a sleek, deep-barreled palomino that showed money and breeding in every line. Bob Creel was there, as well, and the three of them rode out of town along the river road, under the busy, windy sky.

"By the way, young fellow," Kimbrough remarked suddenly. "I wonder if you heard the news about your friend McCarey?"

Something in the somberness of the man's tone made Chick swing a startled look at him. "What news?"

"A rider came in this morning who'd just been through that country, and he told us. McCarey tried to make a break, while the sheriff's escort was taking him back to Three Pines. They killed him."

"Killed—?" Chick echoed the word and then speech choked off in him. Bob Creel put his comment into the stunned silence:

"That must have been near as bad as hanging—to go out with a bullet in the lung. Funny thing, too: It took him right through the pocket of his shirt, where he always used to carry that lucky dollar piece—"

"Shut up, Bob!" exclaimed Kimbrough, sharply.

BUT THE damage had been done, and Chick Bronson could feel the color draining from his face. He thought, in horror: That blamed silver coin! If Ward McCarey hadn't given it away.

"Don't think about it," Kimbrough advised him, in quiet sympathy and understanding of his unvoiced

thoughts. "How can we know about these things? It might not have made any difference; with so many guns against him, one or another was bound to tag him out. And I know he'd rather have taken it quick, than to hang."

For a long time no one spoke, after that, as they went ahead at an easy, reaching gait across the bunch grass swells. But despite anything that could have been said, the silver dollar in Chick Bronson's pocket was like a heavy weight, dragging upon his conscience....

It soon became evident to Chick that all the grass they saw this side of the river was the common graze of certain small-tally outfits similar to the Lazy F; while he gathered that Vince Kimbrough, through his land and cattle operations, controlled most of the range westward of the Lost Wolf, to the cedar benches and timbered foothills beyond. The Barnes place was one of these smaller spreads, apparently, about on a par with the Freeman ranch but not as well kept up.

The few buildings, of log and tarpaper construction, sat among a scatter of pines near a runneling creek. The corrals were small and inadequate, and a rusty pile of empty tins had grown in the yard, within easy throwing distance of the window beneath the stovepipe chimney. Chick guessed from the look of things that Homer Barnes was a solitary—a bachelor. If there had been a woman hereabouts she surely would have made some impression upon the slovenly look of the ranch.

Barnes himself, when he came slouching into the door of the house to greet his visitors, seemed a man wholly fitted to his surroundings—loose-strung, lantern-jawed, with a shiftless, beaten air about him. Seeing who his callers were, he showed his teeth in a weak grin and, scratching with blunt fingers at a scraggly yellow beard, said, "Hello, Mr. Kimbrough. I kind of thought it would be you."

"You said you'd have your answer by this morning," the latter replied. "You wanted twenty-four hours to think it over."

"Uh-huh, I know."

The man showed signs of acute discomfort, while the three of them remained as they were, not dismounting but waiting for an invitation. Finally Barnes ended an awkward silence by turning into the house with a shrug of rounded shoulders. "Reckon you might as well come inside," he told them. "We can discuss the thing some more."

KIMBROUGH swung down and the others followed suit. But when Chick started to trail across the yard, his boss halted him. "It looks from here," Kimbrough said, frowning with impatience, "as though he isn't ready to close—not without a little more talk, anyway. Maybe you'd better stay outside until I call you, and keep anyone from disturbing us. This might take some time."

"Whatever you say." As the others moved inside Chick found himself a seat on the stoop's edge, before the door, where he could keep an eye on the horses and also have a clear view of the trail.

The drone of voices came from within the house but Kimbrough's business dealings held no particular interest for him; Homer Barnes, he gathered, had been offered a price for his buildings and range stock but he was being slow to make up his mind about accepting. While they talked turkey, Chick lounged and idly watched the flow of sun and shadow over the slick green needles of the pines, where the wind made their humming.

Presently he fetched out the harmonica from his shirt and began to blow on it, softly. He found that his thoughts had reverted once more to the terrible news he had learned of Ward McCarey's death. This depressed him badly, and in such moods the strains he drew from the old mouth organ were his most soothing medicine.

He was interrupted by a thud of approaching horses, in the trail. Knocking spittle out of the mouth harp he slipped it back into his pocket, and leaned to spit out the brassy taste that the battered instrument al-

ways left in his mouth. A pair of riders came into sight; Chick was already on his feet before they pulled in their horses, and for a moment they stayed in saddle giving back his stare of surprise.

One was a man, a good-looking chap of thirty or thereabouts—a rancher, from the plain sign of him. The other was Josie Freeman.

It was the girl who spoke first. "Why, what in the world! I never thought we'd be apt to see you again—not after we heard the shooting start last night. Grampa and I didn't see how you could have got through it!"

"I done all right," said Chick. "I made it in to town, and after that there wasn't no more trouble."

She said, "I'm—I'm glad. We were worried."

The man with her said, scowling darkly, "Then this is him, Josie? The saddle tramp you said was looking to hitch up with Vince Kimbrough? Looks like he got what he was after, then!" He pointed toward the knot of groundtied horses. "There's Kimbrough's palomino!"

A sound of distress and disappointment broke from the girl's lips. "Kimbrough's here ahead of us! And we're too late!"

"Maybe!" The cowman's bronzed features had settled into hard lines. "We'll see." With that, he started to lift his right boot from stirrup, to swing down from leather.

Chick Bronson remembered instructions. He had taken a spread-legged stance before the door of the house, and he swallowed once and said, "I'm sorry. You can't go in."

The other held his movement, settled slowly back into leather. His attention was narrowed now on Bronson and his eyes had clouded. "We can't do what?"

"I work for Vince Kimbrough," Chick Bronson said. "The boss told me not to let nobody disturb them."

"Is that a fact, now?" Scorn dripped in the other's too-quiet voice, showed in the glance he let range over the whole length of the one who had set himself to block the door.

"Well, if that's the way it is, you punk saddle tramp—let's see how you're gonna go about stopping us!"

CHAPTER X

On The Dotted Line...

"MARTIN! Don't!" The girl's cry was an involuntary outburst.

Paying no heed, her companion already had one gloved hand on the butt of his belt gun, starting to lift it out of holster. Chick Bronson, for his part, had not looked for anything like this and he was caught staring, startled past thinking of the gun in his own jumper pocket.

"Go ahead!" The man in the saddle challenged him. "Keep us out, if you think you can! We know what's afoot inside that house, and we're here to stop it!"

"Why, in that case, Talbot," said a quiet voice, "Just step right on in!"

Chick Bronson looked around quickly. Bob Creel had moved into the door behind him, and stood there with the point of one shoulder leaning against its edge, his slim right hand dangling loosely and not even touching the gun-handle that jutted from his up-shot right hip. And yet, Chick thought, the advantage of a half-drawn gun was suddenly as nothing, and the quick shooting of fear into Martin Talbot's brown face showed that he knew the danger he was in.

The one in the door smiled slyly, "Why, what's the matter, fella? Aren't you coming in, now you been invited?"

"Hang you, Creel—" Talbot's bitter voice broke off, futilely. With a savage gesture he shoved his own weapon deep into leather, and lifted his hand to the saddlehorn where it lay tight-clenched, white knuckled.

At this, Creel chuckled a little, and then he spoke to Chick with a jerk of his head toward the interior of the shack. "Boss wants you, kid," he said. "He's ready for you to witness a couple of signatures."

"All right."

Creel drew aside to give him room, and it was with distinct relief that

Chick Bronson welcomed the chance to make a quick escape. He didn't know what was going on here. He knew only that this unexpected, and not understood, threat of near-violence had knotted his insides for him, and parched his throat.

The shabby house contained one small room. As Chick entered, Kimbrough turned from a window through which he must have been watching the goings-on outside. Yonder, behind a crude deal table, Homer Barnes sat with hunched shoulders, looking at the papers spread before him and at the steel nib pen and ink bottle that lay ready for his stubby fingers.

"Well, Barnes?" said Kimbrough, prodding him.

But now there was a sudden flurry of running footsteps, and despite the gunman stationed in the doorway Josie Freeman came bursting into the room. Shoving past Chick, she went directly to the table. She leaned both small fists on the edge of it and she cried, "No! You can't do it! You can't give in to him!"

"I dunno why I shouldn't be able to sell my own property," mumbled Barnes, "when I get a good price for it. Better than sitting back and waiting for the bottom to fall out of the market entirely, and leave me with nothin'!" But he didn't look at her as he spoke, only at the fingers that monkeyed nervously with the bill of sale in front of him.

She said, "You can't because it isn't fair to the other members of the Pool—and because it's against the agreements we've made!"

"Agreements?" Vince Kimbrough came striding over from the window then, and his mobile features appeared really troubled. "What's this, Barnes? I've been doing business with you in all good faith; am I to understand that you're tied by commitments I hadn't heard about?"

"Oh, you've heard about them, I think!" Josie retorted, flashing a look at him. "You knew that every member of the Pool had promised not to transfer his property and grazing rights without permission of

the others. And you knew just why that arrangement was made!"

THE MAN who sat at the table squirmed uncomfortably. "There wasn't nothing on paper," he protested, doggedly. "Honest, Kimbrough, they've got no strings on me or my property."

"Are there no strings on your honor?" Josie Freeman demanded. "Doesn't a promise mean anything?" She reached to seize his arm, impulsively.

But her touch seemed only to stir him to resolution. With a quick, angry gesture he shrugged her hand away and then, snatching up the pen, he stabbed it into the ink and in a hasty scrawl slapped his name across the paper. When he threw down the pen, his narrow chest was lifting to his tight breathing.

"There!" he cried hoarsely. "It's done! Go ahead, call me what you like—but I've taken a beating in this blamed country and the way things are going, another six months would have finished me. I tell you, there's nothing left to fight for!"

"No, nothing!" cried Josie Freeman answering him; her voice was choked and trembling, and Chick saw that tears glinted in her eyes. "Nothing—except all that we've been building for here on the Lost Wolf—our homes, our stake in the future...."

Martin Talbot spoke up. He had followed as far as the doorway, halting there with the dangerous presence of Creel to check him from daring to cross the threshold. He said, "You're talking to a deaf man, Josie! You can't expect Homer Barnes to understand about the things the rest of us wanted. A man without family or friends, who turned the very house he lived in into a pigsty—he was the weak link in our Pool, from the beginning. We might have known he'd be the one, finally, to sell us out and set the wolves loose among us!"

"Now, just one moment!"

A hint of color had touched Vince Kimbrough's somber face; yet his voice was still held down, his anger

controlled. "I wish you'd tell me why you people hate me so bitterly!" he said. "Trading in land and cattle is my business; I make a fair bargain, and I keep it. Barnes here will tell you that the price I'm offering him is a good one—better, in fact, than it needed to have been, considering the state of the market."

Talbot's mouth twisted. "Oh, yes—I can imagine! It was well worth your while to name a figure he couldn't afford to turn down; one to make him swallow his principles and forget what he owed the rest of us. You figure you've got to get a toehold—at any price—here on the Pool's side of the river. You've gone and overloaded your own graze, clear back into the cedar benches and the foothills; but you need still more room to put the cattle you've been buying up, at panic prices, from better men than you who have been ruined by the slump.

"Now, holding Barnes' membership and his share in our grazing rights, you mean to start pouring your cheap beef onto Pool graze and you won't stop until you've crowded the rest of us off. And when someday the market starts back up and beef is worth something again, there you'll stand—alone—the biggest damn cattle baron in the State!"

For a moment there was silence—a silence that seemed overpowering after the sound of Talbot's raging voice. And slowly, in that waiting moment, a subtle change came over Vince Kimbrough.

The gaunt body of the man drew taller, stiff with anger; the deep-set eyes veiled in darkness, and the jaw muscles bunched visibly beneath his sunk-in cheeks. "Bronson!" he snapped. "I called you in here to get your name on that paper—as witness to Barnes' signature!"

FORGOTTEN during the interchange, Chick was brought up with a start to hear his own name hurled into the quiet of the room. But without a word he walked forward, picked up the pen and signed in a blunt, angular scrawl. As he laid the pen down, his eyes met

Josie Freeman's for an instant. There was no warmth in them, nothing beneath their surface—only a frigid hostility and hurt.

He turned away, and Vince Kimbrough said, "All right. Your turn, Bob."

The gunman came into the cabin, at an easy slouch, and shouldering Talbot aside. When he had affixed his signature, Kimbrough took the paper, scanned it briefly. Then, from the inside pocket of his coat, the latter brought out a narrow length of paper and tossed it down in front of Homer Barnes.

"There's my certified check, in full," he said. "As we agreed, you have a week to wind up your affairs and turn over this property."

He looked at Martin Talbot and the girl. "I wish you could believe that I don't want trouble—with anyone; but apparently you insist on your own, wrong notions. Yes, it's true I've been buying up a great deal of cattle, and buying it cheap. I admit I hope to make a profit before the thing is finished. Still, at the same time, let me remind you that I've also saved a lot of ranchers from losing everything they owned, and at least left them with a stake with which they can hope to begin over again, later.

"As for you Pool ranchers, I can only say that you have no reason to be afraid of me. I assure you, no one is going to be crowded out. There's room for all of us, here on the Lost Wolf!"

"Sure, there's room!" snarled Talbot. "If the rest of us are willing to lie down and let you walk all over us! But we won't do that! We'll fight you—you slick-talking, pious devil! And we'll fight this sale! It was made contrary to agreement and it won't stick!"

"I think it will," the other replied, quietly, "Take it into court and I think you'll find that any alleged, verbal agreement will carry little weight against a signed bill of sale."

"Probably so—in your court, before your handpicked county judge! But there must be other ways of fighting—and we'll find them!"

Bob Creel muttered, "I know one way—and I'm inviting you to try it right now, fella. *If you feel lucky!*"

"Shut up!" Vince Kimbrough silenced his man with a stern look. "If they insist on a war, they're going to have to start it; I'm hoping they will see their mistake. At the moment, there apparently isn't anything to gain by talking, so we might as well end this before worse things are said!"

He picked his hat from the back of a chair, made a formal bow to Josie Freeman, nodded to Homer Barnes. Then, without another word, he turned and walked from the room, unhurriedly.

Bob Creel slouched out after his boss, but Chick Bronson hesitated a moment. He saw Josie Freeman take the check that Kimbrough had laid upon the table, look at it coldly and then at Homer Barnes; her face was tight and miserable, her voice shook a little.

"There it is," she said. "Take it."

THE MAN put tongue to lips, shuttling his glance between her and Martin Talbot. But he didn't move to touch the check and Josie laid it down again on the edge of the table. Talbot grunted, "Aw, let's get out of here and leave this Judas alone!"

He took her elbow. Josie still looked at Barnes a moment; she shook her head, and told him, quietly, "I'm so very sorry for you!"

They were gone then, and Chick followed slowly outside. Kimbrough and Creel were already in saddle, waiting for him; as Chick walked over to his sorrel and got the stirrup, he watched Talbot and the girl mount up and go riding off along the trail together, holding their horses close together in earnest talk.

Something must have shown itself in his face, for when he lifted and settled into leather he saw Vince Kimbrough's frowning look centered on him.

"Well, young man," said Kimbrough, quietly, "you heard it all. Maybe you felt that what they said was true—and maybe, then, you'd

rather not go to work for me. If that's how it is, I won't hold you. You can keep the money I advanced, and we'll call it settled—as a sort of tribute to Ward McCarey."

And certainly, for one moment Chick had to admit to a very serious doubt. He fiddled with the reins, feeling the pressure of Kimbrough's waiting for an answer. But while he couldn't doubt the sincerity of the charges made by Talbot and the girl, there had really been nothing but emotion behind them. They feared Vince Kimbrough's intentions; while Chick, himself, found it very hard to meet this man's level gaze and believe very much that was wicked or dishonest of him.

He cleared his throat. "I reckon I'll stick awhile."

The gaunt face quickly softened. "That's fine, Bronson! No man enjoys being called a villain; I'm glad to know an outsider could listen to the talk against me and not be entirely convinced by it. It's the price a man pays, I suppose," he added moodily, "for success—for growing big, while those around him stay small and discontented. They'll do anything to drag him back to their own level...."

With a shake of his head, Kimbrough picked up the reins. His manner had altered, become brisk and businesslike.

"Now that Barnes has signed and I have the grass to put them on, I can go ahead and make the deal for those Arrowhead cattle. Bob, get across the river and tell Pearson to ready a wagon and crew to bring them in. You'll ride with them, Bronson. The job should take a couple of weeks. Afterwards, if you stack up, I might consider you to manage the Barnes place for me. That agreeable?"

"Sure," said Chick. "I just want to earn my pay."

CHAPTER X

The Tax Collector

HE EARNED it, those next two weeks, helping push a good sized bunch of Arrowhead cattle down to the Lost Wolf

from a range some hundred miles south and west of the valley. The other members of the crew—four in number—were a strangely seldom-speaking set of men, maybe taking their tone from the trail boss, Spud Pearson, who seemed to have small patience with idle talk; but they seemed all right and Chick got along with them.

Hardly a day passed that some hopeless, out-of-luck rider didn't come straggling into camp, asking for a chance to stay with the drive, for no pay other than his smokes and grub. Pearson gave these tramps a meal, generally, but he turned down every one of them and sent them dragging off again. And on such occasions, Chick Bronson couldn't avoid a twinge of selfish satisfaction over the thought that he was in—on the payroll, with loose change rattling in his jeans alongside that lucky silver dollar—and himself no longer one of those hopeless grubliners.

The weather had broken, sharply. Almost with one stroke, the lagging summer ended and fall was on the range. Frost crackled on a man's blankets when he crawled out of them in the gray morning. The day they came across the escarpment onto the Lost Wolf, yellowed leaves were tearing loose from the cottonwoods and tumbling in a golden shower along the sharp winds, under a sky of lumpy gray.

They would hold the new cattle west of the river for a day or so, Spud Pearson said, until they got orders to move them across onto the new graze that had been acquired from Homer Barnes. "It's a question," he said, ominously, "what them Pool ranchers will do to stop us crossing. And Vince Kimbrough ain't one to start an open war, if he can keep from doing it."

But the word that came next morning to the Box K bunk house was that Kimbrough wanted to see Chick Bronson immediately, in town.

Surprised, Chick saddled up and hit the trail through the cold and blustery day. There had been no in-

dication of the reason for this summons. He made good time and it was still early when he hit the resounding planks of the town bridge.

Here, he saw the first of the placards.

A white square of cardboard had been tacked to the railing, to be pulled and buffeted by the sharp wind. Out of curiosity, Chick leaned from saddle to steady it while he read the poster printing:

VOTE!

For County Judge
MATTHEW FREEMAN

He blinked and read it again. There was a paragraph of smaller type below, describing the candidate as a fearless believer in the rights of man as opposed to corruption and privilege; a man whose honest integrity and citizenship had never been questioned. There wasn't any picture, but Chick felt sure the only Matthew Freeman he knew of was the frail oldtimer at the Lazy F—Josie's Grampa.

Riding on into the town, thoughtfully, he saw more of the placards. They had been nailed up everywhere—to awning posts, to buildings, to fence hoardings. So this, he thought with sudden understanding, was the Pool's answer to Vince Kimbrough! They meant to fight him through the ballot, and through legal interpretation.

Yes, it was plain enough. If Matt Freeman could manage somehow to get himself elected to the bench, the purchase of Homer Barnes' Pool membership and rights to Pool graze—done without approval of the other members—could be challenged and declared null....

Reining in before the land company office, Chick saw that one of the notices had even been tacked, with high impertinence, to Kimbrough's own door. Vince Kimbrough himself emerged from the building as he was tying, and came down the steps smiling a little at the expression on the younger man's face.

"You've been reading the placards?" said Kimbrough, pleasantly.

"Looks as though a lot of money had been spent—I suppose all the rest of the county has been blanketed like this."

"It took gall, didn't it, to nail them on your office door? And on the porch of the Bull's Head?"

"Why?" Kimbrough prompted, smiling. "A free country. No reason any man can't promote whatever candidate he chooses."

"But—these people are hitting at you! They talk about corruption; but their real target is your purchase of grazing rights from Homer Barnes!"

KIMBROUGH went instantly sober. "You know, Bronson," he said, "I'm glad. I'm really glad to see the issue between us put on this kind of basis. Let it be decided by debate, and by the ballot box—and not with guns. And whichever is right, abide by the decision. Better that, any time, than to have this valley torn apart!"

"Do you think Freeman can win?"

"That's something we must wait and see. He has a lot of friends here in the valley, of course; and they'll go all out to sell him to the rest of the county. But they've got a lot of ground to cover, to be starting their campaign so late. The election is only a couple weeks off, you know."

Chick thought this over. He said, finally, "I think you wanted me for something, boss?"

"Oh, yes. Let's step over to the courthouse. Sheriff asked if I knew a good man for a special chore that needs doing, and I recommended you—thought perhaps you could use some extra cash."

"Who can't?" Chick exclaimed. "What's the job?"

"The sheriff will explain. Come along."

The courthouse was a sagging red barn of a building, with a central corridor that boomed out the echoes of a man's boots as he walked through the musty-smelling place. Entering, they passed an individual in a rusty frock coat and drooping string tie, who nodded solemnly behind the pince nez that rode his high-bridged nose. His skin was a

sickly yellow color, and he walked with an elaborate, unsteady dignity. A pungent cloud of whiskey fumes floated about him that wrinkled Chick Bronson's nose.

"Judge Tobias," remarked Kimbrough in a dry tone. "Maybe, at that, he's been in office too long. Maybe a little competition is going to be good for him..."

They found Sheriff Mart Murray in his office—a shaggy-browed man, who favored Chick with a piercing stare as Kimbrough made the introductions. A cane was hooked over the arm of the lawman's swivel chair, ready to his hand, and he indicated it. "Bronc fell on me last week, hurt my hip. So I'm getting caught up on my desk work."

Without preliminaries he opened a drawer, brought out a bundle of vouchers wrapped with a rubber band and tossed them into Chick's lap. "Delinquent taxes," he explained. "It's part of my job to see that they're collected, but I can't do it the way I'm bunged up just now; and it'll soon be time for the new assessments to be made. Care to try your hand?" He added, "You get a percentage of everything you bring in, so it makes pretty good pay."

Chick Bronson thumbed through the vouchers. "I suppose I could make a stab at it," he grunted. "Dunno how well I'll manage, money being scarce as it is."

"Collect what you can," said Murray, "and when you've gone through those I'll have some more to work on. Don't get too rough, though—makes a bad impression, you know, in an election year."

"I understand." Chick fingered the vouchers a moment longer, and then stuffed them into a pocket. "O. K.," he said, rising. "I'll do my best. They'll probably sic the dogs on me but I got used to that, riding the grubline. This, at least, is an improvement!"

THE SHERIFF offered his hand, not getting out of the chair where his smashed hip held him. "That's fine, Bronson." They shook, and then Chick thanked Vince Kim-

brough and walked out of the gloomy courthouse, to assume his new duties as a tax collector.

He told his sorrel, "Well, I certainly can't say that I've been in a rut since I hit this country!"

...But it didn't take many days to learn that this new job of his would prove no cinch. The hard times had a lot of people in this country behind on their taxes, and not many owned the cash to pay. Several swore at Chick Bronson when he rode up and announced his purpose; a few invited him to sit with them over a bottle of rye while they went into a dolorous account of the reasons why they couldn't pay.

Once, in the roughs below the headwaters of the Lost Wolf, a gaunted, tired-faced woman, whose husband had died and left her with three kids and a hard-scrabble homestead to manage, stood before him in the door of her shack and cried while a whimpering baby clung to her shabby skirts. That time, Chick did some fast figuring of the money in his own pocket and what percentages he had due him, and before he rode away from there he had surreptitiously marked the widow's voucher "PAID".

"I can't do *that* often," he told himself, sourly, "or I'll end up losing my shirt!" But at least the job was teaching him something—opening his eyes to the fact that other folks had their problems, too, and that in abnormal times like these a drifting grubliner had no business considering himself the sole, mistreated victim of chance and of other men's greedy indifference. Everybody was in this particular boat...

He covered a lot of miles; the county was a good-sized one, even as Western counties went, though not all of it as fertile or as well-populated as the Lost Wolf Valley which formed its heart. The weather turned really cold, and as he rode hunch-shouldered into his wind-breaker, Chick began to wonder how much of a favor Vince Kimbrough had done him by securing this job for him. But, of course, he knew the boss had meant well.

On one thing, at least, he could congratulate himself: there had been no sign at all of Ott Stanger or of his bully-boy, Ed Dugan. It seemed hardly likely that they should have given up so easily; but though, in his lonely riding, he kept his eyes open and the silver-handled sixgun never far from his fingers, Chick never once sighted them. He began to hope, with no real confidence, that he was actually done with that pair.

In the meantime, affairs within the valley were at a standstill, obviously waiting on the turn of the impending election. Vince Kimbrough had made no attempt to drive stock onto the Pool's graze east of the river; and as for the small-tally ranchers, they were keeping a watchful silence, apparently staking everything on pushing old Freeman's candidacy for the judgeship...

Then the sheriff handed him a voucher with the comment, "This one may be dynamite. Handle it careful." He looked at the name, and the amount of delinquency, vented a whistle. It was Matt Freeman's voucher, and the tax due was a sizable one—the largest he had yet been called on to collect.

"It's right off the books," Murray answered his question, with a shrug. "That's what he owes, all right. And I think you'll be doing blame well to get any of it out of him."

With deep misgivings, Chick Bronson stowed the voucher away inside his coat and went out and climbed into the saddle. Though he had every reason in the world for dreading this chore, it was a thing that had to be done.

A strong wind pushed at him, blowing down from the sandstone rim, as he struck out along the looping wagon trail through the bunch grass, toward Lazy F.

CHAPTER XI

Election Dynamite

SMOKE, buffeted by a whipping wind, rose from the kitchen chimney to dispel a momentary hope that he would find no

one home here; and resignedly, Chick jogged his sorrel in toward the little clot of buildings. As he drew nearer he became aware of the rhythmic strokes of an ax, at a woodpile behind the house. He rode around there, to discover Josie Freeman, in jeans and a hickory shirt, knocking up a little pile of split kindling.

The girl saw him coming and straightened slowly, grounding the heavy ax while she stared at him without welcome. A sudden gush of wind that tumbled down the slope behind the ranch eddied about them both, snapping at the brim of Chick's hat, swirling Josie's brown curls until she put up a hand to trap them and keep them from her face. He couldn't help but notice how the wind molded the bulky material of the shirt against her firm, young body, accenting its shape charmingly.

"What do you want?" she prompted him, her voice holding no warmth.

Reluctantly, Chick Bronson brought himself to the object of his mission. "Your grandfather," he said. "I'd like to talk to him, if he's available."

There was a hesitation, just perceptible, before she answered, with a jerk of her head toward the barn. "Over there."

"Thanks."

He gave the sorrel a nudge in that direction, noting that the girl had left her ax leaning against the woodpile and was following. As he dismounted, stiffly, he saw old Matt Freeman toss a pitchfork aside and walk forward to meet him in the doorway, a suspicious look on his bearded face.

"Don't tell me!" the old man grunted. "We heard you was running tax vouchers around for Vince Kimbrough's sheriff; but I know you haven't got one for us. We're all paid up."

Chick had been fumbling in his pocket. The old man's flat assurance made him blink, halting him for a moment; then, slowly, he drew out the paper and held it toward Matt Freeman.

He said, "Not according to the records, you ain't, Mr. Freeman. I got orders to hand you this."

A medley of expressions ran across the old man's face—surprise, and incredulity, and then a slow building of anger. All at once Matt Freeman's eyes were ablaze, his bloodless lips trembling. "Why, the filthy, stinkin' gall—"

"Grampa!" cried Josie, sharply.

With a compulsive gesture Freeman snatched the paper from Chick's hand, peered at it. Chick Bronson said, uneasily, "Of course, now, if you think there's been a mistake, Mr. Freeman—"

"Mistake!" The old man's voice shook; his bony hands, his entire frail body, were tense with wrath. "A deliberate lie—that's what it is! Unfair as the taxes are in this county, I've known it was no use protesting. But—this! Why, the sheer brazen effrontery of those crooked—" He crumpled the paper sharply in his fingers.

The girl cried, "Let's see, Grampa!" She came and took the voucher from him, and as she looked at the figures her frown deepened.

Chick Bronson wished he could have been elsewhere, just then. He said, anxiously, "Now, just a minute! You understand, I don't know anything about these figures,—I just try to collect them. But if your taxes are paid, there certainly should be a way to prove it. You've got the receipts, haven't you?"

"Some of them." The old man shrugged, bitterly, subsiding a little. "What good will they do, if the county records have been tampered with?"

"That, I just can't believe," said Chick, stubbornly. Yet as soon as the words were spoken, they sounded lame to him. All at once, he wasn't quite so sure.

Josie Freeman said, "But what are we going to do? Have we enough money to pay?"

"Yeah—just!" the old man said. "Only, we aren't going to. Not a dime! It's a dirty steal, that's all!"

"Just the same," Chick told him, impulsively, "fair or not, you want

to remember that you're running for office. Would it help your chances, if word got around that you refused to pay a tax?"

THE OLD man's brow lowered, as he stabbed a keen look at the other. He began to nod, thoughtfully, and one thin claw of a hand came up to work at the long whiskers.

"By gonnies!" Matt Freeman exclaimed. "I think you've named it, boy! That's it! They've done this deliberate, just to rile me into some move that could be used to smear me with the voters!"

His jaw hardened then, in deliberation. "All right—I'll cross 'em up. I'll pay the damn thing. It'll take every cent of spare cash we own; but if I can manage to nail the election, I swear that the cesspool of a county courthouse is gonna see a cleanin' out like it's never had! Wait here a minute," he added. "I got the money inside the house. I'll bring it out to you..."

He went pegging away, returning after a long moment which the two young people waited out in a stilted silence—Chick fiddling with his rein-ends and scuffing an elaborate pattern in the dust with his boottoe, Josie hugging herself against the chill which she was undoubtedly feeling, now that she had stopped exercising with the ax. They were both relieved when Matt came back, a wad of bills in his gaunt fist.

"Here!" he grunted. "Count it, to make sure my end of this transaction is perfectly complete and above board, and then give me a receipt. It'll be the club to whack my enemies with, when the time comes!"

Solemnly Chick went through the formalities. Afterward, with the money in his pocket, he touched hat-brim briefly for Josie Freeman and reached again for the reins of his sorrel, wanting nothing now but to get away. But a word from the old man checked him.

"One moment, fellow." Matt sounded puzzled, and apologetic. "I'm thinking I may have misjudged you some, after all. You've talked pretty straight about this business.

I mustn't forget you're a newcomer to the Lost Wolf and maybeso not actually a party to the wickedness that goes on here."

"Look, Mr. Freeman," said Chick, impulsively; and his words were as much for the girl as for her grandfather. "A man has to eat, and he owes loyalty to the gent that pays him wages. But I'm caught right in the middle of something that I don't much like. You're an honest man; that much I'm sure of. And yet you call my boss a crook, which I find it impossible to believe!"

The old man's bearded head bobbed slowly.

"I think perhaps I understand. Vince Kimbrough is one slick talker, doggone smooth and honest-sounding when he has an impression he wants to make. You just haven't been around him long enough, to see behind that mask he wears. But one of these days, you're bound to see—and I only hope when that day comes, you'll remember that we tried to warn you!"

CHICK Bronson took this in silence; then, because no answer suggested itself, he merely nodded and, turning to his waiting mount, lifted into saddle. It was with a sense of relief that he rode away from that awkward meeting; but long after the Lazy F was left behind, a swirl of confused and troubled thoughts rode with him.

...A horseman came out of the trees that rimmed a low ridge ahead and quartered down toward the trail, a hand lifted shortly in greeting. It was Bob Creel, he saw, not without surprise; you didn't often find Creel out on the trails, this far from town and Kimbrough's headquarters. Creel hauled up, firing a cigarette, and as the other man drew even he flipped out the match and said casually, "Still riding the rounds, huh? How's collections?"

"Not good," Chick answered, shortly. "Times are too tough."

"They'll get better."

Creel nudged his bronc forward and fell in beside Chick, and they went on along the trail at an easy walk. There was no discussion of

how the gunman had happened to be there, or where they both were heading now; they talked a little of in-different matters.

Presently, and unconnected with anything else that had been said, Creel asked: "You've been to the Freemans?" And at Chick's nod. "The old man pay up all right?"

Something jarred Chick, like a blow. He turned slowly, laid his look squarely upon the wrinkled, ageless face. It was, he saw as inscrutable as ever, the slate-blue eyes veiled and empty of meaning. But the question itself had betrayed him; it had told Chick everything he needed to know.

Trying to keep his voice from trembling, his hands steady on the reins, Chick answered. "Sure he paid. But he wasn't supposed to, was he? It was meant for a frameup—a political trap!"

This brought him Creel's full attention, at last; tore away for an instant the curtain from the full-lidded, colorless eyes. The man covered up again, quickly, pulling his glance away from Chick to study the half-smoked quirly butt that he plucked from his thin, flat lips. But they both had halted their mounts, unconsciously, and they sat motionless now with the wind whooping and booming around them.

"This Freeman," Bob Creel murmured, still considering the glowing end of his hand-rolled cigarette. "You know, kid, it could mean trouble for all of us if he should happen to win the election. Most likely the boss would lose the Barnes place, and his toehold this side of the river. You've thought of that, I reckon."

"Sure," said Chick, bitterly. "I guess I got brains enough to figure that out for myself, at least!"

"Maybe we could appeal the decision," the other man went on. "But we can't count on it. And of course, you understand that if Vince loses the Barnes place he won't be able to give you the job he planned to, managing it for him. In fact, kid," Bob Creel pointed out very softly,

"you very possibly might wind up without any job at all."

THIS TIME Chick Bronson kept silent, waiting to see what the man was coming to. He knew this was all a preparation for something.

"Still, maybe there's a way out," Creel said. "A little more drastic than our first idea, of letting Freeman put himself in a bad light by refusing to pay his taxes. But if it worked it should be enough to tie his hands until the election is over. I guess it's up to you, kid."

"Why? What do I have to do?"

"Not a lot, really. Just give me the money Freeman paid you, and then ride back to town and tell the sheriff you've had a stickup. Somebody waylaid you—you couldn't see his face, because he kept out of sight behind a pile of rock with only the top of his hat and his gun barrel showing. But you recognized his voice, all right—it was Freeman's!"

"That ought to sew up the election for us! Afterwards, of course, when the danger's over, you can decide that you might have been mistaken and you can't swear it was Freeman's voice you heard. The sheriff will turn the old fellow loose for lack of evidence; no one will have been hurt at all, really. How does it sound?"

Chick Bronson felt a numbness all through him. "It sounds like you and Kimbrough have got everything figured!" He added: "So I think you must have gone and worked out a third scheme, too—just in case I didn't care for the second one?"

"Why, yes, we did," Bob Creel told him, evenly. "In that event, it'll be up to me to testify. I'll have to say that I saw Matt Freeman kill you and take back his money...."

Twisting sharply in saddle, then, Chick made a grab for the arm that brought Creel's sixgun sliding smoothly out of holster. Muscle, like taunt steel wire, strained beneath his fingers as they struggled for the weapon, both silent except for the grunt of panting breath. Creel's efforts to pull free nearly lifted Chick from his saddle; but he knew it

meant his life and he clung with everything he had, meanwhile working desperately to get at Ott Stanger's silver-handled Colt in from the deep pocket of his windbreaker.

He got his hand on it but the hammer spur dug into the cloth and stuck there, unyielding when he tried to yank it loose. And now, all at once, the horses veered apart; they both went out of leather, spilling bodily into the trail, and in the impact Chick lost all hold on his opponent.

CHAPTER XII

Dead-Man's Money

HE HURLED himself at Creel but the latter had rolled out of the way and now was scrambling to his feet, the gun leveling. And Chick, lunging up from the ground, went after him recklessly. He had to forget his own trapped gun, in the effort to keep Creel from using his. And in fact, he only managed to knock the other's hand aside in time to send a bullet drilling past him.

Chick felt the heat of the muzzle flash, the kick of concussion. His right fist struck wildly, then, and landed in the center of Creel's dark and wrinkled face, causing the man to stumble a step backward. But Creel was a wiry, quick-moving man; he caught his footing and he swung a clubbing blow with the hand that held the gun.

Throwing up an arm, Chick blocked it but the smashing of the barrel nearly numbed his whole left side. He gritted his teeth against this pain, countered with a wild, loping right. Luckily, it connected. It took his opponent full in the jaw and sent him clear around, and into the dirt.

The smoking gun spilled from Bob Creel's fingers; Chick booted it away and then stood waiting, panting and ready for the other to reach his feet. Creel was a little slow doing it. And as soon as he had his boots under him Chick Bronson hammered him down again.

Bob Creel was a gunfighter, strict-

ly, with small skill in using his fists; while Chick had taken part in enough bunkhouse brawls to know how to take care of himself, at least against an opponent anywhere near his own size. Moreover, he had the weight of righteous anger on his side now.

There might have been time, during one of these moments while he waited for Creel to come back at him, to have cleared the gun trapped in his pocket; but somehow he didn't even think of it. Some primitive instinct had awakened in Chick and he wanted to use his hands, to strike and hurt. Someone had to pay for the way in which, as he now knew, he had been duped by Creel, and by Vince Kimbrough, and used to further their greedy ends.

When Bob Creel's nose smashed beneath his fist and he felt the warm blood spurt, Chick drew from this a profound, savage satisfaction. And, moments later, Creel went plowing on head and shoulders into the dust of the trail and that time he stayed there, a thoroughly beaten man.

Slowly Chick's mind began to clear itself of the black fumes of anger. At last, wiping his bloody hands on the cloth of his jeans, he turned away and leaned to pick up the hat that he had lost in the battle; shoving the hair out of his sweaty face, he dragged it on. The emotional aftermath was sudden and complete, leaving him shaky in the knees and drained of feeling.

Bob Creel had pushed up to a sitting position, blood dripped from his battered nose as he stared glassily at the man who had bested him. His mouth twisted and he grunted, "You lousy punk—"

Not answering, Chick Bronson walked over and picked up the gun he'd kicked away from the other's hand, stood dangling it by the trigger guard as he made up his mind. He went then to where the two horses, after spooking briefly, had fallen to grazing beside the trail, and caught up the reins. He tied the captured gun to Creel's saddle strings.

The gunman, watching, showed the first sign of alarm. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

Chick looked at him. "I'd be with-in my rights to kill you," he said. "Instead, I'm only gonna set you afoot. You'll have a nice cold walk back to town—after that, the fun of explaining everything to Vince Kimbrough. That ought to just about square our accounts."

"You'd better kill me!" gritted the other. "Because, when I do get my hands on a horse and a gun—"

CHICK shrugged. "I'll be long gone from here by that time, I reckon. I want to forget I ever set eyes on this Lost Wolf country. I've let myself be played for a sucker from the day I hit it; and there's no fun in bein' reminded of how many kinds of a crazy fool a guy has been!"

"You were pretty green, all right," said Creel, his pale eyes narrowing with scorn. "That first night you showed up at the Bull's Head, wet as a drowned rat and flashing Ward McCarey's hoodooed peso coin, the boss spotted you as something he could use. He's made good use of you, too."

"But for the last time!" Chick turned to his sorrel and went up into leather, and he took the bridle reins of the other horse. Yonder, Bob Creel came stumbling to his feet, moving forward as though to stop him; but he held up in his tracks when Chick showed him the muzzle of the gun which he finally had yanked free of the windbreaker's pocket.

"Just stay back!" Chick warned. "I won't take any more chances with you!"

Creel's angry swearing followed him as he rode away from there, the second mount trailing.

When he had covered a couple of miles he turned that other horse adrift, with a smart slap of rein-ends across the rump to set it heading for its stall in town. Bob Creel would be doing well, on foot, if he staggered in by midnight at the earliest, and this should give Chick plenty of time to get a start out of the valley.

He didn't know yet which way he would be riding—somewhere down the hopeless grubline trail, that he had dared to hope was left behind

him. At least, there was a little money in his pocket, accumulated from the few weeks' pay he managed to tally with Vince Kimbrough....

Suddenly he recalled that other wad of bills, and fished it out—Matt Freeman's tax money. He frowned, reminded of so many things that had passed between him and those folks at the Lazy F; the times they had tried in vain to warn him, to make him see the facts about the men he had got himself hooked up with. He should have known enough to believe them, from the start.

Chick pocketed the bills again and kicked his sorrel forward. Lazy F was the last spread you passed on the main trail leaving the valley. At least, Matt Freeman should have back this money of which he had nearly been cheated.

At the sound of a rider entering the yard, the house door was thrown open and Josie Freeman came hurrying out; but she halted in her tracks when she saw who the visitor was. He saw puzzlement and anger and fear all mingled in her pretty face. Sharply she demanded, "What do you want now? Haven't you done enough to us?"

Leaning from saddle, he held out to her the wad of money. "Here," he said. She hesitated, merely staring at him without making a move to accept it: "Please! Just take this—and don't ask any questions."

"But I don't understand," she exclaimed. "Is this another of Vince Kimbrough's tricks?"

Chick Bronson took a deep breath. So there were going to have to be explanations, after all. "It's not a trick," he answered, dully. "I finally woke up to the truth of what you and your grandfather have been trying to tell me." He told as much as he needed to of his encounter with Bob Creel, and of the lie he had been asked to swear to.

"I was a fool," he ended. "But before I checked out of this country I had to return the money I took from you, on that phony tax charge. Since you have the receipt, too, they can't try to collect it a second time. They'll have to think up something else!"

SHE TOOK the money, now, but automatically, without looking at it. Her eyes on Chick's face, she said, "You're leaving the Lost Wolf?"

"Driftin' out—the way I came," he agreed, bitterly. "Why not? If I could do anything to counteract the harm I've caused, I might stay. But I'd only make worse mistakes; and you don't need any saddle bums around the place."

She misunderstood his meaning, however. "We'd have no right to ask you," she said, thinking she knew what was in his mind. "It's not your fight, and Kimbrough or Bob Creel would surely kill you if you stayed. But—thank you for bringing the money back, anyway. I've got to ride now, and find Grampa; he headed for Martin's place as soon as you had left. He was going to call the rest of the Pool together and talk this business over. He was terribly worked up over it..."

Chick watched her turn away and hurry toward the tackroom in the barn. At least, he thought, she seemed to hold no hard feelings against him for the mistakes that he had made. That was something.

He ran a hand across his face. He was still tired from the fight with Creel, his throat and mouth parched, his head a little giddy. Reining over toward the well, he swung down to get himself a drink before taking his last leave of this valley and its tangled affairs.

Josie came out of the barn, her arms laden with riding gear, and saw him turning the winch. "That well went dry a year ago," she called. "If you want water, I'll fetch you some from the pump in the kitchen."

"Come here!" exclaimed Chick Bronson, in an excited voice.

Something made her drop her burden and hurry to him. Chick had wound up the length of well rope; fastened to the hook at its end was, not a bucket, but a pair of brush-scarred, bulging saddlebags.

She cried, "What on earth—?"

"Can't you guess?" He had the leather pouches unhooked and laid them out upon the well-coping, and

with fumbling hands was opening one of the flaps. From within the pouch he drew packets of paper—green, crisp banknotes.

He told her, "It's Ward McCarey's loot, of course—from the bank hold-up at Three Pines!"

The wind, booming down the slope behind the ranch, caught at the edges of the bills and rattled them drily. Josie took one of the packets in her hands, turned it over and over, staring at the money. It was all of high denominations, and in fresh mint condition—protected by the leather pouches during these weeks it had hung, forgotten, in the dry well.

Suddenly she exclaimed, "I remember now! That day they took McCarey prisoner in our barn—Grampa and I heard shooting and rode back to the ranch just as they were dragging him out, wounded and bloody. I felt sorry for him, lying there, like that—hurt. He was calling for water, and I took him a cup and held it for him while he drank.

"This is what I had forgotten, until this minute: When he'd finished, he looked up at me and he tried to whisper something; but all I could make out of it was, 'The well.' I thought most likely he was out of his head with pain, and trying to thank me for the water."

CHICK BRONSON nodded, slowly. "McCarey had a sentimental streak in him, that made him want to repay any kindness someone did for him while he was down. Just because I talked to him and kept him company, that night in jail, he gave me the only thing he had left to give—his lucky silver dollar. And yet I've sometimes wondered, in the back of my head, why it was he didn't think to tell me, instead, where this loot was buried. Especially when he knew he'd never have a chance to recover it himself."

He indicated the well. "This explains it. McCarey thought he had already given away the secret of the money, to you—the price for that cup of water. He probably died hap-

py in the belief that you and your grandfather were getting the good out of the money he had stolen."

Josie Freeman shook her head, her pretty face clouded with distress. "But what are we going to do with it? It will have to be returned, of course; and yet I don't think we dare trust Vince Kimbrough's sheriff enough to turn it over to him."

"That's the very last thing you'd want to do!" Chick told her quickly. "It would play right into Kimbrough's hands! Can't you see the political copy he'd make of this? He'd say your grandfather had the money from McCarey and had been holding it, until he finally decided it was too hot to handle and had to be got rid of! He'd make Matt Freeman out as big a crook as Ward McCarey, himself. And where would be the chances for election, then?"

Josie saw the danger, and it turned her quite pale. "Oh, Chick!"

He took her by the shoulder, impulsively. "Can you trust me, Josie?" he demanded, searching her eyes. "D'you think you know me well enough, now, that you'd dare depend on me to take care of this for you? If a grubline rider's word is worth anything, I give you mine that this money will be turned over to the law, where it belongs—but that nobody will ever find out that Lazy F had anything to do with it!"

For a long minute he got no answer, and a leaden weight began to settle inside him. Of course she didn't trust him; what business had he supposing, for even a moment, that she could? He dropped his arm, turned away with a shrug.

"Thank you, Chick!"

He looked down, in slow amazement, as the packet of money she had been holding was placed in his hand, confidently. "I think I've learned to know you pretty well, just today," she told him, quietly. "I'm only hoping you won't run any risk to yourself, doing this for Grampa and me!"

The leaden inner weight dissolved; his heart turned suddenly light. "Don't worry, lady," he said. "I've got it all figured out. There'll be no

risk—I promise!" He added, "You go on and find your grandfather, now, and leave this to me!"

Minutes later he had the bills stuffed back into their pouches and the saddlebags slung into place behind his rig. With a final wave of the hand he rode away from the Lazy F; but at a short distance he pulled in for what he knew would likely be the last look he would ever have. He saw Josie Freeman, a small figure in saddle, heading away from the ranch buildings. He watched until he lost her in the rolling swells of the valley floor, and the dust her pony had raised was a dim stain in the air that the ground wind quickly swept away.

A poignant knife of regret for the unfairness of things stabbed through him. If he only could have had something to offer a girl like that, instead of being what he was....

Such thoughts could get him nowhere and he shrugged them aside. He nudged his sorrel forward, with the fifty thousand dollars that didn't belong to him slung behind his saddle.

CHAPTER XIII

The Trick

A LONE cottonwood, that scattered its few remaining golden leaves into the wind sweeping down from the valley rim, struck Chick Bronson as being right for his purposes. He dismounted and tied, and hunted about until he found a sturdy length of windfall that would be stout enough to dig with. The saddlebags slung over one shoulder, then he set his back to the tree, got his directions, and began pacing directly south from it, measuring his steps.

The count of fifty took him over the lip of an eroded wash and to a deep-sunk boulder that long-ago floods had carried down and deposited there. Wheeling, he sought a likely landmark along the broken north rim and finally chose a deep notch that somewhat resembled the rear leaf of a rifle's sights. Facing toward this he again counted his steps,

moving at an angle now to his former course. At ten paces he had reached the bank of the wash again; and here, under the base of a stout clump of buckbrush, he started digging.

Using the crude shovel, he hollered out a good-sized excavation in the crumbling cutbank, with the wind swirling about him and lifting the grit into his face and eyes. Before he was finished, he had discarded the heavy windbreaker. Finally throwing aside the stick, he sleeved sweat from his face and then picked up the saddlebags and tried the fit of them in the hole.

It was all right. Satisfied, he pulled them free, shook the loose dirt from them, slung them over his shoulder again. He turned to get his discarded windbreaker.

A voice said, "By God, I been watching this for ten minutes and I still don't know what he's up to!"

His head lifted with a jerk. On the bank of the wash, not a dozen feet away, stood a pair whose existence he had almost completely forgotten. He saw where their horses had been left, ground hitched; absorbed in his labor, he'd let them move in on top of him without noticing. Big Ed Dugan held a gun, dangling it carelessly. Ott Stanger merely stood with arms akimbo, a mocking look of triumph in his cruel face.

Stanger shook his head. "Hanged if I make sense out of it either," he agreed. "It looked at first as though he meant to bury those saddlebags, but that don't rightly seem to have been the idea." He made a gesture of indifference. "Well, keep your eye on him, Ed. I'll relieve him of the loot, since he don't seem able to make up his mind what he wants to do with it!"

He came down the shallow bank of the draw, sinking bootheels deep into the crumbling earth. There was nothing Chick Bronson could do to stop him as he snatched the heavy saddle pouches from his arm and with deft fingers ripped the flaps open, revealing the packets of money within.

Dugan called anxiously, "Is it there, boss?"

"It's here." Stanger favored the prisoner with his icy stare. "So we end the way we started! I knew, if we held off long enough, you'd finally lead us to this. I've had Dugan watching every move you made, waiting for you to grow confident enough to dig the money up—a nuisance, that way, but safer than trying to buck Vince Kimbrough. And the saddlebags were at Lazy F, all the time!"

Ed Dugan came scrambling down the bank now, still holding the gun; his mouth all but watered at sight of the bulging leather pouches. "You've sure as the devil been leadin' me a chase!" he growled at Chick. "I told the boss when he rode over to check with me today that I was ready to quit. A good thing he made me hang on just an hour or two longer!"

Too sick inside to answer, Chick could only stare dismally at his captors. This time, he knew, there would be no stalling—no escape. This time, they had the thing they were after, and no Bob Creel would appear at a fortuitous moment to catch them off their guard and set him free. Only his own wits could save him, and he had no confidence in that. Right now, his mind was a hopeless blank.

"Incidentally," Ott Stanger demanded, harshly, "what about the gun you took off me, that night in the stable? I want that. Where is it?"

"The coat pocket," Chick said, resignedly, indicating the discarded canvas windbreaker that lay in a heap a few yards distant. Stanger walked over and picked up the garment, to begin rummaging in its cavernous pockets.

ED DUGAN had the saddlebags slung across a forearm and with his free hand had pawed out a fistful of the packets of crisp green bills. He vented animal grunts of pleasure as he examined them, brutish features lighted by his greed. Obviously it was the largest amount of

money he had ever held in his fingers at one moment, and he was likely thinking less of what it could buy him—the clothes, the women and the liquor—than of the mere feel of the money itself. Suddenly he commenced cramming the wads of bills into his clothing.

Ott Stanger said, "Put it back, Ed!"

His crisp order jolted the big man. Dugan lifted his head, looked at his boss stupidly. "There's plenty!"

"I said put it back!" Stanger's voice was sharp and cold. "You'll be paid your share later."

Big Dugan's thick chest lifted with angry emotion. It didn't occur to him to disobey, however, and with the surly look of an adolescent he shoved the money back into the pouch again.

Already quarrelling over the spoils, Chick Bronson thought with tired disgust. With crooks like these, it was what you could expect. It made this tainted money seem somehow more unclean than ever.

"Now, put those bags down and keep away from them!" Ott Stanger told his bodyguard.

Dugan hesitated, scowling darkly. He was probably well used to receiving such curt tongue lashings, but sight and feel of the loot must have wakened in him instincts of greed, and a certain submerged yearning toward rebellion. Reluctantly he dumped the leather pouches to the ground at his feet. Standing over them, his bearlike shoulders rolled forward, he said thickly, "Boss, I know we never discussed it but I'm thinkin' we ought to cut this two ways—an even split."

"Even?" grunted Stanger, in cold scorn. "Why, you big lunk! What do you think you'd ever do with that kind of cash?"

"Oh, I could spend it, all right," the other insisted, stubbornly. "And, I've had more'n my share of the trouble. I want what I've earned."

"You'll take what I give you! Now, shut up and bring the horses!"

"But, boss"—

Stanger's voice was sharply dangerous. "I said shut up! Do as

you're told or you may not get anything out of those saddlebags!"

The prisoner could see rebellion mounting high in Dugan, but the habit of obedience was long engrained and this habit won out. With a whine of self-pity the big man heeled about and went up the bank, digging his heavy boots into the earth, heading for the waiting pair of horses. Stanger, still hunting for his silver-handled gun, flipped the canvas jacket over and shoved his hand into the other pocket. Chick heard his grunt of satisfaction.

Throat suddenly dry, Chick waited until Stanger's hand came into view with the gun in it. And then he put everything into a quick and startling cry: "Dugan! Look out!"

PULLED around by the shout, big Dugan saw his boss turning, palming the weapon. Nerves already tensed by argument brought Dugan's arm up, in a convulsive, unthinking movement, and the gun which Dugan still carried leaped and spoke—directly at Ott Stanger.

To the shot, Stanger went stumbling backward, only a quick scraping of bootsole against rubble keeping him on his feet. He stood like that, with his body drawn up and the red stain slowly spreading on his chest, and on his face a dumb look of surprise and incomprehension. He looked at Dugan; he looked down at the gun which he had made no move to fire. Then, shaking his head as though still not understanding, he opened his hand and let the gun drop to the dirt in front of him.

Afterwards, his knees broke and he spilled down in a twisting fall, to land upon the weapon.

In the silence of the fading gun-echoes, Ed Dugan's deep-drawn breath was a rasping sound. "Try to shoot me in the back, would he?" he croaked, hoarsely. "Thanks for the warning, Bronson!"

Chick couldn't answer. Now that the thing was done, Chick knew a shakiness in all his limbs so that he had to stiffen his knees to stay erect. It hadn't been anything thought out or planned—merely a wild, half-rea-

soning instinct that had told him to shout, knowing Dugan was so wrought-up that sight of Stanger with a naked gun in his hand might be enough to start the gunman shooting wildly. It had been a trick, and a peculiarly unclean one. But it had lost him one of his foes.

One was still alive, however, and still dangerous.

Dugan came shuffling back into the draw, now. He put a heavy boot-toe under Stanger's body, nudged him and let him fall back limply. He seemed oddly at a loss. He was used to taking orders; and being left suddenly on his own, without anyone to tell him what to do, he hardly appeared to know what his next move ought to be. But then he remembered the saddlebags and he went and picked them up, and looked over at Chick. He still held the smoking gun.

"I dunno," he muttered, uncertainly. "I kind of hate to shoot a man that's saved my life—even you, Bronson. But Ott said it wasn't safe to let you go."

Desperately, Chick tried to reassure him. "You don't have to be afraid of me! I don't want any of the money—I don't want to have anything more to do with it! I'll get on my bronc and you'll never see or hear of me again."

"No!" Dugan shook his big head, stubbornly. He had absorbed Stanger's warning and it had become an unshakable tenet of faith that Chick Bronson must die. The weapon lifted in his hand, its muzzle a great black threat pointed squarely at the helpless victim's face.

"This is the most money I ever seen," he grunted. "I ain't takin' no chances."

Chick felt the sting of sweat breaking out upon him. "Don't be a fool!" he cried. "You can't spend it anyway!"

"Why not?" The gun wavered slightly, something in Chick's sharp words penetrating the other's slow brain.

"Didn't you take a good look at it? Most of those bills are mint condition, never circulated. Beyond any doubt in the world the serial num-

bers have been posted with every bank in the country. You try passing any of that stuff and see how quick the law pounces on you!"

IT WAS A new idea to Dugan, obviously. He blinked once as it sunk home; then with an oath he pawed open one of the leather pockets, dragged out a handful of bills and squinted at the numbers. His face darkened with fury and disappointment. "There must be some way—" he mumbled.

"Sure, there's a way. Stanger would have known what to do—but you haven't got his connections. And if you tried asking questions, first thing you know you'd have talked to the wrong man and he'd deal you out and take it all away from you.

"There's dynamite in those saddlebags, Dugan! Better not play around with it if you don't savvy what you're doing. ... I'll tell you, though," he added, as an afterthought. "If you want me to I'll take the money off your hands and turn it over to the law for you, and you won't have to answer any embarrassing questions—"

He had pressed too hard. He saw Dugan's doubts harden into stubbornness, his ugly face go bleak. The hand tightened on the gun. "Like the devil you will! You're just tryin' to get around me—I know! But I got a lot of time invested in this money and I ain't giving it up to you, or to the law, or anybody, until I've found out for sure there's no way to make it pay off. I'll burn the stuff, first! And I'll kill you or any other man that gets in my way!"

Chick dragged in a deep breath. "All right, Dugan," he said. "Put the gun away and I'll show you the only chance you have of cashing in on this loot—not for fifty thousand, of course, but enough anyway to make it worth your while. It means me selling out the people at Lazy E, but a man's life is worth more than promises...."

The big fellow looked dubious. "Now what's on your mind?" he demanded, harshly.

"Put away the gun, first. I can't talk with it staring me in the face."

He waited, trying to appear adamant and self-certain; and at last, after a long and chilling minute, Ed Dugan lowered the gun. He even stabbed it into its holster, but he kept his huge paw wrapped around the butt. "Well?" he snarled, dangerously.

Something of the tightness eased a little in Chick. He plunged ahead with his proposition.

"You wondered what I was up to when you caught me with those saddlebags, just now. I wasn't burying them—I was trying to arrange things to back up my story, later, when I turned them over to the law and said that McCarey had given me directions to locate his cache. I didn't ever want it known that the money was actually hidden on the Lazy F—not with Vince Kimbrough gunning for the Freemans."

ED DUGAN scowled. "I dunno nothin' about all this. Vince Kimbrough is sure as hell no friend of mine!"

"He could be—if you took this money to him and told him it came out of the Freemans' well! Take my word for it, Dugan—he'd make it plenty well worth your trouble! And he'd be a good man for you to hook up with, permanently, now that Ott Stanger's through."

"Kimbrough wouldn't even give me a chance to tell my story! I so much as stick my nose in his town, and he'd sic that Bob Creel on me!"

"No, he wouldn't. That's where I come in: I'll make him listen! I put you in touch with Kimbrough—and you forget about throwing a bullet into me; is that a fair bargain?"

But Dugan's face was still dark with angry suspicion. "You must think I was born day before yesterday! All you're tryin' to do is talk me into lettin' myself be led into a trap!"

"That's that, then." Chick lifted his shoulders, resignedly. "If you don't like my idea. It was the best I could manage—for both of us!"

An agony of indecision settled plainly on the big man. He could see all his cherished hopes for this loot of Ward McCarey's glimmering

away to nothing—and himself left now without even a job, Stanger being dead. Dugan wasn't a man to face that prospect calmly. He was one who needed to take orders, needed a stronger mind and personality than his own to lend him the comforting security of a sure job and definite work to do.

His ugly little eyes glared at Chick; his maul-like hands twitched.

"All right!" he blurted. "I'll have to take a chance. But, boy, I'm warning you! If this ain't on the level—if I see one single thing that don't look right—I'll burn you down and ask questions afterward! You'll never spring the trap and live—understand? So if you don't mean to play square with me, you better forget it right now!"

Chick Bronson met his look squarely. "Fair enough, I'm ready to ride anytime you are...."

CHAPTER XIV

Trapped

THERE WAS not much light left in the day when they came into Lost Wolf, and lamps already burned in some of the houses. A pair of riders drifting in with the evening did not make a particularly noticeable sight, but Ed Dugan seemed nervous as a cat; Vince Kimbrough's town was dangerous territory for him and he rode alongside Chick with a busy glance roving the darkening streets, and a thick hand hitched close to his gun.

Chick watched that hand, himself uneasy enough. He knew that Dugan was geared to instant action, and if anything happened to start him digging for gunmetal it would be Chick Bronson himself who would draw the first bullet. Dugan had meant that for a promise.

But the streets were almost deserted, and silent. Coming to the small frame building that housed Kimbrough's land company office, they saw the lamp burning inside and the aged clerk on his high stool, working at the desk. They dismounted and tied; Dugan took down the saddlebags, slung them over an arm. He motioned Chick ahead of him, across

the plank walk; at his command Chick pushed the door open.

"Where's your boss?" he asked the clerk who twisted about on his stool.

He thought there was something odd in the way the latter stared at him, before giving answer. "Not here. Over at the Bull's Head, I think."

"Get Kimbrough here," Dugan ordered, in a whisper. "And alone!"

Chick cleared his throat. "Would you fetch him for me? Tell him I got important news that he'll want to hear. And it might be better if he came by himself...."

With Dugan watching, he didn't dare attempt to signal a warning that all was not as it should be. Even so, the clerk was eyeing him strangely and for a moment Chick thought he would decline to carry the message; but he laid aside his pen and slid down off the stool, and without word took hat and coat from a wall peg. They stood aside for him as he scurried through the door, heading for the saloon across the street.

Dugan's nervousness seemed on the increase. He at once began a quick tour of the narrow room, pulling shades, and even trying the rear door for a look into the alley. Then he returned to the front window, waiting there in high tension for Vince Kimbrough to show in the street outside.

A grunt of satisfaction broke from him, finally, as he peered past the drawn shade. "Comin'!" he said. "And alone, all right...." Yet he still fingered the butt of his gun.

Presently Kimbrough's steps were heard hitting the sidewalk and then the door was thrown open. Framed in it, the boss of Lost Wolf stood looking at his visitors.

Chick Bronson had let himself into a chair beside the main desk, that stood next to a shade-drawn window. Kimbrough's stare slid off him, moved to the other man; it considered Dugan for a long moment, then turned again to Chick. "What is this all about, Bronson?"

He would have given much not to have had to answer. He had stalled, up until this moment, by every desperate means—even risking the wel-

fare of the Freemans in order to gain time and a chance at escape. But this chance had failed to present itself; and now that the pay off had arrived, Chick was appalled to see the irremediable damage he had done, in his panicky effort to save his own neck.

He said, miserably, "Dugan's got something he wants to talk to you about, boss. A deal."

"Oh?" Frowning, Kimbrough closed the door behind him and walked into the room. He circled the desk, opened a box of cigars and, taking one, rolled it between his fingertips as he studied Dugan's ugly face. "This has something to do with Ott Stanger, I suppose?"

Dugan shook his head. "If the kid here has been tellin' me straight, what I got to sell is a lot more important to you than Stanger."

TAKING his time about it, Vince Kimbrough lifted the cigar to his lips and bent to turn the flame of the lamp higher, while he got a light at the mouth of the glass chimney. Looking at that gaunt face, with its deep-carved lines and somber mouth shadowed now by the upward spray of lampglow, Chick had to remind himself of the things he had come to know about this man. You would have thought that the heartless greed which motivated him should reveal itself, somewhere, in the mask he wore; yet even now Chick could find in it nothing but a sad and thoughtful earnestness.

Now Kimbrough straightened, the cigar alight and drawing. "Well!" he grunted. "You've got something to sell me, have you?" His voice altered, gone suddenly harsh and rimmed with sarcasm. "Ott Stanger's gunman! And Bronson, here—who of course had my interests at heart. It's only natural that you'd try and arrange to get me here, alone...."

Chick Bronson's spine felt a touch of icy chill at what he heard, thinly concealed, in Kimbrough's voice. Even Dugan seemed to sense that something had gone wrong; he was scowling uncertainly, head thrust

forward, mean eyes pinned to Kimbrough's face.

"Why, this is kind of a private matter," mumbled Dugan. "We don't want the whole world in on it!"

"I'm sure you don't!" The mockery of the other's tone had mounted till it touched his brooding stare. "Sorry!" he said. "But I have to do things my own way." And then, lifting his voice sharply: "All right, Bob!"

At his summons, the alley door swung open under the drive of a boot toe, that sent it slamming into the wall. Bob Creel stood, a spread-legged figure, in the opening—face disfigured by the swollen marks of Chick Bronson's fists, a gun leveled in his hand.

Chick Bronson understood everything, then. The possibility somehow hadn't occurred to him that Creel could find a horse and get here ahead of him, to report what had happened out on the trail. No wonder, then, the clerk had stared! No wonder that Kimbrough, on being told of Chick's audacity in showing himself again in this town, had brought Bob Creel along with him!

But now Ed Dugan's startled oath reminded Chick of another forgotten peril. For yonder Dugan had finally broken free of the first shock and now his big head was swiveling, angry eyes hunting for Chick Bronson. In Dugan's slow brain, all this could have but one meaning. He had been betrayed—and he had given plenty warning what would happen, should anything go wrong.

Hardly even thinking, Chick started for the floor and the poor protection of the bulky desk. Even as he was falling, Dugan shot; the bullet, reaching for Chick's moving figure, chanced to strike the lamp instead. He flinched as hot, splintered glass and burning oil sprayed him, but with it a grateful darkness descended upon the room—a darkness that was made complete by the drawn shades, keeping out any possible filtering of street light.

Straight on the heels of the first shot came a second, from a gun stationed by the rear door. Dimly,

Chick realized that it was Bob Creel, targeting the flash of Dugan's weapon—thinking no doubt that Dugan's bullet had been meant for him. Over and over the guns spoke, stabbing their lances of fire and mingling an ear-punishing racket upon the close air of the room, while Chick Bronson, unarmed and helpless, hugged the floor and waited out the storm.

Dugan's hoarse cry of agony ended it, as abruptly as it had begun. The gunfire ceased. There was the fall of a heavy body; and then, through pulsing gun echoes, Vince Kimbrough's hoarse shout: "One down, Bob! Now, get the other one; get that Bronson devil—"

THERE WAS one chance. The window in the wall behind him was closed, probably locked. But in desperate haste, Chick whirled and grabbing the chair in which he had sat he hurled it at the window. It crashed through, taking wood and glass and shade. And he followed in a reckless dive.

He hit the ground, amid the litter of the broken window, and almost with force enough to knock the wind out of his body. But though dazed, he still had the urgency of self-preservation to bring him stumbling to his feet, for he heard now the pound of boots within as Creel and his master charged the window, cursing the furniture they stumbled against in the dark.

Seeking flight, Chick thought first of his horse, tied out front of the office, and he turned along the side of the building in that direction. Almost at once, however, he checked himself. Others were coming that way; he could hear the scuff of running boots, and a voice he thought belonged to the sheriff yelled: "What's going on? You having trouble, Kimbrough?"

"It's Bronson!" answered Kimbrough's shout within the office. "He just killed a man. Don't let him reach his horse. Bob, you get out the back way in case he breaks for the alley!"

Blocked, Chick halted just short of the building corner and wheeled,

thinking to try an escape toward the rear before Creel had time to cut him off. But next moment he had to hurl himself flat against the clapboard siding, just as Vince Kimbrough thrust head and shoulders through the shattered window a couple yards or so from where he stood.

He sucked in breath, trying to weld himself there so the other man couldn't line up his profile against the dim light of the street beyond. And now, running men were coming past him round the corner of the building, so close that their clothing all but brushed his own.

"Didn't head that way, Kimbrough!"

"The alley, then. But leave a guard to watch his horse."

"I already did," the sheriff answered; and to his followers: "Come on, come on! Let's move!" It occurred to Chick that Mark Murray seemed to be acting pretty spry, for a man supposedly just recovered from a smashed hip. Probably that, too, had all been part of the trap they'd laid for old Matt Freeman, with Chick himself as the bait.

Murray had nearly a dozen with him. And as they went past Chick, their boots spurting cinders against his legs, he saw a single, risky chance to get out of this predicament. Suddenly pushing away from his hiding place, he fell into stride and went with them through the darkness, passing just beneath the window where Vince Kimbrough leaned out to wave them on.

Back in the alley, they bunched up briefly as the sheriff halted for a puzzled word with Bob Creel, who had arrived ahead of them. "Hanged if I know where he went!" Creel said. "Not a sign of him here. He must have been moving plenty fast!"

"We'd have spotted him, sure, did he cut toward the street!" Murray insisted.

By this time Vince Kimbrough had come hurrying from the rear door of the office building. "Talking won't find him!" he snapped, impatiently. "Split up the men. Leave a couple here in case he doubles back, and the rest of us will try both ends of the alley. If we don't cross his

trail by then we'll have to start searching the houses. Because, I want that man, Sheriff—whether dead or alive, it doesn't matter which! I want him!"

CHAPTER XV

The Showdown

"RIGHT, BOSS!" Mark Murray started shouting orders. "You men heard that—the guy's a killer, and we aren't letting him get away.... You!" His finger stabbed the air twice, the second time straight at Chick Bronson. "And you! Watch for him here, and keep your eyes peeled! The rest—start moving!"

In another second or two he had the bunch of men halved and they were hurrying off, down either wing of the long, black alley.

So many things were happening so fast that Chick could feel his head spinning, his tight-stretched nerves making leaps that sent spasms of chill coursing his sweaty, trembling body. He tried to force himself under control, as he stood there in deep shadows with the face of that other man who had been left behind making a dim blob, not far from him. It seemed to him that the pounding of his own heart must drown out every other noise of the night.

His companion said suddenly, "Aw, the devil! They'll never catch him!"

Chick shot him a glance; seeing that the other was looking at him he tried to draw farther back into the shadows. He didn't dare betray himself by speaking.

"They let him through their hands," the man continued. "He'll find him a horse and be out of town while they're still beating the alleys! Right?" This time he waited for a reply and, getting none, asked another question. "Any idea who it was the guy's supposed to have killed?"

Forced to answer, Chick managed a muffled, "No!" and then held his breath, waiting. But his companion seemed to notice nothing and time dragged on for another minute, broken by the distant sounds of the

manhunters calling back and forth along the alley.

"Aw, the devil with it!" the man grunted, in sudden disgust. And he snapped a match for the cigarette he had stuffed between his lips.

"Put that out!" cried Chick, hoarsely. But the glow of the light had already touched his face, and before he could reach the man's arm to bat the match out of his hand, he knew he had been recognized.

"Say! Ain't you—?"

Chick hit him, his knuckles merely grazing the beard stubble of the other's flat jaw. A warning squawk broke from the man: "It's Bronson! Hey, Sheriff!" Then, desperately, Chick struck again and this time his blow struck home.

He felt the head jerk back under his fist, heard the solid thud as it bounced hard against the wall. That was really what put the fellow out. He slid limply down; and the gun he had started to pull went spinning out of his fingers, to clatter somewhere among cinders.

No time to hunt for it—already, from either ends of the alley, the manhunters were returning in full cry. Chick speared an anxious look about him as he flexed his numb right hand to work the feeling back into it. And then, because he had to have a hiding place quick, he picked the only one he saw.

There was a rainbarrel below the rear corner of Kimbrough's flat-roofed, one-storied office building. Chick crossed to it, leaped to a precarious balance on the rim. The barrel threatened to topple; righted itself. Then, chafing his hands on tarpaper roofing, he pulled himself up, got his elbows under him and with a convulsive movement wriggled atop the building and flopped there prone.

Almost immediately, the alley below him seemed to be swarming with men. He lay and listened to them, heard Vince Kimbrough demanding to know who had called out, and what had become of the pair that had been stationed here.

About this time someone stumbled over the man Chick Bronson had hit. He was already recovering.

They got him roused and in a few minutes had the story from him.

"Come on!" yelled Kimbrough. "He's somewhere right under our noses! Find him, wherever he is! Don't let him get to a horse—don't let him leave this town. I want that killer!"

A VOICE he knew belonged to Bob Creel said savagely, "You don't want him any more than I do! If I ever just get my hands on him..."

The manhunt continued. It had fanned out now to cover the entire town, with scarcely a man who wasn't spurred to take part. And Chick Bronson, spread flat on the office roof with the night wind whipping coldly at him, wondered bleakly just what his chances were. He had crawled to the forward edge of the roof, peering over in time to watch his sorrel and Ed Dugan's horse being led away somewhere for safekeeping. They intended making sure of him all right. All the scattered hitch racks had been cleared, the horses collected and placed under guard.

He watched the dark figures of armed men moving through the town, going from house to house now, probing every shed and cellarway where a man might hide. Other men had mounted and ridden to circle the town and try to pick up his trail in case he attempted to sneak away on foot. One rider was sent spurring out of town on the west trail, clattering briefly over the planks of the bridge; Chick guessed that one must be heading toward Box K to bring reinforcements from the bunkhouse crew.

No one, apparently, had thought to try the rooftops; but no telling when they might think of it.

The best part of an hour dragged out; the search seemed to have passed its height of activity, begun to simmer down. Sooner or later, he thought desperately, they were bound to relax their vigilance enough for him to sneak down from his perch; otherwise, the coming of daylight would eventually betray him.

All he asked now was a chance to

be free of this town, and this valley, and the grief they had meant to him. Lying there, scared and bone-chilled by the wind, he went over it all in his mind—back to its beginnings in the jailhouse where Ward McCarey had slipped him a doomed silver dollar, and gone out to his death. Now Ott Stanger was dead, and big Dugan. And that cursed dollar was still in his pocket.

He ought to have flung it away, long ago. Not only had it given him no good luck, but it had brought misery to himself and to the Freemans—had even cost him his old sorrel gelding and, before the night was ended, perhaps his life as well.

He had reached this point in his bleak musings when he heard Kimbrough and Bob Creel return together and enter the office, below him.

Through the roof timbers the sounds of their moving about were plain down there, while their voices came as an indistinct rumbling. Once, when Creel stumbled against some piece of furniture in the dark, Chick caught his angry words. Shortly after this, he judged that Kimbrough had located a new lamp and got it burning.

The droning voices continued sporadically; and then, suddenly, came the thing he had been waiting for—the startled exclamation that told him the saddlebags by Ed Dugan's body had been discovered and opened. "Look, boss!" he heard Bob Creel yell out, quite distinctly. "Look at the bank wrappers! It's what McCarey—"

"Not so loud you fool!" rapped Kimbrough. Their voices dropped away again, but the listener could tell they were talking rapidly and with a fierce intensity. And little wonder! That was a good piece of money for any man to have drop into his lap—even a man of Kimbrough's stature. He, of course, would know of a way to use it, despite the tell-tale serial numbers.

AND SO, AFTER all the men who had died for it—the bank clerk at Three Pines, McCarey himself; Stanger; Dugan—the money

was at last to end in the greedy hands of Vince Kimbrough. Not only that, it gave added reason why one man more must die; for Kimbrough would be doubly concerned now that Chick Bronson be put out of the way, so as to preserve the secret intact.

It was while Chick was trying with renewed effort to catch some hint of what went on in that room below him, that he became aware of a new sound blanketing the hum of voices, growing momentarily stronger. He lifted his head, and saw the riders as they moved slowly into sight along the street.

He blinked, and stared again. For so many riders, they came with little noise or confusion. There were nearly two dozen, he thought—hard to count exactly in the occasional glow of windows as they drifted past. But he saw a face or two he recognized, and startled understanding filled in the rest.

Leading them were Martin Talbot, and old Matt Freeman. So, these must be the Pool ranchers and their crews—but never before had they ventured to ride in force like this, into Vince Kimbrough's town!

Up there on the roof with the harsh wind whipping at him, Chick Bronson watched and could hardly believe it as he saw those horsemen pull rein below him, at a signal from Talbot's upraised hand. Spread out, they nearly filled the wide street. Restless horses stamped and blew, with a rattling of bit chains here and there. Lamplight touched up glints of brightness that Chick knew must mean short-guns and rifles, openly carried.

A word spoken to quiet a horse sounded once or twice; while in the forefront, Talbot and Freeman and one or two other leaders were holding hurried counsel, pointing now and then at the office building where lamplight showed behind the drawn blind of the front window.

Suddenly Martin Talbot spurred his mount forward, and he called sharply into the stillness: "All right, Kimbrough! If you're there, step out!"

The buzz of voices beneath Chick

sheared off, abruptly. Here and there, doors and windows began to slam open; a few men drifted out onto porches and under the tin-roofed arcades that fronted along the street. But none of these ventured further, and from the land company office itself there was no sound at all for long moments.

THEN BOOTS strode heavily forward and the door was flung open, laying a pattern of lamplight over the ground before it. Centering this, was the long shadow of Vince Kimbrough. It flowed out across the plank sidewalk, across the ruts of the roadway. And then Bob Creel stepped through the door behind his boss, quickly moving to one side.

Coming cautiously up onto his elbows Chick Bronson found he could look directly down on that pair of foreshortened figures; but he himself apparently remained unnoticed as yet, by anyone below.

"Well? I'm here!" said Kimbrough, laying his voice across the windy, shadow-clotted street. "Who calls my name?"

Martin Talbot answered him, loudly, "The members of the Pool! Can you guess why we've come? It's because we're fed up—fed up and ready for a settlement!"

"Don't you realize you're talking foolishness?" Kimbrough's voice held a weary patience that might have deceived Chick Bronson, twenty-four hours ago. "You merely want someone you can blame for your troubles—a way of letting off steam, after nursing personal grievances too long without any kind of release.

"I've done nothing to you! Your troubles are economic, and nationwide. Go on home, and think it over; you'll see that I'm talking sense!"

"You can't put us off with words!" retorted Talbot, "If we're fools, it's for not having done this before! It's for thinking we could settle our score with you in any other way!"

"Just step out of the saddle, Talbot!" Bob Creel challenged. "If you're so hot on settling something—"

"No!"

Kimbrough flung an arm across his

gunman's chest, to hold him back. "I've said a hundred times I won't stand for violence!" he cried. "My God! Can't we act like reasonable men? Just what is it you people think you want with me?"

"To run you out of town, Kimbrough!" somebody in the mass of riders shouted back. "And clean off this range."

Martin Talbot had piled his hands on the saddlehorn; he leaned forward upon them, looking straight at Kimbrough across the acrid dust. "We took a vote," he said, quietly. "After what we learned today, we're agreed there's nothing else left us."

"And may I ask what it was you learned?"

"Just the schemes you cooked up to discredit our candidate in the election next week! Tax frauds, and robbery, and murder.... You were stopped, there; but if we let it go you'll try some other trick—and maybe that time you'll get away with it. We aren't going to give you the chance. This is showdown!"

CHAPTER XVI

White-Hot Hate

KIMBROUGH'S voice was rough-edged with suppressed anger. "Where did you hear anything as fantastic as this—if you didn't make it up out of whole cloth?"

"We got it from a good source: from one of your own men—Bronson!"

"Bronson!" The name was spat out, scornfully. "That cheap crook! He took me in, too, with his lies—took me in so well that I gave the grubliner a job and even got him work collecting taxes for the sheriff. It wasn't till today that I found out he's been falsifying his collection and pocketing the difference. Naturally, I fired him—gave him an hour to quit the valley. And this is how he gets back at me: he tells you these lies, and then he sneaks back into town to try and kill me himself!"

A gasp broke from the man who listened, unseen in the darkness of the roof, to this vilification. He

might even have lost his head, right then, had it not been for the quiet answer spoken by Old Matt Freeman:

"We counted on you giving us some such yarn. I reckon we'll stick with Bronson's version!"

Vince Kimbrough must have known, then, that talking had failed. Yet what he said, after the briefest of pauses, was, "I tell you what. We'll never accomplish anything this way. Why don't we step across the street to the Bull's Head, and all have a drink—on me, of course. Surely we can work this thing out...."

And Chick knew what the man was doing—stalling, desperately. Even though Lone Wolf was his town, Kimbrough could not hope too much for help from those who watched from the shadows along the street; not even Mart Murray could do much against such odds. Kimbrough's real strength lay in the guns of the Box K—and Chick remembered suddenly that he had seen a rider leaving town an hour earlier, heading across the river. Kimbrough must figure that if he could keep these others talking long enough, the arrival of Spud Pearson and the crew would tip the balance.

He was not going to manage this, however. For Martin Talbot turned in the saddle, and he was telling his followers: "I don't think we need any of this gent's whiskey! It wouldn't be polite to drink with him, just before we run him out of town."

"Hell, no!" someone echoed. "Let's get on with what we came for!"

And as a stirring went through them, Vince Kimbrough turned and spoke softly to his henchman—but not so softly that the man on the edge of the roof failed to hear every word: "Get their leader! Get Talbot and get him good! Then we'll duck inside and hold off the rest of them until help comes!"

There was no time to think, or to weigh the danger. Martin Talbot was still twisted about on his horse, unaware what went on behind him. And as Bob Creel's gun came sliding smoothly from holster, Chick Bronson came up quickly to his heels

and launched himself, in a flat dive straight off the edge of the roof.

A startled yell from someone was the only warning Creel got. Then Chick's full weight hit him, solidly, and he went down, absorbing most of the shock. Even so, Chick had some of the wind knocked partly out of him and he lay there dazed and gasping, to become gradually aware that the man beneath him had begun to struggle.

The shouting of the crowd seemed to pour in upon his ears; at the same moment—like the releasing of a dike. He stirred himself, collected his strength. Bob Creel was really fighting, now, trying hard to buck him off but not as yet with a great deal of steam. Chick cursed, and put all he had into a clubbing, chopping blow, that he drove at the back of the man's neck.

IT WAS ENOUGH. All the fight ran out of Creel, and he collapsed—so completely and suddenly that Chick lost balance and had to catch himself by stabbing a hand against the sidewalk planking.

Crouched like that, he lifted his head. Bob Creel's sixshooter lay in the dirt just beyond the sidewalk, where it had slid as it fell from the gunman's hand. Knowing he had only seconds, Chick went for it. The edge of the planking struck his chest and then he was groping, scrabbling in the dirt in an effort to get his fingers on the weapon. And it was then that the other gun spoke, and a skewer of white-hot fire burnt its way into Chick Bronson's thigh.

His whole body jerked to the drive of the bullet. Through sweat and bullet shock he peered upward—straight up into the muzzle of Vince Kimbrough's smoking sixshooter, and into Kimbrough's face.

All the hypocrisy was missing from that face. It was twisted, angry, vengeful; ugly with his hatred of this grub-line rider who had spelled the ruin of his scheming. Everything else appeared to have been forgotten, except his eagerness to see Chick Bronson's death. And it was obvious, too, that the Pool men were themselves too much in the grip of

surprise for them to move quickly enough to interfere.

Chick sensed this, dimly, and the need to save himself kept him going. He got his fingers closed on the fallen gun, somehow, and he brought it up though it seemed to weigh a tremendous amount. The hammer resisted him as he fought it back into cock. It took all his strength to tilt the muzzle upward, and to work the trigger.

He never knew for certain whether Kimbrough got off a second bullet or not; but he did feel the kick of his own shot, slamming the revolver butt against his palm. Moments later, when he heard old Matt Freeman's anxious voice and felt hands upon him, lifting him, he had presence of mind to murmur thickly: "Get the saddlebags out of the office. Hold on to them. Don't let anything—happen to them..." From a great distance he seemed to hear his voice saying it.

The bunk room at the Lazy F was a pleasant place, these days, with the yellow November sunlight that flooded through the windows and the warm, rich smells from the kitchen swimming there. Josie Freeman had managed to learn all of Chick's favorite dishes, and the kind of pie he liked best; and she kept the big wood range busy, just turning them out.

It really wasn't quite fair, Chick felt, to treat a man that way—an invalid who couldn't help himself, but whose hurts were fast mending so that he would soon have to be riding away and leaving all this behind him, taking with him only the memory of a girl with music in her voice and warm brown eyes; a girl he couldn't have. But he kept these thoughts and feelings, naturally, to himself.

THEY SAW little of Matt, these days; the newly elected county judge had his hands full enough in town, what with the break-up of Vince Kimbrough's range empire and the new broom that was being used to sweep all of Kimbrough's crooked hirelings clean out of the county courthouse. Maybe Freeman savvied

little of book-law but what he didn't know he made up for with rigid honesty and native common sense; and not only did his frail body bear up under this pressure of work but seemed actually to thrive under it, developing surprising reserves of strength. His color and spirits had never been better.

One particular afternoon he and Martin Talbot rode out from town together, and in the barn Matt found Chick Bronson going over his riding gear. Chick still limped some, but as he could at last sit saddle again he had forced himself to ride a little every day. Now there was a certain purposefulness about his actions that told old Matt what was in his mind. Hitching to a seat on the edge of an oatbin, Matt said quietly, "Figuring to leave us?"

Chick nodded, not looking at him. "Yeah," he said. "Tomorrow."

"Josie know about it?"

"No, I wasn't going to tell her—thought she might argue. I'm well enough to ride, though, and I can't stay on here forever. I got to be finding me a job before winter hits."

The way Matt watched him checking the stitching of a latigo buckle, he appeared in no great hurry to answer; yet it was plain that he had something on his mind and was only holding back, savoring the excitement of what he had to tell.

"Interesting news in town today," he blurted finally, his mild eyes twinkling. "Seems the beef market in Kansas City and Chicago has done taken a tilt upward. Nothing much, yet—still, the experts say it's the bottom of the trough. Come spring, anyway, and things ought to be on the upswing."

"That's fine," agreed Chick, but somehow with no real enthusiasm. "It's fine for all of us."

Matt continued, nodding, his eyes on Chick while he settled back comfortably with bony hands wrapped about one knee: "Yes, come spring, and with no Kimbrough around to keep us all in hot water, things on the Lost Wolf should look better than they ever have. We ought to be able to put a crew in that bunk

room again, and start running some cattle.

"For right now, there's a lot of things that need doing, to get ready. And my hands are pretty full with the job in town. What I'm getting at," he finished, bluntly, "is that I wish you'd stick around, Bronson, and kind of take charge of the place!"

Chick lifted his head to stare at him. "You honestly mean that?"

"Sure. You're a good man that wants a job; I got a job that wants a man. And there's no man I'd rather have than you!"

The old man waited, his face smiling and warm with pleasure; but Chick Bronson did not answer him at once. Slowly, he straightened from his work. He walked over to the doorway and leaned there looking into the yard, with the bleak November sunlight on him. "Sorry," he said, finally. "I appreciate this. But I can't stay."

"What!" The old man came off the box in a hurry, stunned. "What do you mean you can't?"

"Lost Wolf River has been nothing but bad luck from the day I hit it." Chick's tone was dull, the words coming out of him jerkily. "It's nice country—but a man can generally tell when a place is jinxed for him. I've long decided I'd best get out as soon as I was able to stick to a saddle. My mind's made up."

"Hang it, you don't make sense!" exclaimed the old man, angry now. But by then he had come up in back of the younger man and, past Chick's elbow, could see the pair who stood talking earnestly out there in the yard, beside the abandoned well—Josie, and Martin Talbot. The girl's face was tilted up, very close to his, and his strong hand lay upon her arm.

When Matt spoke again, it was in a changed voice; there was understanding in him. He said, quietly, "You haven't been telling me your real reasons, have you?"

CHICK BRONSON stiffened. Then, going loose again, he said gruffly, "No. I ain't!" And not looking at the old man again, he

pulled away from the door and headed for the house, with a purposeful stride.

In the bunk room he slammed the door, dropped down onto the edge of his bed and scowled at the worn floorboards, as though he might find his troubled thoughts written there. His fingers, digging in a pocket, happened to come upon the battered shape of Ward McCarey's lucky dollar. He brought it out, looked at the pit of brightness where a bullet had once struck...and with a sudden, convulsive gesture flung it from him, to roll from sight beneath a wall bunk on the other side of the room.

"Better if I had never laid eyes on the blame thing," he grunted bleakly.

After that he went down on hands and knees and dragged his saddle roll from under the bunk. Unfastening the straps, he spread the blankets out and began putting away in them the few odds and ends of personal belongings that he had about the room, leaving out only his new, long-shanked razor, and the clothing he would wear next day. He had the roll assembled and was pulling the straps tight when Josie Freeman's knock sounded at the door.

She entered at his call, and saw what he had been up to. Her face was clouded. "Grampa said you were leaving. It's true, then?"

"True enough. High time I pulled out, I figure."

Josie didn't look at him, only at the neatly rolled blankets; it was as though she didn't want to see what was in his brooding eyes—or show him what lay in hers. She said, in a low voice, "Don't you like—like us?"

"Maybe it's a question," he told her flatly, "of likin' too well. Likin' something I can't have!"

"And so you mean to run away from it—as you ran away from that Ozark farm you once told me about!"

He scowled. "It's not the same thing at all." Giving the bedroll strap a savage pull, he told himself he didn't want to lose his temper with her.

This time she did look at him.

(Please Turn To Page 129)

STAGE TO SUNDANCE

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

"Driver—stand and deliver," the outlaw barked!



The girl from the East said her intended was waiting for her, but the marshal knew she'd be running into the arms of a killer . . .

HE PACED slowly, in blasting sunlight outside the squat adobe stage station, a black cigar clamped savagely in the corner of his mouth. At thought of what he was about to do, his innards turned. Even now, even before the stage rolled in. Nothing in his twenty-four years, always hard and often violent, had in the least prepared him for it.

A big man, this Jeff Morgan, but so tall he seemed lean; windy-eyed and leathery of skin. His hat had the

wide brim and flat crown known as Californian, pants tucked into dusty half boots, split tail of his broadcloth coat reaching almost to his knees behind. Beneath the unbuttoned coat, decently concealed, was belted a loosely holstered six-shooter. Its handle carried no notches—though it could have, had he been that kind of boastful man.

Far across the heat-glittering plain grew a plume of dust, led now by bobbing stage horses and the rocking Concord Coach. One of the passen-

gers would be a woman. From Kansas City she had traveled the Overland to Indian Wells, and there transferred to this branch line that twice weekly threaded the mountain mines. Her destination would be Sundance. And a wedding. Her name was Candace Blake.

All this, Jeff Morgan knew, though he had never spoken to Candace Blake, nor even set eyes on her, and now wished to God he never had to.

As the stage drew closer, station agent and hostler, grease bucket and brush in hand, loafed out from the adobe. They caught up the relief horses, leading them from the corral just as the stage rumbled in at a dusty gallop, wheels screeching, lathered animals gustily blowing. Billy Grey, wizened as a brown monkey, and as agile, hopped down from the driver's seat.

As he slapped dust from himself, his quick glance touched Jeff with faint surprise, but all he said was, "Jeff, howdy," and turned to open the stage door. Jeff heard him saying in stiff-toned embarrassment:

"We stop here a few minutes Miss—if you're of a mind to freshen up or anything—I mean stretch your legs—limbs—oh, hell, begging your pardon, Miss—"

He pulled back hastily, redfaced as he commenced helping the holster hook in the relief, a task which as driver he normally scorned. Jeff grinned, waiting to see if the passenger would get out.

After a moment she did, slim in her long-skirted traveling dress, and younger even than he had expected. The pretty face was shadowed a little with the mystery of a wispy veil that trailed from the turban-like little hat with its curled—and somehow pathetic—red feather. He found himself wishing she could have been older, and plainer.

He said, motioning briefly, "Washroom's through the station, Miss," and she murmured what must have been a 'thank you', and went into the adobe building. She had stood irresolute only an instant, yet in that brief space he sensed

the strain in her face from a thousand miles and more of staging, and the uncertainty waiting yet ahead, this young and sheltered person journeying along into the wilderness West to marry a man she could not have seen for a year and likely longer. Or rather the hope of marrying him—for this was the task Jeff Morgan now had, to put to death that hope.

WHEN SHE returned to the stage from the station the fresh horses were hooked in and the hostler just finishing greasing the wheels. Billy Grey swung up on the driver's box. He looked down at Jeff, motioning inquiringly to the seat beside him. Jeff shook his head, and Billy shrugged briefly, gathering the reins, but again his eyes were touched with that quick curiosity.

Flipping away his cigar, Jeff stepped into the coach. He sat opposite the girl, facing backward. She kept her glance out the window as Billy Grey's long whip cracked like a pistol shot. The coach lurched into sudden motion, then settled into the rocking sway of its leather thorough-braces for the long miles ahead. Already it was late afternoon, and Sundance would not be reached until well past midnight.

The coach smelled of dust and leather and the faint fragrance, now, of cologne. In its hotly shadowed dusk he studied his traveling companion. Suddenly he wanted her to talk, to confirm in her own words all he was working to bring about—and that he hoped, now, in spite of himself, would somehow fail.

"Miss," he said, "I'm Jeff Morgan by name, begging your pardon."

She glanced around, a faint amusement in her eyes. "Why beg my pardon for that? It sounds like a good enough name."

"I only meant," he said, "that the distance, and the heat and dust, too, seem a mite less when folks can talk."

She smiled then, and lifted the veil from her face. "I'm Candace Blake."

Her quick friendliness brought again that sour distaste for the use to which he had to put her. But he only said, "Proud to make your acquaintance, Miss. Traveling far?"

"Only to Sundance now," she said. "But I've come all the way from Kansas City."

"I'm for Sundance too," Jeff told her.

Interest quickened in her face. "Why, then," she said, "maybe you know my—my intended. Frank Corley. He lives in Sundance."

"Corley?" Jeff pondered. "Frank Corley? Can't say I recollect him, but then I haven't been back to Sundance for quite a spell. Lots of new people coming in and out of the mines these days. He work in the mines?"

"He owns a mine," she said, a little proudly. She went on, looking happy and excited in the dimness of the rocking stage, "When he went West to the gold fields—more than two years ago it was—he promised to send for me as soon as he made good. For a long time I didn't hear from him—I was afraid something had happened to him—or even, I guess, that maybe he no longer wanted to wed me—but then he wrote. He'd had a hard time—but at last he'd struck it rich. He said for me to come right away—that we'll be married as soon as I get there."

All that Jeff had already known was now confirmed—and none of it at all was what Candace Blake thought it was. He turned the talk and let it dwindle and presently as she cuddled a little in the corner of the seat, he knew that she was asleep.

THE HOT day was wearing away, and with it the long miles to Sundance. Through the window he watched the purpling twilight, as they left the plain and began a twisting ascent through the humped and tawny foothills. His gaze went back to the sleeping girl. He tried not to think of that moment ahead when she would step from the stage at Sundance. Run happily into the arms of a waiting man, and by that

act identify at last an infamous road agent and killer long known only as Comanche Bart. End the long hunt, the first clue to which had been the discovery that Comanche Bart's right name was Corley—Frank Corley—that he was originally from Kansas City, and, more importantly, had left there a childhood sweetheart whose name was Candace Blake, and with whom, in all probability, he would sooner or later get in touch.

It hadn't been difficult to have her watched. Not when you were Jeff Morgan, United States Marshal. Things were getting easy these days, too easy maybe, what with the talking telegraph wire strung clean across the country. Easy to get a wire saying this girl was on the Overland, destination Sundance. Easy to meet the stage down on the flats, to take advantage of her natural friendliness, lie, stack the cards against her, bait the trap with her youngness, her innocence, and all her shining hope.

The coach slowed to the steepening grade. The hot and dusty smell of sage and grass gave way to a sharpening tang of pine. In the darkness the sleeping girl was only a curled-up shadow. Pity touched him, and even tenderness, alien to all his past experience. And with it came a hatred for Comanche Bart that was suddenly personal and bile-bitter. In arresting him he would only be saving Candace Blake from the greater misery of innocently marrying him—yet that would make the blow no less shattering, nor lessen at all the contempt she would know for the degrading use to which he himself was putting her, as human bait for the human trap.

He felt the stage level out, and knew they had reached the high flat south of Sundance, now less than three hours away.

A full moon rode the star-fired sky. It drenched the vast mountain world with its ancient silver light. Winding across the high wilderness flat, through blackly brooding pine and the ghostly huddles of white-

boled aspen, the coach with its troubled human freight became little more than a lost speck of dust aimlessly afloat in a timeless universe.

In less than three hours she would step innocently from the stage, and the quarry would move suddenly to seize the bait and the iron jaws of a trap he had given a patient year to setting would at last snap shut...

And then abruptly, all in an instant, everything was changed. The whole pattern fell apart as he heard the quick crack of a rifle shatter the night silence, and a voice, like its echo, bark, "Driver—stand and deliver!"

But Billy Grey didn't. Temper and sheer reflex brought him standing up on the box, cursing, his long whip curling out to crack like a shot over his startled horses. They bolted. They went streaming through the night with the coach rocking and careening behind them.

Both Jeff and the girl had been thrown violently forward. They collided against each other. He grabbed her and pulled her to the floor of the stage. From behind, over a muffled roar of pursuing hoofs, came a quick crackle of gun-fire. He shouted, "Keep down," fearful she would be struck by a bullet slashing through sides or back of the careening coach, and then he was pulling his six-shooter, writhing upward, driving his head and shoulders through the window.

THREE HORSEMEN were pounding after them, guns barking and flashing, strung out in the moonlight along the narrow stage trace. He cut loose with his own weapon. It throbbed in his hand. But the angle was hopeless, the coach so wildly careening, that he knew he was only wasting powder.

Came another burst of fire, bullets wailing past, and as the coach gave a sudden drunken lurch he sensed that one of the horses had been hit, heard the neighing screams of its mates as they piled up and over the fallen animal. At the same instant

the coach stood straight up on its front wheels, like a bucking horse, jolted back, teetered crazily, and then crashed over on its side in a splintering explosion of breaking wood. He felt the girl move beside him, and asked quickly, "You hurt?"

"I don't think so." Her hands found him in the dark, clutching a little wildly. "Did the horses run away—I was asleep—but there was shooting—are we being held up? What—"

Before he could answer, the whole top of the stage seemed suddenly to yawn open, moonlight pouring in, and then he realized that the stage was on its side and this was just the door being pulled open. A face with a bandana tied across the lower half peered down. Moonlight glinted on the menacing barrel of a six-shooter.

"Let's climb out of there," came the order. "And keep your hands where I can see them."

"There's a woman here," Jeff said. "Let her out first."

"It's gentlemen first this time," the masked man said. "You should ought to know that. Now shake a leg."

Jeff climbed out. The man, as tall as Jeff, motioned him aside and said, "Up." Though Jeff had lost his gun when the stage capsized, he elevated his hands. Two riders, also masked, each holding an extra saddled mount, were reined up beside the wrecked coach, and now shifted the rifles half-levered in the crooks of their arms to cover him. The tangled stage horses were quieting now, after stamping and tossing their heads around their fallen mate. And off to one side, limply sprawled, was Billy Grey, but whether he was dead or just stunned, Jeff had no way of telling.

Candace Blake climbed out of the coach, avoiding the masked man's proffered hand as she jumped lightly to the ground. She was clutching her dress against one slim shoulder, from which it had apparently been torn, but otherwise appeared unhurt.

Curiously now the fellow bent close to her, talking in a low but seemingly urgent voice. At first she

seemed bewildered, and then suddenly to be protesting bitterly.

Abruptly the outlaw snapped something. He half turned, indicating Jeff with the barrel of his gun. The girl drew back, her face white and startled in the moonlight.

And then suddenly the whole slim body seemed to wilt, as though surrendering helplessly to whatever it was the man had demanded. She walked ahead of him to one of the two saddled extra horses being held by the pair of riders covering Jeff. The masked man half helped and half forced her into the saddle.

SURPRISE and a sudden cold anger washed through Jeff. He had expected the stage robbers to take their valuables, possibly even the girl's, but not to molest her. To his experience, and the West of his time, this was one crime at least that was virtually unknown. He spoke harshly.

"Take whatever we got," he said, "but let the girl be."

The outlaw turned, stepping quickly to Jeff. "As it happens, this time, she's all we're after." His six-gun nudged Jeff's stomach. "Any objections?"

"You do this," Jeff said, "and just killing me won't help you. Word'll get around. Won't be a man in the country who won't be hunting you. Even your own kind."

The bandit shrugged. "Only if we was taking her against her will. But we ain't. She wants to come with us." He turned toward her. "Don't you, Miss Blake? Tell him that, Miss. Say you want to come with us."

She stared toward them from the horse, almost blankly, her head lifting in the moonlight in that distraught, bewildered way. Suddenly she murmured in a toneless voice: "Yes, I—I want—I want to go with you."

Jeff looked at the lank outlaw, his gaze narrowed speculatively. "Can't figure," he said, "what you've done to make her say that. Unless—" He paused, measuring his chances. "Or maybe," he added suddenly, "I just read her wrong. If that's what she

is it's nothing to me."

"That's better," the lank one said.

He turned, starting toward his horse. And as he turned, Jeff leaped. He smashed himself against the man's back. He wrapped his arms around him, pinning them to his sides, driving him forward in a running rush. The bandit cursed, and and shouted, "Don't shoot," to his henchmen, fearful of being hit himself, which was just what Jeff intended. He was gambling on rushing the outlaw off the trail and there grabbing and wresting from him his six-shooter.

But the man was powerful, and with a tremendous wrenching twist suddenly broke free. Jeff saw him whirl, saw his six-gun pounce up like a striking rattler. He looked straight into the black muzzle, and at the same instant heard Candace Blakes's quick cry, "Don't! *Don't!* Or I'll never—"

And then the gun crashed, flamed, less than three feet from Jeff's face. But even as it exploded, almost at the instant of Candace's protest, it was swiveled slightly aside, so that Jeff, half blinded by the flash, felt only the hot blast of powder and heard only the close snarling wail of lead snipping past his head. Dimly he saw the continuing swing of the rising gun and felt the barrel crash against the side of his head in a slashing blow. He saw a burst of colored light, his knees dissolving, and then the ground seemed to rise up with sudden force and smash against him.

WHEN HE came to, a few minutes later, the bandits had left. He had the sense to remain quiet for a space, letting his head clear, and then took his time getting to his feet. He walked around slowly, dragging in great gulps of the pungent pine-laced air. As the weakness left his legs he went over to Billy Grey.

The gnome-like little driver looked up, conscious now. He cursed waspishly. He said, unbelievably, "They took the girl."

Jeff said, "You bad hurt, Billy?"

"Leg," Billy said. "Numb. Maybe broken. Can't feel it enough to tell. What kind of varmints are they, taking a woman! Plumb dishonest, I calls it."

Jeff knelt beside him, probing the leg, trying to bend it. Billy yelped. "Hell," he said, "can sure feel it now. Don't reckon it's busted though. Hurts too much. Never lost a woman passenger before. Dang varmints. Help me up. I'll see if it'll hold me".

Jeff got to his feet, supported him as he tried out the leg. He found he could hobble around, limping, cussing a little at the pain.

"All right," Jeff said. "I'll get you up on one of the stage horses. You should make it to Sundance in a couple of hours."

"What about you?" Billy asked.

"I'm going after the girl," Jeff said.

You could get help in Sundance," Billy suggested. Only a fool would tie into them alone." He grinned venomously. "Not that I don't wish to hell this leg would let me be a fool."

Jeff nodded. "I'll give them your greetings, Billy. No, too many times Comanche Bart's slipped right through my fingers. This time I'm getting him."

"Comanche Bart?" Billy said. "Was that Comanche held us up?"

"His outfit," Jeff said. "I don't think he was there though. They're taking the girl to him."

"The devil," Billy said. "How you know all that?"

"For one thing," Jeff recalled. "that hombre doing all the talking knew the girl's name. Slipped once and called her Miss Blake. She knows Comanche only as Frank Corley, her intended, and was to meet him in Sundance. I've had her watched nigh a year, figuring he'd send for her sooner or later. Right smart of me, except Comanche was even smarter. Must have got the wind of what I was doing, decided to cut us off, and corral the girl before we ever got to Sundance."

"I was playing possum," Billy said, "just so they woudn't start

practicing up their shooting on me. Heard the girl say as how she wanted to go along with them."

Jeff shrugged. "Likely they told her Comanche was in trouble and needed her. Or maybe she knew from the start and was just pulling wool over my eyes. Women are hard to figure — reckon some of them will go through hades for a skunk quicker than they will for a man. Have the marshal in Sundance make up a posse, Billy, and come back here. I'll leave them a trail."

He rescued his six-shooter from the wrecked stage. Then he freed the stage horses from their dead mate and the coach tethered three, kept one for himself, and got Billy up on another and started him along the trail to Sundance. Now he began the tedious task of back-trailing in the moonlight. First he lit matches, patiently studying the tracks of each horse until presently he discovered one with a broken shoe. With that as identification he rode slowly, dismounting every hundred yards or so to examine the spoor for the broken-shoe sign. For some two hours it led him back along the stage trace until finally, dismounting again to search for tracks, he found it had vanished.

Leading his horse he back-tracked until he again found the spoor. By now the moon had set, the darkness was dissolving grayly, and the black peaks to the east stood stark against a mighty crimson splash of dawn. With the increasing light he soon found where the tracks had left the stage trace and took off along the winding stream bed of a timbered canyon. He made better time now, keeping the horse to a jog, and following an increasingly plain trail, the broken-shoe track, newly crushed grass or brush, and every so often fresh horse droppings.

SOME TIME later he heard a raucous chattering of mountain jays ahead. Presently a faint flavor of woodsmoke stained the morning air, and finally, startlingly close, he heard the sudden neighing of a horse. That was enough. He dis-

mounted, tethering his mount, and went cautiously on afoot, making his way through the dense chaparral that choked the canyon dry-bed. A few moments later the gorge flared suddenly, into a wide mountain meadow, sparsely timbered and steeply walked with granite cliffs.

In the center of the meadow was a low log building, a couple of lean-tos, and a pole corral holding half a dozen horses. Saddles and other gear hung on the corral rails, a man was bent over a cooking fire near one of the lean-tos, and nearby two others sat on a saddle blanket in a cross-legged card game.

These three, Jeff decided, were the same trio who had stopped the stage. Comanche himself was most likely inside the log house, and with him would be Candace Blake. That she was there willingly he didn't want to believe. Yet she had said herself that she wanted to go with the bandits. Comanche had from the start outguessed him. Genuine as her innocence had seemed she could simply have been playing Comanche's game. Women, he guessed, were good actresses, and the sooner he learned that, the less likely he would be to find himself on the outside of a bullet or two.

He studied the layout ahead, probably an abandoned homestead, and likely only one of Comanche Bart's numerous isolated hide-outs. All around the canyon meadow the steep cliffs were fringed with a heavy stand of second-growth pine, aspen, and tangled buckbrush. Concealed in this belt of chaparral Jeff stalked his cautious way along the north side of the canyon. He slipped past the lean-tos and corral. He continued until he had half-circled the log house, putting it between himself and the three at the lean-tos, so he could now approach it unobserved from the rear.

This side of the cabin had a single small window, with a covering flap of ragged canvas, now pulled to one side. Drawing his six-shooter, he silently moved up on this window. As he drew closer he heard a murmur

of voices, a woman's and the heavier tones of a man. He still hoped, before jumping Comanche Bart, to overhear enough to determine whether or not this girl had been actually kidnapped, or had from the start simply played him for a fool.

That, however, wasn't the way it worked out. He got to within only a couple of yards of the window when suddenly it was filled with a startled face. It was Candace Blake's. As she saw him, her eyes flared. Her hand flew to her mouth, but too late to quench the surprised exclamation.

INSTANTLY Jeff leaped at the window, knowing that his only chance now was to cover Comanche before he realized what was happening. He crouched at the window, thrusting his gun through, leveling it on the huge man who even now had reared half out of a chair, his hand slapping against the butt of a holstered six-shooter.

"Let it go," Jeff said. "And hoist—unless you're tired of breathing."

For an instant the big outlaw remained frozen, half out of the chair, fingers clawed against the gun, glaring narrowly. Slowly, reluctantly, his fingers uncoiled from around the gun handle, and he pushed his arms above his head. His mouth started to open, and Jeff said, "Easy now, let's not disturb your boys out yonder."

For an instant then nothing more happened—as though all three of them had been frozen suddenly in their awkward positions. Then Comanche Bart chuckled softly. "Now what?" he wondered. "You can't come through that little window and still keep me covered. But neither can you just stand there pointing that thing at me forever. Sooner or later one of the boys outside will be coming in. Then where'll you be?"

Jeff knew he was right. He looked suddenly at Candace Blake. "Miss," he asked, "you still aim to marry this hombre?"

Her face paled. "How was I to

know?" she asked. "I thought—oh, I'd rather die than marry him now!"

"Back there," he reminded, "at the stage, you said you wanted to go with them."

"Of course I did," she said. "When I was told that you, and the stage driver, too, would be shot down in cold blood if I didn't. Do you think I wanted *that* on my hands?"

For an instant Jeff studied her. And still he didn't know. But he had choice. "Miss," he said, "maybe that's the truth. And maybe not. But it's a chance I got to take. What I mean, I want you to take his gun and cover him with it. While I squeeze through this window. If he moves, pull the trigger."

Her eyes widened slightly. She looked at Jeff. She looked at Comanche Bart. And then she stepped quickly to him. She reached out, a little gingerly, to take the gun—and in that instant he grabbed her, spinning her half around, between himself and Jeff. As he backed swiftly toward the door, holding the struggling girl as a shield, he grinned over her shoulder at Jeff. "Sonny," he said, "you always do forget something, don't you?"

Then he was outside, flinging Candace aside, yelling for his crew at the lean-to. Jeff could hear their confused shouting as he raced backward into the sheltering timber. The next instant they were pouring around the cabin, converging toward him, guns blazing. For a moment he faced them wide-legged, crashing gun bucking against his hand. He saw one of the outlaws pitch head over heels. He swiveled his throbbing gun and saw another stagger suddenly, clutch a shoulder, and then tip over like an upset tenpin. Comanche Bart had pulled back now to the edge of the cabin, was firing from its protection, while the other remaining one was blasting away from somewhere in the timber off to the left.

Caught in that vicious cross-fire Jeff made a running dive for a huge boulder, slid head-first behind it in a

cloud of dust. He pulled into a crouch, half-lifted his head, and instantly a gun banged and something gently plucked his hat from his head. He ducked down, pinned there helplessly as lead wailed and whined above or spanged off the rock.

Then for a moment the fire ceased. He had the creepy feeling they were stealing in on him from opposite sides, yet dared not lift his head to make sure.

Until suddenly he heard a pebble rattle under a foot, and knew that someone was now close, deadly close. He gathered himself and leaped, upward and backward, swiveling his head from side to side as he landed. He saw them plunging down on him one on either side, guns smashing, jetting flame.

For just an instant he looked into Comanche Bart's jeering face, and then smashed and shattered it with two quick shots. He whirled to face the last one, yet before he could fire at him, saw him reel oddly to one side, and suddenly fall, his gun blasting one last shot as he plunged to earth. At the same instant something like a bolt of lightning exploded against Jeff Morgan's head and he felt himself hurtling blindly downward into a bottomless pit of swirling blackness....

DOC WORMSY of Sundance was a stubborn man. For several hours after Jeff came to in his back room he refused to answer questions. "But that bullet only creased me," Jeff protested. The doc said, "You been a normal man, with anything less than solid bone above your neck, you'd be dead now." Then he told him how the marshal's posse sent by Billy Grey arrived only a little while after he'd been shot. "Found Comanche Bart and one of his men dead, the other two badly wounded, and you"—the doc chuckled—"with your head all wrapped up in part of a woman's petticoat. What's more said head was lying on the rest of said petticoat in said woman's lap."

"She all right?" Jeff asked.

"Looks fine to me," the doc said,

with a knowing wink. "Fact is, never saw anything better looking in my life. Too bad she's starting back for Kansas City first thing tomorrow."

Jeff thought again of the contempt she must feel for the use to which he had put her. What Comanche Bart had been mattered not at all. What mattered was only the dream she had known, come here to fulfill, and which was now forever shattered. He'd had no trust in her at all, and still she had risked all that a woman can risk that he, and Billy Grey, might live. Not once, he knew now, but twice, she had put herself between him and certain death.

He was not one to whom apology came easy, yet early that evening he set out for the hotel. He found her on the long porch, in the warm and purpling dusk. "Miss," he said at once, "I used you badly, and I know it. No sense in denying it. I was set on getting Comanche, and I reckon I didn't much care how I did it, or who I hurt."

"That's one way of looking at it," Candace Blake said. "But another is just that you saved me from him. I mean if I had come here and married him—not knowing. Have you thought what that would have meant for me? I have."

Jeff looked at her curiously. He said suddenly, "The one that creased me. He wouldn't have just creased me if he hadn't been hit by a bullet a second before he fired at me. He'd have killed me instead. I didn't fire that bullet."

Her slim shoulders lifted in amaybe even ranching."

brief shrug. "I've no credit coming for that. I didn't even know I'd snatched up a gun from one of those you'd hit until it went off in my hand. I'd never even held a gun before."

"For a hand that never held a gun before," Jeff said, "it fired mighty true."

She gazed up at him suddenly, her eyes bewildered, even a little surprised. "Why, yes," she whispered, almost to herself, "it did, didn't it? Mighty true..."

For a long instant he just looked at her. And for the first time it came to him that the dream he had destroyed for her could possibly be replaced. He was acutely aware of the faint disturbing scent of cologne, and all the loneliness in him was a sudden hollow aching. "I've always figured I'd be a peace officer all my life," he said slowly, tentatively. "But now I'm wondering—if I wouldn't be better off mining—or maybe even ranching.... Leastwise, if I was to get married...."

"Are you getting married?"

"Not if you go back to Kansas City."

Suddenly she was in his arms, half laughing, half crying. "Whoever told you any such crazy thing," she demanded, "that I'd be going back to Kansas City?"

"Well, aren't you?" he asked, grinning a little at last.

"Of course not!" she told him. "How could I, when I have to stay here so you'll be better off mining or

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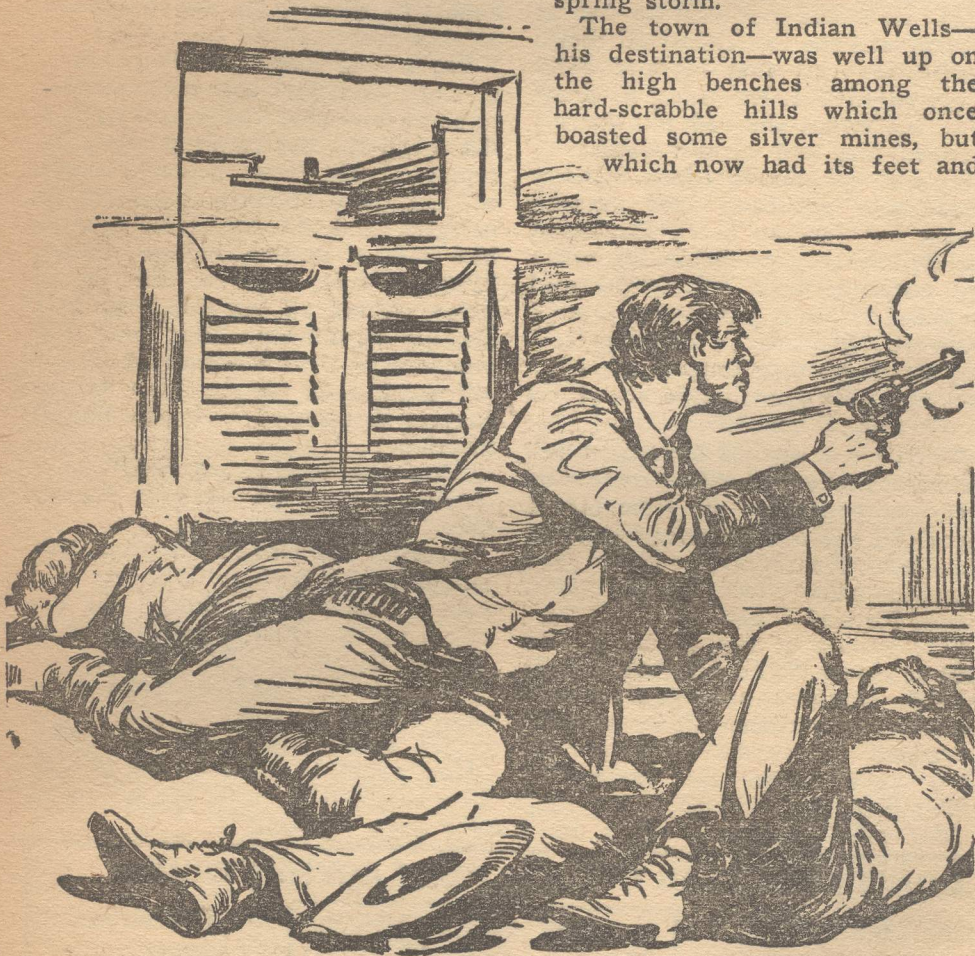
CHAPTER I

OF RAWHIDE AND HUNGER

WADE MCLEAN rode into Indian Valley on an afternoon during a late winter snowstorm. All day he'd faced to-

the pine bowed under the snow's weight. He passed ranches, huddled in the whiteness, corrals plastered, haystacks white and crusted. Hoar-faced red cattle stood in bunches and lowed and chewed at the stacks in their wet misery. He grimaced and pushed on through the spring storm.

The town of Indian Wells—his destination—was well up on the high benches among the hard-scrabble hills which once boasted some silver mines, but which now had its feet and



ward the Sierra Nevadas into a slow rain that had changed to sleet as he lifted up into the nut-pine country, and now wet heavy snow blanketed everything, and McLean cussed it heartily. It was not weather for a Texan.

He was in the mountains now, and

lifeblood in ranching the thousands of rich acres in forest land fingering down into the canyons and foothills.

McLean hunched over his grey horse, a dour, sunburned young Texan whose yellow slicker kept out little of the wet snow and none of the cold, and whose black, stained som-

He was slammed back against the bar...

Fellow Texans they were, but there the similarity ended: any ruckus Wade McLean took cards in must see Tex Dwyer and his merciless cutters on the other side of the table. And bucking the Dwyer gang here would be only part of it — McLean knew he could count himself lucky to live to get that chance. Because hell was afoot on this range, every stranger that rode in was being tested and those not willing to sell their sixes to Satan were slated for permanent residence in Indian Valley—under six feet of sod!

brero—much rolled at the sides—thrust forth over jagged brows and an aquiline nose like the prow of an ancient barque. He was the youngest of the Texas McLeans, of Brazoria County, and the only one not married. By choice or by chance, no one really knew, he had been selected to go to Indian Wells.

The horse trail had been following a slaty canyon. It now broke upward abruptly onto a rugged freight road, and the black outlines of Indian Wells appeared in the grey distance.

McLean straightened. Weariness fled his bony shoulders, and an alert interest grew in his black, triangular-shaped eyes. "We're there, Captain," he said tensely as he shook out the reins.

He rode through the grey waste up the center of the main drag and saw Indian Wells was half-ghost, half-ranching town. A glimmer of light appeared through the snow curtain, and he swung the grey toward the sprawling false-front. The sign said, "Hubbard House—Hotel."

McLean rocked out of the wet saddle, pulled his levis loose, then, with slicker crinkled and fanned up around him, like a mother duck with wings spread, he moved up the snow-covered steps to the veranda. There he paused. He couldn't see too much of the town, but what he could see didn't impress him.

He reached thoughtfully for the makings, and as he rolled the smoke, melting snow dripped through wood cracks of the veranda roof. Already he felt a change in the weather, and knew the back of the storm had been broken. Now he could get around the country, out to this Gus Randig's Broken Spur spread, and see what this "trouble" was that his dad's old partner had written of and for which he had asked McLean help.

He finished wetting his smoke and put it between his lips. His eye caught a man down the veranda. How long the gent had been standing in that farther doorway, McLean didn't know.

He half-turned, easily, fumbled at

his pockets, then walked down. "Got a match, pard?" McLean's eyes were instantly appraising.

Because there was something familiar here—

THE TALL man took his shoulder off the door jamb. He fingered into his cowhide vest with his left hand and silently produced a green-headed match which he extended.

The color of the man's eyes matched that of the match. He was tall, as tall as McLean, with a high-bridged blade of a nose, a hard mouth, a scar low on his neck. He was well clothed. A mouse-grey sombrero slanted negligently on short, brown, curly hair and two guns slanted just as negligently from his slim hips.

McLean felt recollection picking at his mind. The fellow didn't belong in this section. There was a look about him of having been made out of the elements of another range—of thorns, and rawhide, and hunger. This, in spite of the new, good clothes. And that range might be—

"Here y'ar, McLean." Yes, it was unmistakable Texas drawl.

And then McLean knew him—Tex Dwyer of Black-Jack Dwyer's gang.

McLean took the match with casual fingers. "Thanks, Dwyer."

The other didn't show surprise. They hadn't seen each other for years, and then only briefly. They had never been friends, just known of each other, but now the languor of the Deep-South held them momentarily together.

"You getting a piece of this fight?" Dwyer asked. He made no move to shake hands.

McLean broke the blackened matches and sucked deep. "Shouldn't wonder."

The green eyes flickered, then looked at the snow. "Helluva day to be drifting in."

"Yeah—for a Texan. Thanks for the match."

"Okay."

McLean moved away toward the hotel door, and he knew that as sure

as the snow down his back was wet, Tex Dwyer would be on the other side of this ruckus. The Dwyers were that kind—guns for hire but you had to have the cash. And McLean knew that Gus Randig wasn't the one with the money. He wondered how many more had come up with Tex.

A fat man with black sleeve-holders was hanging a big, brass lamp to an iron hook in the lobby ceiling. McLean slapped the sleet from his sombrero.

"Nice weather you geitts got up here."

The man turned. Pale, fleshy eyes took in McLean's single, walnut-butted Colt, then looked out the window. He saw the Texan double-rig of McLean's saddle; stared for a moment, puzzled. Then he grunted, "It'll go away in a day," and went on trimming the lamp's wick.

McLean put his hat back on. "Got an empty room?"

"You working for Hubbard?" The man didn't turn.

"I dunno—yet."

That satisfied something for the fat one. He went back of the drop-board desk. "I can put you up for one night. In the morning you'll have to shove on." He swung a dog-eared ledger. "One room one buck."

A THINNED, bright look had come into McLean's eyes. Men in Brazoria County, seeing that look on Dan McLean's youngest son, would have started counting their friends and guns.

McLean came right out with it. "I reckon I'll stay more than a day. I'm looking for a friend named Randig. Owns a busted-down spread with a Broken Spur brand."

The pen stilled in the fat man's hand, but before he could recover, another voice said in a ragged, crackly voice.

"I heerd ye. You're after my pa'tner Gus, ain't ye? Another o'them tramp gunmen."

McLean turned. This was a little gent who was very drunk. His ragged, black vest was torn; his run-over boots with the toes sharply

up-tilted, were wide apart holding him up. He stood in the doorway of the saloon adjoining the hotel lobby.

"Another blasted Hubbard gunman. Ain't it enough we got that bully, Red John, an' Jug Boseman an'—"

"Go back to your drinking, Talon," the hotel man snapped. "You're drunk, and crazy as a loon again."

The twisted, red face glared at McLean. "What do you want with Gus? He's my pa'tner. We come to town together. You c'n do business with me. You hear? Speak your piece, man."

McLean said mildly, "No business in particular. You say he's in town?"

"Down at Sam Doort's house-warmin' where this whole dang town is—outside of that Hubbard skunk an' me." He indicated the hotel man with a skinny, dirty hand, and almost lost his hold on the door jamb. "I was invited too, me an' Sarah, but she wouldn't come. Sarah's funny sometimes, thataway. She's my daughter. An' me, somebody fed me some bad likker in here an'—" He stopped talkin' and slowly settled to the floor and at once fell asleep.

The hotel man came around the desk cursing. "Drunk and crazy. Gets that way every time he hits town." He hauled the little, ragged man erect and threw him back into the saloon, closing the door.

"Is he Randig's partner?"

"Thinks he is, but Craz Talon's full of bells. So's his daughter."

McLean pulled down his hat. "I'll be back."

"If you want that room, you register now." The man snapped it.

This time McLean smiled. Somebody had given orders to find out about everybody who came to Indian Wells, and McLean thought of the letter inside his shirt pocket: *Don't tell anybody who you are or what you came for. You'll run into enough trouble after I give you the low-down. It's too big to write it on paper...*

So McLean, with his smile, took the chewed implement and in a broad, angular hand, wrote, "Saddle

Mac from Texas." He handed back the pen and walked out of the hotel.

The snow had let up. Surprisingly, warmth and a soft wind was already in the air. McLean pushed through the wet snow and swung into his saddle. He noted Tex Dwyer was gone, and he was relieved.

As he moved down the street, the picture of the town widened, but it didn't change. He knew what the down-country looked like, so now he swung his eyes upward and to the west. It was rugged. Rock slashed with canyon, brush-choked draws, digger pine and scrub oak, and far to the south great reaches which he knew were alkali plains spotted with scanty bunch grass and miles of basaltic rock; stunted junipers and thorny cacti grew there inhabited only by brush rabbits, sage hens, crickets and lizards. He grimaced.

"And I'll bet my bottom dollar that there and to the west is my friend Randig's Broken Spur—"

He grew motionless in saddle. The sound of gunfire came to him on the wet, heavy air. And then he eased back. It was spaced, and even, and he knew it was a shooting match going on at the house-warming. "Get along, Captain. Might have some fun this afternoon yet."

CHAPTER II

"YOU'RE A GUNFIGHTER"

THE HOUSE was big and white and glistening. It stood on a big lot, apart from an old stamping mill and other mining buildings behind it. Across the side street was a long, deserted-looking livery, and across stood a big, white store, "Doort's Gen'l Mdse."

McLean muttered, "Doort must be a big wheel in Indian Wells," and swung off his saddle among the rigs and horses before the wire gate.

With four windows—two up and two down—to a side, the big white house bounced with noise—fiddles squealing, the boots of men stamping the floor, and the laughter of women—but the sound of gunfire from the

barn, where the wide carriage doors had been lifted to admit light, held McLean's attention.

As he turned the corner of the house he saw a woman attempting to work water from a new iron pump. She kept at it, but no water dribbled into the galvanized pail. He hesitated, then stepped forward.

"Can I give you a lift with that handle, m'am?"

"Oh—thank you."

She was young, and pretty, with luminous grey eyes, very bright, and lips very red. Maybe it was the exertion, he thought, for her cheeks were that way also. And she wore a tight, dark-blue bodice with a full skirt.

He wrestled with the pump vigorously and the water came.

"Don't break it," she said.

He looked up, realizing he had been pumping foolishly hard.

"No, m'am."

She laughed, and he reddened.

"It's full! Stop!" she cried after a while.

He stopped. And he felt angry with himself. He wished he'd have let some other man come here to help her. With her brown hair fluffed up like that, she was more vividly lovely than McLean had thought any girl could be. He knew he was blushing, but he couldn't do anything about it, and she was laughing at him with her full-lipped mouth and her bright, mocking eyes.

She reached for the wire handle, and he found himself already taking it. "Thank you." She moved on the shoveled board walk beside him toward the kitchen door.

"You're a stranger to Indian Wells, aren't you?" She sidled those grey eyes upward.

"I reckon I am—for the time being."

"Are you staying with friends?"

"Not yet. I just came in."

"You're a Texan, aren't you?" A frown had puckered between her straight, dark brows.

"Yes'm. I—"

THE KITCHEN door opened, and a stout, warm-looking wom-

an appeared. She laughed at what she saw.

"Why, Bess Randig! You, of all girls! I send you for coffee water, and you go out to the barn and corral yourself a man to pump it for you—"

"I did not!" The girl crimsoned, brilliantly, and McLean gaped. *Bess Randig!* This was the daughter or some relative of the man he had ridden in here to help. The girl cried, defensively, "I was pumping and he just came along—"

"A likely story. Bess Randig, I'd never have thought—"

"Mrs Doort, I'll douse you with this water."

"You'll not!" The red-faced, jolly woman burst into prodigious laughter, grasped the pail of water from McLean's hand and disappeared into the kitchen, crying back, "Don't mind me, cowboy. I have to tease our little Bess. Take your man in and dance, deary."

They were alone, and McLean felt the quick silence. The girl was flushed to a beautiful rose now, and McLean suddenly felt a wicked inner satisfaction. She'd toyed with him a moment ago. He straightened.

"Is this the usual trick for girls in Indian Wells? To go out for coffee water and—"

Her small head came up, but McLean with careful elaborateness went on, sweeping off his grey, wet sombrero and bowing with all the grandiose manner that was his grandfather's in Virginia Reels he remembered years ago. "If you don't mind, miss, you will have to excuse me from dancing. My boots are wet and muddy and I have ridden far, but I'm going to witness the shooting matches and maybe one of the men out there—"

He stopped. The smoky-grey in her eyes was fairly jumping. She was as erect as a line corner post. Her delicate hands were pulled into small, white-boned knots, and the curve and redness of her mouth of but a moment ago had disappeared into a tight line.

"You're a Texan—I know you are—and you're a gunfighter. I can see

that, too. But listening to you and talking to you, I had hoped you wouldn't be another one of *them*, but now I can see—" A ragged sob burst from her slender throat, and she turned grasping for the door handle.

"Wait a minute, Miss. I came to help—" But the slamming of the door was McLean's answer.

He stood indecisive, whirling his wet hat in his lean fingers, and then finally, with a shrug, he put on his hat and stamped off through the snow toward the barn. There'd be time enough to tell the girl that he had come to help her side. The thought of the future gave McLean warm pleasure. He'd see those grey eyes light up warmly toward him, gratefully, and she'd touch his arm...

But McLean didn't know the future.

THERE WERE two dozen men in the barn. A mixture of the country-side—lanky cowmen, flat-hatted, hard-rock miners, a handful of big-knuckled farmers in black serge and square, polished boots. He saw the man who would be the town's livery man—he smelled stoutly of horses and he swore better than any other man in the place. A couple of sedate gentlemen in white shirts and bow-string ties would be fellow merchants of Doort's. McLean took it all in with one swift glance, sniffing the place which smelled of wet mackinaws, slickers, horses, whiskey and tobacco smoke. He wondered which man was Gus Randig.

On one side of the carriage-way, open to the dwindling daylight, two men were paired off and shooting at a target of cardboard nailed against the big hay-mow beam. Other men were waiting their turn, examining their revolvers, talking and laughing, and the boom of the forty-fives filled the air with sound and acrid smoke.

"Winners get whiskey! Winners get whiskey!" A solid, grey-headed citizen, wearing a striped shirt and fancy brocaded vest, shouted it from a horse stall. He had a keg on a plank supported by two carpenter horses and he was waving a tin dipper. This,

McLean decided, was Sam Doort. He drifted toward the host.

What with the crash of side arms and the laughter and shouting, the noise was deafening, and to McLean it looked as if everyone, winners or losers, had already had a couple of dippers' full. The barn-warming crowd was in high spirits.

McLean said, "How's chance of shooting?"

"Ho there, stranger," Doort boomed. "Right in line there. Mock! Fitch! Let my friend step ahead of you. Ain't you got a partner to shoot against? One-eyed Dick! Get up here." A disreputable hanger-on arose from a bale of hay, weaving. "Stranger, if you can't beat One-eye, you can't pull a trigger. Here! I'll give you one to warm up your shooting eye. Whiskey to the winners!" Chuckling, he ran the dipper quarter full.

Explosions filled the air. Two new men toed the line. Revolvers lifted, one at a time. Judges announced their decisions. Again revolvers lifted.

Suddenly a scream went up. It was a man's voice, high-pitched, filled with fear.

"He's shot! He's shot!"

McLean whirled so fast he spilled the whiskey. A wide, grey-thatched man in a calf-skin vest and work-worn levis was slumped to the straw-littered barn floor.

Motionless men stared. Silence held the gathering, so quick, so abrupt that it hurt the ear drums.

"Holy heaven," muttered Doort leaving the whiskey barrel. "Somebody accidentally shot Gus Randig."

"Gus Ran—" McLean dropped the dipper.

Men circled the fallen man. Doort was on his knees, slashing away the man's shirt with his pocket knife, shouting for water and for somebody to run to the house for Doc Haskin. And through all the hub-bub McLean's mind raced like a wild horse before a prairie. *Somebody in that room had shot Gus Randig on purpose! Which man had done it?*

A slim, young cowboy in fancy buckskin shirt and fresh levis was

kneeling beside Doort and holding Randig's head. Randig's eyes were closing slowly, and now grayness was fast creeping over his face. Doort was clumsily trying to staunch the flow of blood.

The young man wore a silky, gold beard. It made him look like a prophet. But when he flashed his black eyes around the circled men, the impression was destroyed. The man's voice rasped like a freighter's wheel on a dry skein.

"So you got him. One of you Hubbard men. Which one? You, Boseman? You, Koppen? Where's Red John? You'll fry in hades for this. One of you will. By God, I'll see to that!"

"Shut up, Laws," Doort said sharply. "It was an accident."

"Accident, hell!" Laws got to his feet. He faced a barrel-chested, swarthy man with phlegmatic eyes. "Let's see your guns, Boseman."

Boseman drew back. Sullen anger replaced the dull wonder in the man's small, black eyes. "No young punk's looking at my guns. They stay right in their holsters."

"We'll see about that—"

Two men grabbed Laws' gun arm. They took away his .45. And McLean, whose eyes were now racing, saw stiffness come to a thin, hatless man with bleached hair and red-rimmed eyes, and the stiffness drained away. This man would be the gun-fighter, Koppen. Memory stirred in McLean. Boseman and Koppen. Two more of the Dwyer gang. They'd come up with Tex Dwyer.

He looked with new eyes at the dreaded pair, and the knowledge came to him that there must be a great deal more at stake here than he'd dreamed, if a cattleman like this Forrest Hubbard could afford to hire and pull men like these into the deal.

CHAPTER III

BAD BLOOD

THE NEWS spread swiftly. People poured from the house; they came from houses and business places in town. Gaunt Doc

Haskins finally stood up and shook his head, and a woman in the crowd began to cry, but it was as nothing to the agony of the brown-haired girl on her knees with head bent against her father's shoulders, her body shaking with silent sobs. Even McLean turned away. Minutes ago she'd been laughing, talking to him...

The town minister appeared and everybody bowed heads or knelt in the straw—the musician besides their instruments, Doort beside his whiskey keg, the judges beside the unshot-at, new targets which they'd just erected—and the minister prayed in a loud voice, but McLean had withdrawn to the outer fringes now and looked over everyone, keenly.

He bumped into a man entering. The man barely noticed him, eyes on the scene. The man bent toward a stocky individual. "What is it, Cooley?"

"Gus Randig got shot. Accident. They were shooting at targets, Mr. Hubbard."

Hubbard! McLean saw a tall, hard, brown man in fine broadcloth suit and polished boots. He had been to the party, McLean saw. Sweat from dancing still stood on his black and grey-streaked brow. He had been the last one from the house.

McLean saw the hard, close-set eyes kindle with interest. "Shot, eh? Dead?"

The squat man, whom McLean saw was wearing a star, nodded. "Deader'n a mackerel." He chewed a heavy lip. "Wonder what the blazes to do?"

Hubbard said, "Get every man who was in the barn, of course. Line them up, check their guns, the number of rounds they've shot. Isn't that so, Doort?"

"Yes. Yes, I guess that would be the best thing to do, only I don't see how we can prove anything on anybody."

Under the blustery sheriff the twenty-odd men lined up, but as Doort had surmised, nothing came of the inspection of guns, missing shells from cartridge belts, or going over the lists of those who had shot.

Doort, himself, had had four broken boxes of .45 cartridges by the whiskey barrels for shooters to help themselves. And finally the busy, noisy Sheriff also realized the futility and emptiness of the gesture.

In anger he shooed everybody out, and the men who'd helped carry the body to the funeral home, returned from up the street, and in the grey, late afternoon Sam Doort's housewarming came to an abrupt and dismal end.

McLean, who had stood the gun-inspection one hundred percent because his gun hadn't been fired at all, took one last look around before he left. He looked at the big barn interior, at the lifted carriage doors, at the big two-storied house, at the livery across the distant alley, and then he moved, puzzled, through the fast-melting snow to the front yard and his horse. This was puzzling—and tightening at every turn. Should he tell the girl that their fathers had been partners? That he was up here to help her? He decided against it, for the time being.

He was almost at the wire gate when Sheriff Cooley's harsh voice called,

"Hey, you! Come back here!"

He turned. He saw the fat hotel man talking excitedly with Doort and the Sheriff, and pointing to him.

McLean went back. "What is it?"

"Palmer, here, says you were lookin' fer Randig."

"Yes."

"What did you want with him?"

"Nothing in particular," McLean said. He turned to the hotel man. "Did somebody tell you to tell the sheriff this or did you think it up all by yourself?"

"I'll do the askin'," Cooley snapped. "What's your name?"

"McLean."

"Where you from?"

"Brazoria County, Texas."

"Texas?" Cooley frowned. Then he asked, "Why did you want to see Randig?"

McLean grew silent. Men were gathering. Anything he said would be bad—for him, for Bess Randig, for the Broken Spur. His part in

this would best be kept secret for the time being, so he said, slowly, "I reckon, Sheriff, my gun back there should clear me. It hadn't fired a shot."

"There were other guns lying around," somebody said.

"Yeah," another spoke up quickly. "Doort had two extras by the whiskey barrel to loan fellows who hadn't brought theirs."

"He could have done it, Sheriff. Who is he? What's he doin' at a party he wasn't invited to?" Angry voices went up.

Then a deeper, cool one spoke from the rear. "I don't say the man is guilty, Sheriff, but it might be a good idea to arrest him and question him thoroughly before you let him go."

McLean turned. It was Hubbard, in knee-length, expensive, ulster fingering on wool dress gloves.

"Good idea," Cooley snapped. "I'll take your gun, Texan."

Calmly McLean took out his gun and handed it, butt foremost, to the Sheriff. But as Hubbard passed him, walking strangely stiff-legged, he said quietly, without raising his voice.

"The name is McLean, McLean from Texas. I'll be seeing you, Hubbard."

Forrest Hubbard jerked his narrow eyes around; then, with a shrug, he walked stiff-legged to his red wheeled buggy and drove off swiftly.

BUT THERE was something in McLean's low voice that disturbed Forrest Hubbard. He wheeled his rig smartly into the barn back of his saloon-hotel, tossed the reins to a barn flunkie, and entered his saloon through the back door. He entered his private office at the rear, quickly locked the office door behind him.

Three minutes later he emerged. He had taken off his ulster, black Beaver, and gloves, and once more was smiling his perpetual, hard, confident look. He took a cigar off the back bar, saw the man he wanted to see, and walked toward

Tex Dwyer who was seated, back to a corner playing desultory solitaire with eyes more on the room than on the cards.

"Dwyer, do you know this man McLean?"

Dwyer's green eyes flickered with interest. "You have a run-in with him?"

Hubbard nodded. "Down at Doort's house-warming. What about this McLean?"

"Hits hard, shoots hard, rides hard. Never had any trouble with him before. Was on the same side of the fence, chousin' out trail rats from the Brazioria Flats."

"What's he doin' up here?"

Dwyer shrugged his hard shoulders. He held silent.

Finally Hubbard said, "Did you hear Gus Randig got shot? Randig's dead."

Puzzlement, well-covered, went momentarily through Tex Dwyer's green eyes. He hadn't talked to Boseman and Koppen yet. But he lowered his voice, "Reckon that ends it. You won't need us anymore."

Hubbard's close smile went through a change upon his hard face. He leaned back and blew smoke upward. It was a confident, relaxed gesture. And yet, behind it, like the faintest singing of the wind, was a hesitation.

"No hurry to pull out. I'll keep on paying wages to you three for a while." He swung to his feet, unhurriedly.

But as he strolled away between the card tables, puffing and slapping shoulders with hearty laughter, Tex Dwyer's green eyes followed him, narrowed.

"So Hubbard's bumped into McLean, and he's already felt a little of the cactus." And Dwyer's lean, gun-slick fingers ruffled the cards a little more swiftly.

McLean spent four hours in the Indian Wells jail. He smoked half a sack of tobacco, parried Sheriff Cooley's questions with exasperating deftness, and finally the slow-thinking, angry Cooley left. He was back in fifteen minutes.

"Awright. Get the devil out. I can't hold you 'cause nobody will prefer any charges."

McLean swung long legs off the iron cot. "Someday I'm going to thank that nobody." He put on his damp hat. "How's chances of viewing the body, Sheriff?"

"What for?" Cooley was instantly suspicious.

"Just a whim, I reckon. Randig looked a decent sort."

"A stubborn damn fool, that's what he was."

McLean paused at the door. Maybe he could get the information here that he was looking for. Or some of it, anyway. "What do you mean?" he drawled.

Cooley grunted. "Hubbard offered him twenty thousand for his dumpy two-bit spread backed up there against the Short Hills, which is about ten more'n anybody in his right sense would offer. And Randig turned it down."

"Why? Bad blood between them?"

"Not that I knew of before. Old man Hubbard—Forrest's pappy—and Randig got along fine. The Hubbards, of course, owned half the country—their Big H spread in the valley, and the silver mines to the north of the Short Hills. They once owned the Short Hills, too, except when young Hubbard took over after his pappy died, he pulled a fast one on old Randig. Fooled the dumb jackrabbit completely and traded him no-good, rocky range in the Short Hills for Dead Hole Spring, the choicest valley graze Randig had. Everybody knew it was a dumb trade on Randig's part, and right after that the trouble started. Guess he regretted it at once."

"What sort of trouble?" McLean asked gently. The story didn't stack up. Pieces were missing. It was puzzling. His dad had said often that old Gus Randig was nobody's fool.

Cooley snorted. "Boundary trouble. Cows strayin'. Big H stock found back in the Short Hills. Then Craz Talon starts shootin' off

his crazy mouth to Hubbard men trying to shag them outta there, and there's some gunplay, but luckily nobody got hurt. Randig's three hands quit before."

McLean's eyebrows raised. "No sand, huh?"

Again Cooley snorted. "There was no reason for shooting. Big H had a right to git their steers back that strayed to their old haunts. Hot-headed Johnny Laws, who already had quit to start a penny-ante freight line to Oracle, went back." Cooley chuckled. "But everybody knows why he went back."

McLean's lips tightened. He, also, thought of Bess Randig. He flipped his cigarette off into the growing darkness. "Thanks, Sheriff."

Cooley jerked up his round face at the terseness of the Texan's voice. "Lissen, McLean. Git out of Indian Wells. I don't want no trouble. Randig's Broken Spur is done for and..."

But McLean was moving off through the wet night, not listening.

CHAPTER IV

KILLERS

HE CAME to the boardwalk in front of the jail and he looked up and down the half-ghost, half-lighted town. Hubbard House flung a yellow banner of light across the murky street. A barber shop was open, a hardware, two stores, but in between were dark, silent mining buildings—shops, assay offices, wagon yards, blacksmith and repair structures.

He saw the undertaker's dimly lit establishment where the man was going about his business, but he turned from the side street and walked southward again toward Sam Doort's big white house. He wanted to talk to Sam Doort.

Only the first floor lights were on now, and McLean, after hesitating, went around to the kitchen door. At his tap Mrs. Doort answered. She wasn't laughing this

time. She started as she saw him, but McLean, hat in hand, spoke low and quickly.

"I'd like to speak to your husband, Mrs. Doort."

"Come inside. I'll call him."

He was about to refuse, when he saw Bess Randig's white face. She was seated in the kitchen, alone, and the thought came to him that now he could tell her about himself, and why he'd come.

"Thank you." He stepped inside.

Mrs. Doort left for the forepart of the house. The girl, lifting her eyes, but showed no recognition through her limp grief.

"Miss Randig," he began, "I came to help you. Your father once lived in Texas and we knew him—"

"Texans," she murmured lifelessly. "Gunmen. Killers. Johnny says they did it. Jug Boseman or Grif Koppen. Then there's another one around here. Please go away. I don't want to know you."

He twisted the damp, gray hat in his big hands, feeling sorry for her. She was shocked, and alone. Death had never come close to her before, as it had to him when his brother Bob had been killed, or Sammy,—his brother Ray's oldest kid—stamped to death by a stallion. She was pathetically small, and beaten, and the night, he knew, was black all round her.

So when he heard Doort's heavy footsteps approaching, he said softly, breathing his vow, "I'll find the killer of your father, Miss Bess, or take a .45 slug in the heart trying. I promise, Miss Bess." And then Doort came into the room.

THEY WENT outside. Doort, true to McLean's first, swift judgement, was a shrewd, cautious, conservative business man. He was jolly when a party called for it, but when other business was at hand, he thought before he spoke. He was cautious now.

He now said, "I can understand your wish to help Bess Randig. We all feel that way. But I am afraid nothing can be done about this unfortunate accident."

Doort that he was drifting through but wanted to help, shook his head. "You don't believe it was an accident, either, Doort. You know how things were stacking up, how Hubbard was bringing gunmen in, running Randig's hands off the Broken Spur. What is all behind it, Doort?" McLean made his voice rasp.

Doort said stubbornly. "I'm saying it was an accident."

McLean grasped the man's shirt. "Which one did it? Boseman or Koppen?"

Doort tried to twist away. "So help me, I don't know. Neither, I honest-to-God believe. You're takin' this wrong, McLean."

"Why neither?" he grated.

McLean, who had merely told "Because Boseman was sitting on a bale of straw in a corner, smoking. I remember because I was watching him for sparks. I'm afraid of fire."

"And Koppen?"

"I'm not so sure of him, but a minute before, he was talking to Andy Fellow and Jim Wilder in the farther stall around the corner."

"Who's this Red John?"

"Hubbards' Big H foreman. A big, good-looking gent."

"He wasn't at the party."

"Not that I saw."

"Then it boils down to Boseman and Koppen."

"You're inviting trouble, McLean. Broken Spur isn't worth it. I'm advising her to take the twenty thousand and get out."

"And I'm advising her to hang on," McLean grated. "There's more to this than just cow range." He turned and stamped away, and cautious businessman Sam Doort shook his head, muttering.

"A trouble-maker. Another Texas trouble-maker spoiling for a fight on this powder-keg. But danged if I ain't glad he's on Bess Randig's side."

McLean went up the dark side-street to the dismal, single-lighted undertaker's parlor. He met Johnny Laws coming out. Laws gave him a curt look, and passed on. McLean entered.

The undertaker was a humped, sour-looking man. He grunted, "What do you want?" He looked distastefully at McLean's gun.

"Sheriff said I could look at the body."

"It ain't ready for viewing yet."

"Said I could look anyway." McLean's hand brushed the gun-butt, suggestively. The bespectacled man grunted again.

"Come take your look and get out." He led the way through a curtained doorway into a back room. There on a pine table lay Randig under a sheet. Cheap coffins, satin goods, bits of gaudy lace and artificial flowers were on shelves all around.

"Hurry it up. They're burying him tomorrow afternoon and I've got a lot of work to do." He flung the sheet half off.

"Don't rush me, graveyard boy." McLean murmured, sizing up the hole in Randig's left chest. Randig was stripped; his chest washed of blood. The hole, McLean noted, had a downward slant. Randig must have been stooping or bending over something when the shot hit him, McLean decided.

He was on the point of asking if the bullet had been removed, when the entrance of someone in the front office called the undertaker forward. Swift to act, McLean turned over the body to see. It hadn't. And he saw it—a dark, bluish spot low in the back under the grey skin—and in a flash he had out his jack knife and with a neat slice, pried out the slug. "Some detective, that sheriff—"

Then he stared at it in astonishment.

FOOTSTEPS WERE coming. Swiftly he put the body back to its original position, replaced the sheet, and dropped the slug into his shirt pocket. The undertaker came in.

"Reckon I saw enough," he said easily, put on his hat and walked past the scowling man for the outside. He headed for the main drag.

A noise came from behind him.

"Reach!" A gun jabbed his back, hard.

McLean hesitated. The man had been waiting in the alley. They were watching him. He raised his hands slowly.

"My poke is in the left hip pocket, mister."

"I ain't interested in your poke," the heavy voice growled. "What'd you take off Randig back in that room?"

McLean felt surprised. Somebody had been watching him through the alley window. He tried to turn a little, see who the man was. The gun jabbed savagely. "Cut the play. This hammer's back. Fork it over."

"What?"

"You know what. You did something—"

McLean took a wild chance. He came around whirling, slashing at the gun with his left elbow. His right fist lashed for the man's jaw.

There was no gun report, just the swift whistle of steel, and McLean felt the gun barrel take him across the temple. A wild, black roaring filled his eyes, his ears and he went to his knees.

Another blow put him all the way down. He struggled to get up as he felt hands pawing over his shirt pockets but an inner sense told him he wasn't moving a muscle. Then the blackness whirled deeper.

It seemed hours before the blackness lifted. He struggled to his knees and crouched dazed beside the alley entrance-way then he stood up weaving. He touched his head. The gash was still bleeding, so he'd been out only a few minutes. He put his hand to his shirt pocket. It was torn half off—but the bullet was still there.

He slipped it into a safer place in his levis pocket and walked to the main street and the Hubbard House.

The fat, pale-eyed man was behind the scarred desk. "Loose plank?" He half grinned.

"Yeah!" McLean said.

He headed toward the saloon door. Tex Dwyer was at his corner table, shuffling cards. He didn't

move at the sight of McLean entering with blood on his head. Grif Koppen was at one end of the bar, his peculiar red-rimmed eyes under snow white hair making him look like a gaunt vulture. Seated at a table near his office door, and smoking a cigar, was Hubbard, his close-set, hard eyes continually raking the room with their old smirk.

McLean saw all this. One man was missing—Boseman. He threaded to the bar. "Whiskey."

A man disengaged himself from a group of noisy cowpunchers down the bar. The man was tall, magnificently built. He wore a red-plaid shirt, silver-studded gun belt and fancy Spanish spurs. His hair was short and a burnished red, his eyes black and bold.

"Stranger," he boomed. "It looks like you closed your eyes on that one."

McLean turned. This would be Red John. He lifted his drink. "Mister, I'm from Texas. I don't like coyotes yowling." He tossed off his drink and walked from the saloon. He'd learned what he'd wanted.

The lock to his hotel door was broken. He put a chair against the knob, pulled the tattered shades and thumbed a match to life.

He washed the blood from his head and was drying himself when it occurred to him. His letter! Slowly he stood erect, feeling at his inside pocket. Randig's letter to his father was missing. His only introduction to Bess Randig was gone!

CHAPTER V

SPOILING FOR TROUBLE

A STREAK OF greyness through the torn curtain awakened him. He swung his long, bony legs out of the iron bed and pushed up the green curtain. The town lay wet and melting under the first morning brightness. And it was bigger than he'd first thought. There were other stores

besides Doort's and the others he'd noted last night, three more saloons besides Hubbard's—the Lucky Chance was directly across the street. He saw a bakery, a bank, two barber shops, a ladies millinery, and looking up the rise he saw some stamp mills, abandoned, a huge enclosed wagon yard with empty ore wagons stacked one against another, rusting. At the end of the line of false fronts staggering up the hill he saw a red building and a sign: "Johnny Laws—Freight'g & Pass'ngr Serv."

McLean doused his ragged head, and pulled into his shirt and levis. He strapped on his gun and went down the stairs. No one was in the lobby. He passed through the musty, reeking corridor and outside. Cool mountain air struck him. He breathed deeply. He knew Johnny Laws hated him, for some unknown reason. But Johnny Laws and he were both on the same side, and Johnny Laws knew all the answers.

He swung up the plank walk along the deserted street toward the young cowboy's freight yards.

The little red office was locked. He moved around the alley where two stocky, battered Studebakers stood in the open, tongues stacked skyward. A boy was pitching slough hay to four collar-scarred horses in an open-stalled barn.

"Laws," the boy said in answer to McLean's question, "is gone. Took a load of supplies down to Oracle afore daybreak."

"Supplies down to Oracle?" McLean felt surprise. "Isn't Oracle down the valley, nearer the railroad?"

"Yep."

"What kind of supplies would Indian Wells be shipping down there? Who was the shipper?"

"Dunno, mister, except he left afore daylight. Took the Southeast trail too, I seen, not the regular freight road."

McLean frowned. That was somewhat in the direction of the Broken Spur and the Short Hills. "Anybody see him go or ask you about

him?" He asked the boy finally.

"Yep. Three riders. Johnny told me not to say anything, but he ain't paid me fer two weeks. These guys gimme a buck."

McLean took out a five dollar bill. "Here. And after this stick with the outfit you're working for." He turned for the long stretch down to the livery barn where his horse was stable.

The town was awakening now. Some women passed him and looked at him, a stranger. The hardware man swept off his walk. And a carpenter started fixing the plank steps of the Lucky Chance saloon. McLean also noted that a man was digging a grave among the tombstones on the knobby, pine hill above the town.

He was entering the livery when Stump Cooley came from his sheriff's office. Cooley's meaty chops were hard with anger.

"What'd you do last night?"

"Do? Nothing, except some hombre cracked me with a gun barrel last night and stole a letter I had."

Cooley snapped, "Hump embalmed Randig last night, and Randig had a cut in his back. Hump didn't do it. I didn't. Hump says you were there alone for a while."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, sheriff," McLean grinned.

Cooley's moon-like face screwed up, ugly. "Listen, Texan, you're not wanted in Indian Wells. You're spoiling fer trouble. I seen it in your eyes the minute I laid my glims onto you. I don't want no blood spilled around Indian Wells. I'm giving you twelve hours to get out."

McLean grinned. He poked his hat brim up with a stiff fore-finger as he held his cigarette with the others. "That's what Fatty at the hotel told me yesterday, only his deadline was twenty-four hours. We'll see, Sheriff." He passed the sputtering law officer and entered the livery stable.

He turned the grey into the southeast road to Oracle. It was a rocky, treacherous affair, and after

a mile McLean wondered what Laws was thinking of, taking this route, and then he came to a wet swale and he stopped in astonishment. For instead of keeping to the high, solid rock, Laws had driven straight across. The wagon wheels hadn't more than broken the tough, new-greening mountain sod.

Johnny Laws' wagon was empty!

NOW THOROUGHLY puzzled, McLean shoved the grey faster. The mountain road wound among pinnacles of red rock. Ahead he could see short, jagged hills covered with stunted pine and cedar. Grass was scarce and the water that ran from yesterday's snow found a new course each year. He knew that this was the edge of the arid Short Hills.

A shot echoed from the rocky walls ahead, then another, followed by a fusilade, and McLean sent the clay-spattered grey into a choppy gallop.

Rounding a shoulder of rock he pulled his horse to a sharp halt. The trail dipped, threaded a narrow ledge, and down on this ledge stood an ore wagon, its double team cut loose. Three masked men were down there. One held Johnny Laws against the rock wall at rifle point; the other two were straining at the wheels of the heavy freighter.

McLean yanked out his gun, yelled and fired, but he wasn't quick enough. Already the slope had the wagon, and it gained momentum. It careened off a stumpy tree, hit a rock, bounded wildly into the air and then dashed madly down to its destruction.

McLean spurred the grey, and came down shooting. The distance was too great for his .45 slugs, but it was enough to startle the men. The one with the rifle whipped a quickie at McLean, and all three leaped for saddles. They quirted the wagon horses up over the rise and disappeared among the rock.

The yellow-bearded young puncher scowled as McLean rode up.

"So you were following me also."

Sitting in saddle, McLean fed

fresh cartridges into his smoking gun. "Yes."

Laws' mouth twisted bitterly. "Everybody knows it, I suppose."

"Knows what? I don't."

Laws, for an answer, turned his back and walked to the slope's edge and looked at the remains of his wagon. Some loose shale was yet rolling, raising dust. Then he came back. He looked hard at McLean.

"I saw you sporting to Bess Randig at Doort's yesterday. Who the blazes are you? What are you doing in Indian Wells?"

Finished with his gun, McLean replaced it in his holster and proceeded to build a smoke as he talked.

"Name's Wade McLean. I come from Texas. Randig wrote my dad asking his help. He was in some tight spot but pa is past his riding and fighting days so the chore fell to me. I come in time to see Randig get killed, which I figure—as you do—was no accident. But I'm still in the dark about the whole deal. What does Hubbard want?"

Laws' blue eyes were hard. "Show me that letter."

"I can't. Somebody slugged me last night and stole it."

The blue eyes flickered. "I thought so."

"Listen, Laws. I wouldn't be sticking my neck into a shooting fight if I didn't have a reason. I promised my dad I'd do what I could, and I'm here! Dad and Randig were partners in the old days. Dad staked him to come north. I reckon they still were partners, the way Randig wrote, but dad never told me anything about that."

Laws' face crinkled with a sardonic twist. "I see. That makes you and Randig partners, is that it? And now that he's dead, you and Bess Randig. Well, ride along, McLean. We aren't asking your help."

MCLEAN CHECKED his anger by carefully spitting out a crumb of tobacco. "By the looks of it, hombre, you'll be run to the wall in short order. Who were the gents and what'd they want?"

"Red John, Boseman and Griffen. Their masks didn't help them. But how can I prove it?" He said bitterly.

"What'd they want?"

"You saw." Laws nodded over the slope.

"Why wreck your wagon?"

The young, yellow-bearded lips curled. "You're such a smart drifter. You figure it out. You come in to cut yourself a piece of easy cake. Go ahead and cut—on your own." Laws turned and whistled. His horses came, with cut harnesses trailing.

"If I knew everything, would I be asking? Would I be horning in here blind, if I hadn't had a letter. You don't figure straight, mister."

But Laws didn't answer. He cursed when he saw all the damage to his harness tugs. Finally he swung onto a stocky bay, and leading the other three, he rode up the back trail toward Indian Wells.

McLean looked around. Then he shook his gun loose. Might as well get into this up to his neck. He headed for the rise over which the three Hubbard riders had disappeared.

The country grew rougher, sharper-sloped. In less than a mile he lost their trail, although he was sure they'd swung west in which direction he figured lay the Big H spread. He reined in his horse and looked at the wild, cathedral-like spires of yellow and red rock all round him.

"The Short Hills," he murmured. "Sure a rotten country to raise cattle." He assumed Randig's Broken Spur lay farther into the mountains for to the east dark pine showed possible graze land, but the country, instead of smoothening out into graze, became wilder under the pine growth.

He went deeper into the silent land, through one close defile after another, across narrow pockets, along sheer cliff faces and on up through pines.

He had been in the saddle, he judged, better than an hour when he entered a canyon no more than

six yards wide, skirted a tiny creek that clashed and clattered down the steep grade, and at last he was stopped.

Above him he saw the blankness of perpendicular yellow walls, pine-topped against the blue sky. The creek rattled at his feet. He stared searching around—saw a rock gallery cut into the left canyon wall—and moved that way, his horses' shoulders brushing short pines to the steep sides.

Sunlight blacked out, and in the shadows he muttered, "If ever a man wanted a hide-out, this sure would be it—if he could ever find it again—"

He stopped. The hair rose prickling on the back of his neck. He heard the laughter of a woman's voice.

There it was again, wild, untamed. He stared around. It was incredible. Here? In this God-forsaken wilderness of rock and pine?

CHAPTER VI

SHOWDOWN

HE NOTED Captain's ears were pricked to the right and he pushed his horse that way. Rounding a thick clump of pine, he saw a needle-like opening between the rock walls. He dismounted. The way was steep but the footing firm. The horse struggled after him, pulled by rein and voice, and after a rugged time McLean found himself panting on a high and grassy bench of which the creek tumbled in joyous and wild abandon.

But what really astounded McLean was the sight of a yellow-haired girl seated on a rock and splashing her bare feet in the icy mountain stream. The wind out of the pines blew her hair, and she put back her head and laughed again, and something in that laughter sent a shiver through McLean's spine. It had a wild, jangled sound.

She was full-grown, he saw, but she didn't have too much on, a simple dress, the bodice of which was pulled off one shoulder, while the skirt was

drawn far above her knees. She was white-skinned, full fleshed, and McLean could see the womanly shape of her breasts.

He considered retreating down the desperate slope, when her back-tilted eyes caught sight of him.

For an instant wild fright spun across her milky, blue eyes, then they flooded with a coyness that was unmistakable.

"Hello."

"Good morning, m'am," McLean said.

"Come over here. Who are you?" She arose, replacing her blouse over her shoulder, and, in the act of standing, her blue calico skirt fell into place.

"My name is McLean. Who are you?" His eyes were narrowed. Something was wrong with this girl, he knew.

"McLean. McLean." She said it over and over. "That is a pretty name. I will have to name one of my new puppies that name. My name is Sarah."

"Would your name be Sarah Talon?" he asked, remembering the words of the drunken, little man in the hotel lobby yesterday.

Her eyes brightened with pleasure. "How did you know?"

"I met your father yesterday in Indian Wells."

"Oh, yes. At the housewarming. Was it fun? Did you see fat Mrs. Doort? She's nice. She always gives me cookies and good things to eat when I visit her. Father wouldn't let me go. Says I don't know how to behave at parties. I would, wouldn't I?" She put her head to one side, questioningly, and her yellow hair fell down over her rounded shoulders. And as she came closer, McLean saw the milk-blue eyes, beautiful as they were, had a clouded, uncertain look.

McLean pursed his lips. The girl, about twenty, obviously was a mental case. It was a wonder she was as neat and clean as she was, and he wondered if Bess Randig didn't have something to do about that. He said soberly, "I'm sure you would be-

have." Then, "How do you get back to Indian Wells from here?"

"That is easy. The trail leads along the creek up through those pines to Randig's place, then ours. You hit the old mine road and follow it into town. It's ten miles. But don't let Pa ketch you up around the buildings. He'll shoot holes in your breeches as he once done to Red John. Red John likes me. He comes and sees me when Pa's working. I reckon Pa's working now so you're safe."

So Red John came and saw her. McLean remembered the man's bold, protruding eyes. Red John would come; he was that type. He asked, "What does your Pa work at?"

A SLY LOOK appeared in her shadowy face. "Bess told me never to tell, and I ain't. I never ain't told nobody, but Red John. And I only told him because I like him. And he likes me." She giggled.

McLean tightened his jaw muscles. He could imagine what went on between this simpton girl and the husky, black-eyed foreman of the Big H. He said,

"I'm going to Broken Spur. Do you want a ride up?"

"Oh, don't go up there! You'll be shot at—"

The crack of a rifle sounded from the underbrush up-hill and McLean's sombrero sailed to the ground. The gray jumped and McLean spun the horse into the pine, whipping out his .45 with a smooth racing motion.

But the girl cried, "Don't shoot. It's just Pa. He wasn't trying to kill you. He's just warning you. I'm coming, daddy! Don't shoot him. He didn't touch me. We was just talking." And she gathered her blue skirt and in bared feet ran swiftly into the pine.

McLean shouted. "Talon, come out. I want to talk to you."

But the pine forest didn't move.

"Talon! Do you hear? I'm your friend."

McLean waited five minutes, then, walking on the off-side of his horse, he retrieved his hat, returned to the wood and rode cautiously along the path the girl had taken.

After a while he came to a set of grey, weather-beaten ranch buildings and he knew this was the Broken Spur. The house alone showed care. It had red curtains; the lean-to was painted, and blue and pink flowers grew before the sagging verandah.

He skirted the busted corrals keeping to the pines and rode down a small, shadowy valley, and finally came to a single, clapboard shack before which Sarah Talon was dutifully seated on the porch stoop shelling seed corn off the cob by hand.

He passed by Talon's shack and came to an ancient, ruttid wagon road a mile down. He stopped, and he looked back. Somehow the Short Hills had changed color. They were a greyish-black among the balding pine, and McLean knew then that he was in a mining district. The thought brought another idea and McLean's dour lips curled upward as he began to understand what this fight was about, for Gus Randig's decrepit, busted-down Broken Spur.

Two hours later McLean was sitting back after a huge dinner of steak and potatoes in the Hubbard House Hotel when the fat clerk waddled in and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Boss wants to see you."

McLean didn't look up; he continued building his brown-papered smoke. He thumbed a match to fire, took a puff, broke the wood in two, dropping the match into his coffee cup, and only then did he look up.

"Did you say something?"

The man flushed at the insult of delay. "Drifters like you, get wised up fast. Hubbard's in his office." He moved away.

McLean took another puff, thoughtfully. He was sitting right in the midst of a powder key here in the Hubbard House. He knew it. And now Hubbard wanted him. At last he was getting into things. The knowledge intrigued him, sent a cool, singing wind through his veins. It was he and Hubbard, had been all the time. He had known it ever since that clash on Doort's house when Hubbard had had him arrested and

the man went stomping, stiff-legged, away.

MCLEAN WENT back over the entire story as he knew it, and there were a dozen loose threads that he couldn't understand, such as who had killed Randig and how, but the main thread had shaped up fast back there in the hills on that wagon road.

Hubbard had unwittingly traded himself out of some old mining property upon which Randig, a man of some mining experience, McLean recalled, had found something valuable. Randig had known of it before the trade. He had out-foxed Hubbard; it wasn't the other way around as most of Indian Valley thought. McLean grinned at the thought.

Then his smile faded. They had spooked Randig's men, after Hubbard had found out about the discovery through Red John who'd been told by the girl. They'd put the screw to old Randig, and Crazy Talon. They'd fought young Johnny Laws. It was a cinch they'd tightened Randig's credit at every bank in the country. But still Randig had hung on, writing his old partner as a last resort. And then they'd killed him.

McLean stared at the ceiling. Bess Randig was busted. They'd dug some ore by hand. Johnny Laws was freighting it to the railroad at Oracle to raise some dough. Hubbard's dogs had known all this, pounced on the fighting kid. A thrill of pleasure coursed through McLean at the thought of stubborn, scrappy Johnny Laws.

And now Hubbard wanted to see him!

McLean rose feeling the old singing wind. He loosened his gun gently and walked steadily toward Forrest Hubbard's office.

He entered the saloon. Three men were in there: Gorilla-like Jug Boseman lolled at the end of the bar, his black guns hanging low, convenient to his dangling arms; the bony, red-eyed Grif Koppen sat at a card table across the room, silent, the card table pushed well away from him;

the bartender, nervously wiping glasses.

The bartender jerked his bald head. "In there."

McLean walked through the open door of the office and Hubbard sat at his fine mahogany desk. The quick, hard smile played over his bronzed face and settled confidently into his close eyes.

"Come in, McLean. We were just talking about you."

Only then did McLean see Tex Dwyer to one side, sitting with one hip hunched on a file desk. His right gun swung free.

"That so?" McLean stepped to one side inside the door and watched both Hubbard and Dwyer. "Fatso said you wanted to see me. What's the deal?"

"Simple, McLean. We haven't any more room for you. We're expecting you to check out this evening."

"From your hotel?"

"From Indian Wells." Hubbard's voice was very even. And suddenly the singing coolness was whispering strong in McLean's veins. *Was now the time? Was this the showdown? Did he want it now?* He believed he could get one, either Hubbard or Dwyer, before they got him. If he were lucky and got both, he was still bottled up by Boseman and Griffen. But bad as it looked for him, he didn't believe Hubbard wanted it that way. Hubbard wore no gun. Hubbard wanted no killing trouble, if it could be avoided, if he could scare him out. McLean's nerves quieted a bit. He said,

"And if I don't?"

"If you don't, it is hard to say what will happen to *the partner of Gus Randig*." Hubbard's close eyes lost their smile.

McLean murmured, "So you got my letter."

For answer Hubbard took a paper and envelope from his desk drawer. McLean recognized it as his. And slowly Hubbard tore it once, twice, three times across and dropped the remnants to the floor, his eyes not once leaving McLean's face. "I'm not talking to hear myself talk when I repeat, *get out of Indian Wells be-*

fore nightfall! That's all, McLean."

McLean looked to Dwyer. The man's hard face didn't move a muscle, and McLean knew there would be no gunplay unless he pulled first. He sidled to the door. Outside Griffen had risen from his chair, and Boseman, the gorilla, had come to the end of the bar and was staring straight into the room. McLean thinned his lips toward Hubbard.

"We'll see—pea-shooter." Then he slid around the door and had only Boseman and Griffen to watch. He walked swiftly backwards behind the bar and the bartender scurried to get away from between them, and then McLean was out the side door. He couldn't trust one of those killers behind his back now. Not after what he'd called Forrest Hubbard.

CHAPTER VII

BIG H

BESS RANDIG awakened to strong light moving through the white bedroom curtains of her room, and she knew it was morning. It was the beginning of the second day that she was alone in the world. Her fingers closed in soft pain and loneliness on the pillow beneath her tousled head, and then in quick determination she slipped from the white-sheeted bed and dressed. Her father was gone; there was nothing that could be done about it now. She had to work, to keep busy. She was glad the sun was shining this morning.

She looked out over the purple ridges to the west, smoky in the morning light, and wondered if she shouldn't take Sam Doort's advice and sell the Broken Spur for what Forrest Hubbard offered. Twenty thousand was a great deal of money, more than she'd ever need for the rest of her life. And quite possibly the silver vein that her father and Craz Talon had found, quite by accident, was a mere pocket and would peter out shortly. Maybe the hi-grade she and Johnny had taken out and cached at Red Nobles to freight to

Oracle to raise money had already depleted the find.

As she washed and combed her hair her thoughts reverted to the tall, dark-visaged young man who had offered his help at Doorts. In the dreary rain of late yesterday when they'd buried her father, she had once glanced down the hill and seen him, single and alone in the street looking up at them in the cemetery. And now she recalled there had been a bedroll slung across his horse back of the saddle. He had left just as Whitney and Jones had been scared out by Hubbard and his gunfighters.

The thought of him running off depressed her more than she wanted to admit. Their meeting at Doort's pump had been fun, though it had ended in sparks. Bess had never looked at any young man in Indian Valley with more than cursory interest, even worshipping, hang-dog Johnny Laws, but this strong dark Texan with the drawly voice...

She put down her comb angrily and twisted her long, brown hair into a secure knot at the nape of her slender neck.

"If he wants to run away, let him." She rose and built a fire for coffee.

This hour of the morning—it was before five—contained a silence which picked up the crackling of the fire and magnified it into minor explosions. Out in the pines night's thin chill crept stealthily into deeper shadow, and the knee-high meadow grass turned amber under the sun and softly furrowed under the morning wind breathing soundless through the valley.

A crow suddenly made its harsh warning cry and flapped heavily from a tree top, and she whirled from the warming stove with thoughts of Forrest Hubbard and his gunmen. But her fear died instantly at the sight of Craz Talon humping up the wood path. And then it was full-blown again. There was something in Craz's staggering run—

He stopped before her in the doorway, his scarecrow figure panting.

"I—jes' a second, Miss Bess—"

"Big H coming?"

He shook his head. "No, it's Sarah. She's got those pains again. She's groanin' an' awful sick an'—an'—what is it, Miss Bess?" He twisted his shapless hat in his helplessness and pleading.

Shadows came into Bess Randig's eyes. She had, in her own loss and pain, forgotten about Sarah's trouble, but now it would bear no more putting off. She suspected what it was, in fact, *she knew*, for her heart told her, as one woman feels for another, and she put off the coffee pot and throwing a wrap around her shoulder said,

"I'll go down and examine her."

Craz Talon pattered along behind, whimpering.

When Bess Randig came from the small clapboard house, fifteen minutes later, her lips were pressed tight.

"What is it, Miss Bess?"

"Sarah is going to have a baby."

"A baby?"

"Not for a long time yet. You stay here with her. She will feel all right after a while, but don't you leave her. She knows her trouble and—and naturally it has upset her."

"Who is it? Did she tell?" Talon shrieked it.

"You be quiet," she said sternly. "I'm going to saddle up and go some place. You stay here and take care of things."

She went back to the ranch yard, and forgetting her breakfast and coffee, changed to riding clothes, saddled her bay mare and rode down the old mining road for the turn that headed for Big H.

AT THE POINT where the freight road came out of the Short Hills McLean saw Bess Randig. He drew back his gray watched her swing off onto the Big H trail that led down into the valley.

"Now what in thunderation—" He whistled softly, then clucked to the gray. "If she's going down to sell her ranch, let's be around, Captain." His mouth pressed hard.

But as he trailed her staying well to the rear, he noted her angry hurry. And he thought, *if she were going*

to sell the Broken Spur she'd go to town. There was more likelihood of catching Hubbard there. She must have something else on her mind.

He was convinced of this when he saw her turn to intercept a lone rider at the oxbow bend of Indian creek. He couldn't recognize the man at that distance, but he knew she could. The man was a Hubbard rider, he knew, because he was headed from town to the ranch.

McLean kept to the rough, wood country circling nearer. When he came into view of them again, he was surprised to see the rider was Red John, Hubbard's foreman. She was speaking vehemently. Red John listened motionless for a while, then he spoke. She answered, and Red John shook his head and laughed out loud. She spoke again, and Red John threw back his coppery head and laughed the harder, waving her down.

Then McLean was astounded to see the girl snatch a quirt from her saddle and bring it down full on Red John's face. With willowy strength she whipped it around again and lashed him savagely, and again, and again.

Red John flung up his arm, grasped the lash and jerked. She was flung from the saddle. Red John, laughing suddenly again, leaped to the ground and closed in on her, and in the thin air McLean heard the faint scream. With a curse McLean spurred the gray straight down the rock through the enveloping wood. He drew his gun as the gray raced dangerously down the slope under punishment of spur.

But the brush closed in, and the horse was slowed to a pushing walk. With another curse McLean raised his gun into the air and shot twice. He repeated it fifty yards on and then a third time, and when he finally broke onto the trail he saw only the girl ahead. She was seated on a flat outcropping with her brown head buried in her hands.

McLean yanked the grey to a halt and leaped off, running. "Are you hurt? Where'd he go? The blamed whelp! I'll—"

Then, without really knowing why he did it, he pulled her to her feet and held her to his chest.

He felt the quick loosening of her body, and then he was listening to her crying. He said nothing. And when it had stilled and her shoulders grew quiet, he looked down at her.

Color had come back to her cheeks. Her hair was a solid brown, lustrous in the sunlight; the smell of it was sweet to his nostrils, and his arms around her found a substance to her body, warm and firm and strong.

The weight went suddenly from his arms. The quick, full look she had momentarily given him, was gone.

"I'm all right now. Thanks."

He picked up the quirt and tied it again to her saddle. "You came to do this?" he asked softly.

"Yes. I knew he would laugh when I told him what he should do. I told him I'd report him to Hubbard and he laughed harder. And then—then I guess I lost control of myself." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "But I never dreamed he'd dare to attempt—"

McLean found his breathing had stopped. "Do you want to go to the Big H?"

She shuddered. "I want no part of him any more."

They rode back up through the hills to the freight road, and as she didn't offer an explanation, he asked none. When they came to the Short Hills trail, she stopped.

"Thanks again for—rescuing me." Her lips smiled, making a joke of it now, but there was deeper light in her luminous grey eyes. She looked once more at his bedroll, then turned her bay mare toward the Broken Spur.

As she rode from sight, her supple figure changing with each movement of horse and saddle, McLean watched her and knew she wanted to ask if he were riding out but pride held her from it, just as his own reticence held him from asking her the cause of the trouble with Red John.

McLean turned the grey and rode back toward Indian Wells. He had

seen the misty luminous greyness of her eyes. His original plan had been to hole up around here, but the game was moving too fast to hole up. The aggressor had the initiative, and remembering her eyes, McLean looked out over the valley and smiled. All the horizons were filled with a powdery, wondrous haze. "Get along, Captain."

CHAPTER VIII

"DRAW!"

HORREST HUBBARD was disturbed by McLean's parting remark. It weighed on his mind all through the afternoon, and finally he returned to his saloon office and motioned Tex Dwyer and Jug Boseman in with him.

Closing the door he asked, "Where's Koppen?"

Dwyer said, "You told him to follow McLean. He's still out."

"Did McLean leave town?"

Both gunmen shrugged their ignorance. Dwyer's feeling contempt—that had grown in him for Hubbard—widened. He saw jitteriness and fear crowd behind those close-set eyes whenever McLean's name was mentioned. He wondered what hold McLean had on the man.

Hubbard now said, "If he does, good! If he doesn't, your orders are to shoot him down."

"On sight?" Boseman growled.

"Any way, just so you get him. The three of you should be able to do it?"

Dwyer said thinly, "If I do it, it'll be me against him. I don't ask any edge."

Hubbard snapped, "You'll maybe need some. The best way, I figure, is to ambush him out in the Hills where his bones will never be found."

Dwyer grunted. "Better keep such talk to yourself, Hubbard."

Hubbard swung, snarling. "What the hell is this? You're hired by me to take orders. And you knew your job before you hired out. You getting squeamish?"

"Me?" Dwyer laughed. Then he said, "Some ways just don't go, that's

all, no matter how big you are in this town. The town could turn against you if you got too raw."

Hubbard sneered. "What do you suggest?"

Dwyer said bleakly, "One of us will gun him down."

A tapping on the door halted the conversation and Grif Koppen entered, red eyes blinking balefully.

"He's run out on us, damn him!"

"That's all right," Hubbard said, sinking back in his chair with a heavy breath. "That about settles things. If the girl doesn't knuckle down before the week is out, I miss my guess. We scared Whitney and Jones out, Talon and Laws don't count, Randig is gone, and now we've tied the can on this hard ticket, McLean."

"By the way," Dwyer drawled. "What ever did happen to Randig?" His eyes shuttled around the three. "I wasn't there."

There was silence, then Boseman growled, "What difference does it make?"

Grif Koppen snarled, "Seems you ain't with us much lately, Tex. Asking a lot of foolish questions."

"I always earn my shooting wages," Dwyer said. He snuffed out his cigarette, and looked Forest Hubbard in the eye, murmuring, "I was just curious as to how it was done."

MCLEAN RODE into Indian Wells at dusk. He didn't ride down the main street but came up behind the Lucky Chance saloon, opposite the Hubbard House. His first impulse was to go on foot between the buildings, across to the Hubbard Saloon, but he decided against it and, ground-tying the grey in the alley, he entered the Lucky Chance by the rear door. He wasn't quite sure of a plan yet. But he knew a shoot-out was in order. He had some of the evidence on Forrest Hubbard, but he wished he had more. He would like to search that office, behind those files and those shelves of books. The odds were slightly against him. Slightly? He grinned mirthlessly at that thought. Dwyer, Boseman, Koppen...

The Lucky Chance was a small saloon with six card tables and a pool table in back. There were few men in there. No one paid any attention to him.

He had a drink, then another. He helped himself to a rye and cheese sandwich. He saw Griffen and Boseman lolling on the verandah across, then they left. He saw Tex Dwyer come out, look at the sky then go back into the saloon. A light was in Hubbard's office, then it went out and he saw Hubbard leaving, walking down the street, hurriedly.

Dwyer was there alone now. But did he want Dwyer? He was the toughest of them all, but the least needed to be killed. Hubbard was his man. If he could only squeeze Hubbard into a corner, pin the guilt of Randig's killing onto him, before someone's eyes—

McLean stiffened. Red John rode up. Three Big H punchers were with him, all laughing, and small red waves went back and forth before McLean's thinned eyes. There was a man he would kill. He had attacked Bess Randig.

He had another sandwich. He was eating it when a man came in, breathless. The man shouted,

"Craz Talon hit town five minutes ago, raving and screaming with a loaded shotgun. He was looking for Red John, screaming something about finding his daughter drowned, about her going to have a baby or something. I dunno, but Stump Cooley bore him down and hauled him away to the jail."

McLean stopped chewing. *Baby? Sarah Talon?* His mind flashed back to Bess Randig, her ride toward the Big H, the quirting of Red John.

McLean's fingers opened and the partly eaten sandwich fell to the bar. He stared at his own image in the mirror.

"Red John, I'm not going to wait for someday to kill you. *I'm doing it right now!*"

He knew he had said the words. Men heard him, turned, stared. He pushed through the circle and walked out the door and headed for the noisy Hubbard House saloon. Wide-

eyed Lucky Chance patrons followed in his wake, hushed, cautious, and at a safe distance.

McLean pushed into the saloon, and halted at the door, a dozen feet from Red John. The red waves were flooding his eyes.

"Red John," he called. "Turn around here."

The man spun. His companions whirled. Every man in the place stilled. There was no mistaking the look in McLean's eyes.

McLean said, "Red John, I'm giving you a chance. Draw!"

Blank terror came into the man's florid face. "What for? I ain't done—"

"Draw!"

Red John looked wildly around. He saw Tex Dwyer standing to one side. He screamed, "Dwyer, do something! My God, the man's going to kill me!"

McLean went for his gun. Red John made half a stab at his, but an invisible hand threw him back against the table, and the explosion of gunfire rocked the confines of the room. Red John's bullet went into the floor; McLean's went into the center of Red John's thick, ruddy neck. Two Big H waddies went for their irons. McLean took the first in the arm, but the other fanned a quick slug at the crouched figure in the doorway, and McLean felt red fire in his head. He was slammed back against the bar.

He saw the man straightening for a second, surer shot and he let the puncher have it. The man fell over the dead Red John. McLean swung his gun around the room. He was fighting the fire, the waves of pain and blackness. If one other man drew, he knew he was done for—His gun centered on Tex Dwyer, the ace killer for the Big H.

But Tex Dwyer hadn't moved as much as a hair.

McLean backed into the street. Footsteps were coming racing from up and down the street. He heard Stump Cooley's huge roar. McLean holstered his .45, and in a staggering run got across the street, between the two buildings, and gained his

horse. He headed the grey at a run for the trail Johnny Laws had taken yesterday into the Short Hills.

But the galloping horse had no sooner entered the darkness of the pines when the burden on its back went limp. Captain was carrying an unconscious rider.

HUBBARD came racing up the street, black coat tails flying. He had been down at the jail trying to make sense out of Talon's ravings. The news of Talon's berserk charge into Indian Wells and its cause had resulted in a flurry of excitement in the Hubbard Saloon, stronghold for Big H men. The Big H ramrod had over-stepped all bounds of decency. Hubbard didn't like it, and new fear had piled on the old in his heart. Ever since that blasted Texan had come, he'd had nothing but trouble. He'd thought the killing of Randig had been neat. It would be a closed book now—if it weren't for the Texan. He wished he'd ordered Boseman to shoot McLean down instead of merely slugging him the other night in the alley.

So now as he ran, he swore under his breath wondering what the shooting was in his place, and he was glad in his knowledge that McLean had left town.

He pushed through the crowd inside the saloon door, and halted. Red John lay dead; Morkle lay on a card table gasping with Doc Haskin working over him; and Tom Smith stood at the bar white as river sand, clutching his bloody right arm.

Hubbard yelled. "What the hell happened?"

"McLean," Dwyer said simply.

Hubbard whirled. The close-set eyes in the hard face widened, then narrowed, swiftly, to shut out the rising fear. "He came back?"

"Looks like it."

Hubbard checked the swift surge of fear. Men were watching him, looking to him for leadership. "Which way did he go? Who was with him? Was he hit?" His loud bluster drowned out his fear.

A dozen men answered him but

their excited replies were unintelligible. Hubbard lifted his voice, ignoring Sheriff Cooley.

"He's a killer! The man has to be hunted and shot down like a cougar! No civilized man is safe with him roaming Indian Valley! Hit the saddle, every one of you rannies who want a thousand dollar chunk of Big H money! That's the price that's going on the drifter's head!"

A flurry of excitement went through the saloon, and a score of the younger riders looked to guns and cartridge belts and filtered outside into a growing rain that came with swift mountain storms at night. But the older men looked to the dead Red John and were not stampeded by the promise of a thousand dollars. Hubbard, himself, strode into his office and reappeared a moment later with a .45 strapped around his lean waist. He saw Tex Dwyer against the bar, smoking casually. Hubbard snarled.

"Why didn't you shoot him down?"

"Red John got what he deserved." Dwyer spat.

"It seems, Dwyer, you're siding with this saddle tramp," Hubbard said shortly. "You're both Texans. Hit the saddle against him. I'm paying your wages."

Dwyer spun his cigarette to a spittoon. "I'll give you your money's worth—when the time comes." He turned his back and started rolling another cigarette.

CHAPTER IX

GUNSMOKE ADVICE

BEFORE McLean opened his eyes he was conscious of the fever. What had awakened him? He struggled and lifted his eyelids. He was lying face-down on a grassy swale and both feet and one arm were in water, and the cold mountain stream, rising in the all-night rain, had begun lapping at his face and awakened him.

He struggled to a sitting posture trying to remember what happened. His head was splitting with pain. He

recalled the shooting of Red John and his escape from Indian Wells, but where was he now?

He peered around at rock and timbered hills, and realized he had passed through the bad lands of the Short Hills and was now somewhere south of Broken Spur, quite a ways by the slope of the land. He must have clung onto his horse for hours while unconscious and finally dropped here. He'd lain here all night.

He pucked his lips to whistle for the grey, but his throbbing head prevented the shrill sound. He was alone, under a grey, dripping sky, like a wounded, fevered cougar licking his wounds in the open, too injured to drag himself to his lair, knowing the hunters were coming.

But McLean had no lair to which to crawl. He was a Texan far from home who had bit off a little more than he could chew, he now realized, and as he sat there shaking with chill one moment, burning with fever the next, he tried to force a reasonable plan of self-help and escape through his tortured brain, but the bullet crease along his temple prevented it. Finally he lay back again, filled his mouth with the cold mountain water, then with effort crawled to a higher place and lay flat on his back. The rain started coming down again.

He didn't know how long he lay like this—maybe he even slept a while, or lapsed into unconsciousness—but suddenly he was aware someone was coming; his years on the trail, instinctively, told him this, and he struggled to sit up. He looked around. The grassy park up the canyon was empty and rock walls closed in on each side across that slight rise amongst the pines he could not see. That way must be Indian Wells, the way he'd come. And he knew no good could come from that way.

He struggled to his knees, feeling for his gun. It was there. Relief swept him. He hadn't thought to look before, and he crawled toward the rise and with bared, dripping head peered through the mountain grass.

A rider was coming slowly, head bent, eyes on the ground reading sign. In the grey drizzle, and because the man's sombrero was bent, McLean didn't know who the man was but he prepared to meet him.

The man breasted the rise. His horse snorted and stopped, and the man's dripping hat jerked up, spraying rain forward. Grif Koppen saw the man, who was his quarry, lying in the grass, and the man had a .45, gripped with both hands, centered on his chest.

Grif Koppen went for his gun.

It was the final motion he made in his life. McLeans's report sounded an infinite moment ahead of his, and the vulture-like, red-eyed Koppen, who had trailed alone, slid off his leaping horse and fell dead in the stream.

McLean stood up. He was surprised at his new-found strength. That last sleep had helped him. He walked forward to the reins-trailing horse, speaking quietly. He'd rather have his grey, but he wouldn't have time to—

Out of the pine trotted Captain. He'd been attracted by the shooting, knowing his master had awakened.

STRENGTHENED with new purpose and this show of faithfulness McLean slipped the Winchester from Koppen's saddle and crawled onto his own horse. He knew the shooting, if others were near, would bring Big H riders on the gallop. McLean turned the grey and headed as fast as he could stand the pace, up the glade, deeper into the maze of twisted hills. There lay his only hope of escape.

He hadn't ridden far before he heard distant shouts. He wheeled up a left canyon. A shot sounded in that direction—a signal shot, he knew, and cursing, he headed the grey up the steep slope, praying no rimrock or escarpment would block his escape.

None did. He gained a broken, brief table-top and turned. He held the Winchester on his lap, waiting. Wind, growing stronger, trembled the pine branches overhead and shook stringers of rain on him. He

didn't notice it. His fever had left him; he was cold to the bone but he didn't notice that either. His narrowed eyes fastened on the four men converging on him from each side below. They had spotted him.

Then one Big H man broke from the screening cover. McLean slipped from saddle and steadied the cold, wet gun. The gun recoiled savagely, and the Big H rider dropped sideways, the bucking horse flinging the dead man from saddle.

"Whitney! Whitney, was that you?" a man yelled.

"No. He got Jones, though. Go up careful."

McLean snarled silently. Whitney and Jones. The two renegades who had deserted her and the Broken Spur. So they'd gone over to Hubbard. He hunkered down behind a giant pine-bole and waited for Whitney's partner to show himself.

But Jones didn't. McLean heard them calling, knew they were creeping up, but they kept well to cover. He weighed his chances to escape. They could out-ride him, but it was his only chance—

Suddenly below him to the right the shadows of the two Big H men began to emerge. They thought him farther to the right. Their voices drifted on the wind, calling each other. McLean flung up the Winchester and fired. One went down; the other lost his footing and began rolling. McLean traced his course with bullets. When the man came up against a pine stump he stopped rolling. He lay still.

A single voice cried out in the wind and rain.

"Fitch! Rastus! Where are you?" Fear rode the wind-ripped words.

McLean crawled to his feet, got into his saddle and rode into the hills. That man would no longer follow him.

CHAPTER X

"I HATE YOU, TEXAN!"

THE DAY lightened. McLean rode on. The day lost its lightness, and in the waning after-

noon he began at last to recognize his surroundings. One close defile, then another, across a red-clay pocket, there was that yellow, jagged cliff face through the dark green pines. He came to the perpendicular walls. Their pine fingers were now lost in the grey rain above, but he knew it was the same rock gallery with the wild creek at its feet. He pushed the grey hard. Sanctuary!

Fifteen minutes later he dropped to his shoulders, lying on the hard rock floor of the gallery. Firelight reached back another ten feet and came against the gallery's end; it danced on the rock and dirt ceiling above. Smoke lifted to the ceiling and drifted outward. Fire's heat made a half-barrier against the raw damp cold slowly condensing in the canyon. His head ached and the battered muscles of his arms and legs throbbed steadily. What pressed against him now as a dead weight was the letdown following hard, nerve-wracking action. He had escaped momentarily and he was emptied of strength.

He lay on his back for a while not thinking of how he had failed the girl, his father. He had no enthusiasm, no wish to think or try to plan a future move. Maybe his secret as to Hubbards's guilt and his inkling as how the man had committed Randig's murder would go no farther than this rain-washed, hidden cave. There was Tex Dwyer left, and Jud Boseman, and Hubbard himself, and who knew how many other Big H riders scouring these hills.

The quick fire from the upwrenched pine stump died down, and the necessity of rising to scout more wood loomed a dreary chore; he lay there, all passive, unresisting, glad to drop his guard.

The distant neigh of a horse instantly threw all this from him. He sat up, clutching the Winchester. He had but two shells left in it. He couldn't let them hole him up in a place like this! He had to get out, get moving.

He crawled from his retreat, plucked the horses reins from the

digger pine to which he'd tied them, and splashing across the wild cold creek, he made his way through the needle opening and fought his way upward to the plateau.

He gained it after a long struggle, mounted and went up through the dark pine. The Broken Spur buildings were deserted in the gathering gloom. He rode around, saw the padlock on the kitchen door, and rode down the valley to Craz Talon's shack. Hunger was suddenly strong in his vitals at the thought of food.

Talon's shack also was deserted, but not locked, and dismounting he went in. In the gloom he found bread, a pot of cold beans, some milk in a crock, some pieces of lardy bacon in a skillet. He sat at the table in the growing darkness and ate ravenously, and only when the first great pangs were taken away did he realize that the milk was sour.

Then in the crying wind came the sound of horses. He sprang to the door. Johnny Laws and Craz Talon sat on horses before the porch. Laws held a small, black box under his arm.

McLean slowly put down his .45. Laws said, coldly,

"So it's you. We saw horse tracks up around the house."

"What were you doing up there?" McLean asked.

Laws indicated the box. "Miss Randig asked us to get this. This has her papers. She's going to sell the ranch."

McLean fell silent. So all his work had gone for nothing. He tried to take the droop from his shoulders. He tried to grin, to laugh it off, to throw back his head and roar his mirthless let-down, but he couldn't move, and Laws' cold voice continued,

"You sure as hell made a mess of it for her. You made a mess of it for everybody."

McLean looked up at the tight-faced man. He said, "You love her, don't you, Laws."

Laws clamped his jaw. "What do you think I tried starting my freight line for? They were starving on the Broken Spur."

"If you could have gotten that cache of ore to Oracle—"

Laws snapped, "You saw how far Hubbard let us go. It was that way always, always would be. She couldn't get any backing. Then you came in and—" He stopped and spat. "My advice to you, Texan, is clear outta here. The woods is full of Big H men gunning for the thousand bucks on your head." He yanked his horse around.

Craz Talon said, "Mebbe, Johnny, we should help him." His watery eyes were shining. "He kilt Red John fer me."

"What? And get shot down by Hubbard's men?" Laws put spurs to his horse, his young face pressed hard and strangely angry.

"Is—is there anything I c'n do fer you, feller?" Talon asked huskily, picking up his own reins.

McLean thought of Bess Randig, of the supple warmth of her body in his arms for that brief moment yesterday, of the warmth of her brown eyes as they looked up into his, giving him vague promise, a womanly look, in spite of her tears at the moment, and then McLean put aside any thought of saying a goodbye to her. He said simply,

"Yes, got any Winch shells lying around?"

"Top cupboard shelf. A hull box of them." Then Crazy Talon kicked his bony saddler to life and followed the disappearing Laws.

WHEN McLean came out with the shells it had started raining again. He rode away, following the wagon road up into the hills and after a while he saw an abandoned barn by an old mine dump, and threading between rusting machinery, brush and heaps of rock he entered the barn, slipped the gray's saddle, and in a stall he lay down in utter weariness.

The wind cried around the old log corners. Rain rattled on the sun-curved shakes. Water dripped through, suddenly hitting tiny holes in the moldy hay. Wade McLean fell asleep.

Voices awakened McLean. Like a great cat he rolled over onto his

knees then feet, all in one motion, and he stood on the balls of his feet, tense, listening. Grey dawn filtered raggedly through the great gaps in the broken roof.

He heard a growling voice mutter, "Something went in here last night. Rain ain't washed all sign away. I'll take the front."

Footsteps slogged through the mud outside the board wall toward the rear, but McLean whirled to face the front. He had recognized that heavy voice. Jug Boseman stood there.

Things happened then in the split of a second. The wide gunman stood there for an instant, blinking his heavy animal-like eyes in the gloom, a down-thrown shaft of dawn lighting him with a strange glow, his eyes showing red and hungry, the hating, greedy, eyes of a deserted dog. He made only one sound—a flat murmur in his tremendous throat—and his shoulders went down as he slapped at the gun in his right holster. His arm came up with a great jerk. He fired once, too soon. The bullet sprayed up the old spongy dirt of the barn floor.

McLean's gunplay was fast, smooth, unhurried. He hit him with his shot, hit the big man in the chest, the heavy wallop of the .45 slug driving Boseman one short step backward and half around.

A faint surprise showed in Boseman's eyes. He drove his left hand down, even as his right fought to lift his other .45. He called up all that massive power of which he was so proud and so sure. He never doubted his ability to shoot again. His slow-moving mind was fixed on that one thing alone. He fought himself around squarely to McLean, fought that right gun upward, fought the last of his strength into that trigger, and sound swelled once more like a dynamite blast in the stable. Dirt slashed McLean across the knees. Then McLean saw the big man's eyes go dead as they stared at him, and Jug Boseman fell in a vast heavy sweep.

"Boseman! Boseman! Did you get him?"

McLean came around on the balls of his feet, silently, gun following

the moving man through the cracks of the barn wall. He recognized that voice also, and a shivering thrill moved through stiffened body. Forest Hubbard had walked into his hands.

"Boseman! Answer me!" Hubbard shrilled. "Did you get—"

The man, his black clothes yellow-stained and wet, his boots dripping with clay, stood by a broken piece of the barn wall, and his face was loose as ashes as he stared into the rigid .45.

"Drop your gun, Hubbard," McLean said softly. "An' crawl through this hole, on your hands and knees."

"McLean—" Hubbard gasped and his voice drifted away sickly. He did as he was told. "Lay down. Hands behind you," Hubbard obeyed.

McLean drew a string of rawhide from his pack, knotted Hubbard's arms together so tight that Hubbard gasped with pain at each yank, then McLean saddled his grey, ordered Hubbard astride his horse, and at gun point directed the man down the wagon road toward Indian Wells.

Hours later they drew up back of Sam Doort's store, and Doort, himself, saw them first. The stolid merchant blinked in astonishment.

"Get Stump Cooley, the sheriff," McLean ordered.

"Wh—what's the deal?"

"Get Cooley!"

Doort hurried through the store and across the street. In a moment he was back with the sheriff.

"Now," McLean rasped. "We're going up to the Hubbard House, and through the back door into his office. There I'll show you the evidence and prove to you that Hubbard killed Gus Randig to get him out of the way so he could buy a silver mine off Bess Randig for a song."

"He lies!" Hubbard croaked hoarsely. "He jumped me and Boseman and killed Boseman. He killed Red John, and how many more I don't know, but your duty is to arrest him, Cooley. I order it in the name of law and—" Hubbard stopped suddenly. McLean had taken something out of his pocket. It was a small, leaden thing.

"So that's what you got that night? Out of Randig?" Hubbard stared.

"Let's get along," McLean said. The two riders and the two on foot moved up the alley.

THEY entered the rear office door, and McLean threw the lock. "I was in here the other day, and I saw the other part of the evidence. Move that bookcase, Sheriff." Cooley did and something thudded down behind. He drew it forth and it was a .22 rifle, its stock half sawed off.

"I saw the butt-end sticking down through the books the other day. And here is the slug I took from Randig's back. You remember, Sheriff. It is a .22. Hubbard—"

"He lies! He lies!" Hubbard screamed it, trying to drown out McLean's quiet voice, but something else stopped McLean and he whirled on his heels. Through the key-opened door slipped Tex Dwyer, cigarette loose in his hard, down-pulled mouth.

"Sorry to interrupt, McLean."

The breath went out of McLean, and then he sucked his lungs full. This was the worst one of all. He should have known Dwyer once bought was all bought. He should have taken Dwyer the other day when he'd had his gun on him. Then he had a chance, even with blood blinding him and pain whirling his sense of direction, but now—Tex Dwyer was the fastest thing out of Texas.

"Go ahead, draw, Mac. I'll give you an even break." Dwyer murmured it.

McLean saw the scar move on the man's neck. He saw the green eyes fasten, hold, glow like thinned emeralds. Smoke rose lazily up into them, around them, then curled over the thrust-back hat brim.

There was only one thing McLean could do. He went for his gun.

Dwyer let the other Texan's hand touch leather before he started, then his right hand went down in a blurred motion and came up in the same movement, and McLean, with cold numbness, knew—

A gun roared behind McLean. McLean's startled shot went into the floor, splattering wood, and he saw Dwyer let his gun sag with a look of amazement.

"Mac, you—beat me—" Then he saw where the shot had come from, and McLean whirled also. Johnny Laws stood in the doorway, smoking gun in hand.

Dwyer's gun spoke suddenly. Johnny Laws flew back against the wall. He stiffened and threw down on Dwyer again, but Tex Dwyer was already falling. Dwyer had been a better gunman than Jug Boseman. He'd gotten off that last shot before death.

With a desperate sob Hubbard plunged for the window. McLean stepped before the bound man and clubbed him savagely across the temple. "Is Laws killed?" he asked of Cooley and Doort.

"No. Too high. But he'll sure need Doc Haskin's help."

Cooley asked, "You didn't finish about this rifle and bullet business. How did Hubbard do it? And what made you suspect him?"

"I suspected him when he came into the barn late, and limping. He limped when he left Doort's house later. But when I saw him after that his leg was perfectly natural. Randig was shot at a slant. Either he was bending down, or he was shot from a high place. I sized up the barn, the open carriage doors, where Randig was sitting. I looked at your house, Doort. Hubbard shot Randig from one of the upstairs windows. He'd planned it that way, using a light rifle so the noise would cover the sound of the explosion. And then also it would be easier to conceal.

He merely thrust it inside his pants leg down into his boot."

McLean saw Johnny Laws' blue eyes looking up at him with cold, direct hatred. McLean knelt down beside the youth with the yellow beard like a prophet.

"Why did you do it, kid? You saved my life. Yet you don't like me."

"I hate you, Texan. And if you can't guess why you're a damn fool. I saw it in her eyes that first day at the pump. I was watching from the barn."

McLean grew still. He started to put his hand on Laws' shoulder, then drew it away. "Maybe you're wrong, kid. Maybe—"

Laws shook his head. "The story of your old man and her's was in that black box, written up by old Randig years ago. She bawled when she read it. But she wasn't crying only because of that. Craz told her of meeting you up at the shack, that you'd got hit in the head, and how we met Big H riders swarming all over the Short Hills. Aw go soak your head." He turned to the wall.

McLean stood up. He shoved his gun down tight in holster, and he felt a strong, rich eagerness reach up inside of him. The weariness, the cold, the pain, the crash of gunfire, the sight of men falling, of blood, of grey dawn and black night fled from his mind.

He said, to no one in particular, "A man rides and keeps going until he runs into something big. If he turns his back on it he leaves a chunk of himself behind. I reckon that now I got something good to ride for. You comin' up to the house, too, Doort?"

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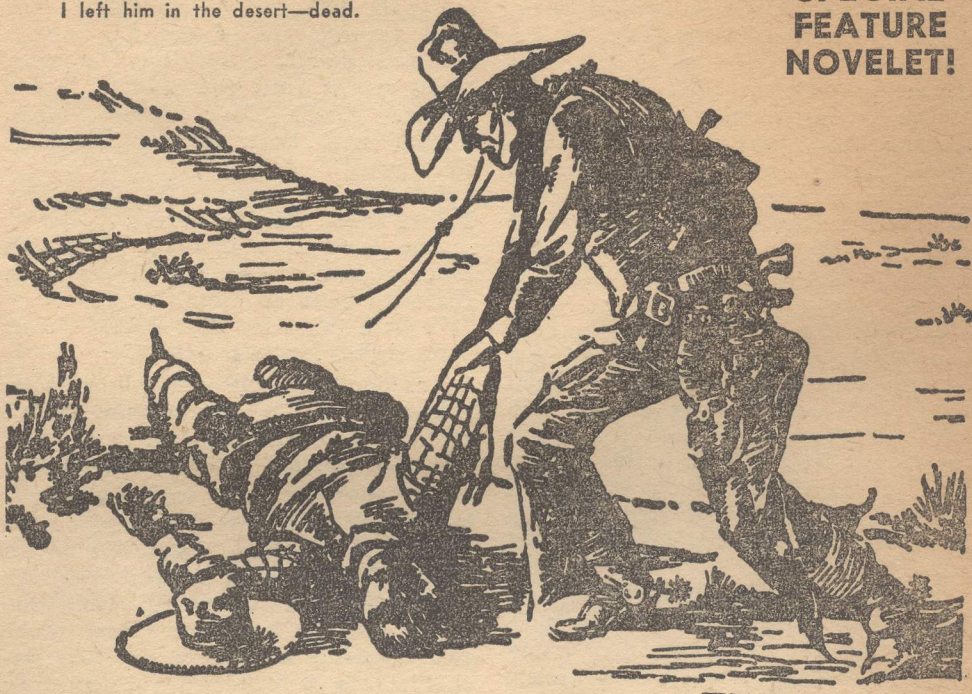
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I left him in the desert—dead.



Mebesso the kid could take a herd of cattle out of San Romano, like he claimed. But he couldn't have killed a man riding in. . . .

CHAPTER I

TO THE EAST of San Romano stretched the desert, on the north and west of it were mountains, and the muddy Rio Grande fenced it on the south. There was good grass in San Romano, it was good cattle country, but that didn't help the ranchers much. Because there was no way to get a herd out to a railhead—at least nobody had ever yet found a way. So the only market the cowmen had for their critters was across the river in Mexico, and the Mexicans had little money for beef.

So most people didn't bother coming to San Romano. Not even the Northern carpetbaggers, nor the Davis Police. But Les Roark did.

And he came in the hardest way possible—through the desert—on foot.

Except for his .44 and a saddle bag, Les Roark had left everything where his horse had been shot from under him. There wasn't much in the saddle bag—a change of clothing and some ammunition and not much else—but after being dehydrated by the desert sun for six hours, he felt as if he had the weight of Texas on his back.

The town appeared suddenly; nature played this trick every once in a while. Les had seen the desert spread out monotonously until he had come to believe that there could be nothing anywhere but gravel, and cactus, and sage brush, and prairie dogs. A wasteland with no beginning and no end. But abruptly, for no apparent reason, it did end.

Les closed his sore, sunburned eyes and pressed his hands to them for a long moment. When he opened them again a hundred little suns danced before him, but the town was still there. It was no mirage. Ten or twelve faded plank buildings leaned against the edge of the desert. A few adobe houses stood at the back. He could even make out four horses switching sleepily in front of what was probably a saloon. He shouldered his bag again and started walking.

Gravel had eaten through Les' thin-soled Dragoon boots, and his feet were sore and heavy. He lifted them and walked. His throat was raw and dry and he had too much tongue to fit his mouth. He forced himself not to think about it. He got on the hot treadmill and set his mind on making San Romano and nothing else.

The first building was the livery barn, with nobody around it that Les could see. A mangy dog came out and barked a couple of times, then went back to the shade of the barn and went to sleep. There was a watering trough and pump there at the end of the street. Les dropped to his knees, cupped warm water in his hands and poured it down his swollen tongue. In a little while his tongue went down until it felt like it was a part of him again. He got to his feet, worked the pump handle, put his head under the cold flow and drank some more. Only after he had had his fill of water did his anger come back to him.

For a moment he sat on the edge of the watering trough and shook with it. He forgot about his aching feet and empty belly and thought about his horse. He got up and went to the open doors of the livery barn and shouted into the dark, hay-smelling interior.

"Ho! Is anybody in there?"

Somebody was. A little baldheaded man with heavy eyes and no liking for people that woke him up in the middle of the day. He stood back in the shadows, blinking at the hard brilliance outside. He said pettishly, "All right, what's the racket about?"

"I want to see the sheriff."

"Well, he ain't here." The liveryman turned to go back and finish his nap, but something made him turn around. He looked Les Roark up and down, carefully. He said, "You might find the sheriff in his office. That's four doors down. You're new here in San Romano, ain't you?"

Les said, "Thanks. That's right, I just came off the desert."

The liveryman nodded. "You can leave your horse around at the back. I'll take care of him."

"I left him in the desert," Les said tightly. "He's dead."

Les could see he was going to be asked a lot of questions he didn't feel like answering, so he said, "Thanks again," and turned away.

The sheriff could have been any age between twenty-five and forty-five. He had crisp black hair and a smooth boyish face, but his eyes said he was no kid. His small office was sandwiched in between a feed store and a saddle shop, and he was sitting at his desk listening to another man talk when Les came in.

Les' anger made him cold and hard, and his throat was tight. He dropped his saddle bag on the floor and interrupted the conversation without apology.

"You're the sheriff?"

The lawman looked at him. "That's right. What can I do for you?"

"You can take a burial party about twelve miles out on the desert if you want to. There's a dead man there. I killed him."

The visitor made a startled sound in his throat. The sheriff only pushed his chair back from his desk, slowly, as if it were something to be doing while he gained time to think. Les had a feeling that he was going about this all wrong, but at the moment he didn't care. He took a chair without being asked and said:

"I had a horse, a big black that I raised from a Colt. I thought more of that horse than I thought of most people, but a while back I got him shot out from under me. Ambushed from a dry wash about twelve miles back, like I said. I don't know who the hombre was. And I can't tell

you what he looked like because he stopped a .44 bullet with his face. He made the mistake of thinking he got me when my horse went down and he came out of hiding."

The sheriff seemed to understand that Les' nerves were doing the talking now, that his mind hadn't taken over yet, for he folded his hands calmly across his vest and waited.

"That's about all," Les said tightly. "I figured he might be one of your flock. If you go out to see about him I'd be obliged if you brought in my saddle and roll."

The sheriff waited until he was sure that Les was through. He had the face of a youngster and the eyes of an old man. He said finally, "If he's dead there's no use being in a hurry to get to him. Do you want to answer some questions?"

"Sure." Les like the sheriff's soft voice and his wise eyes. He would be a strong friend, or a bitter enemy. Les got the feeling that behind that quiet face there would be a hot temper—always under control.

"What's your name?" the sheriff asked. "Where did you come from, and what are you doing in San Romano?"

Les said, "Les Roark, to answer the first question. I came from Arkansas, but that was a long time ago. Lately I've been fighting with the Confederate Cavalry, and even more lately against the Davis Police and carpetbaggers. San Romano seemed like a good place to get away from them. But that's not the real reason I'm here."

He paused for a moment and wondered if the real reason had anything to do with the bushwhacking. He couldn't be sure yet.

"What is the real reason?" the sheriff prompted.

"Do you know a man by the name of Jeff Landson?"

"I knew him," the sheriff said quietly. "He was killed in Georgia."

"He was my lieutenant," Jeff said. "We used to have some long talks about San Romano. He claimed there was no way to get the ranchers' cat-

tle out of here to market, but I didn't agree with him. I knew these mountains to the west pretty well—well enough I thought to move a herd of cattle through them."

The sheriff's eyes were interested. The visitor made another sound in his throat, but Les didn't look around. The sheriff said carefully, "What good would it do if you did? There's nothing but Indians between here and California."

"Take the critters to Wyoming. The government's opening Indian reservations there, and Indians will have to be given meat to keep them off the war path. Sell the cattle to the government."

The sheriff rocked back in his chair, closed his eyes. "If it could be done..." he began. Then he suddenly opened his eyes. "Your idea may be crazy...but the ranchers might listen to you at that. That is, of course, if this affair on the desert turns out to be like you said."

Les said, "Ride out and see for yourself."

The sheriff smiled without much humor. "I will."

The sheriff's visitor made that sound again, and this time Les turned and looked at him. He was a squat, stern-faced man whose eyes said he didn't want any foolishness. He wore a black suit that had cost enough to fit well but didn't. It didn't seem to bother him, wearing a coat in this kind of weather. His face was sweatless.

The sheriff stood up, saw to the hang of his gun, and said, "You can test your idea on Mr. Orsler while I ride out to have a look at the body. If you can interest him you might have yourself a job." He left without explaining further.

Mr. Orsler stood up. He wasn't much taller than he had been sitting down. He put a big, rough hand on Les' shoulder. "Jim's right, Mr. Roark," he said. "If you can convince me your idea will work, you'll have a job all right."

Les said, "I'll be glad to tell you about it, but first I've got to have some food."

"Of course, of course," Orsler said.

CHAPTER II

THEY FOUND an eating place across the street, a box-like building heavy with the smell of steak and onions. Les felt his stomach knot as it hit him. They slid into a booth near the front wall and an untidy waiter came up and grunted.

"A steak," Les said. "Big and rare and in a hurry."

"You want french fries?"

"Not if they're going to hold up the meat."

Orsler ordered the same thing and said, "Bring the potatoes later." He turned to Les and said, "Do you really think you could get a herd of cattle through these mountains?"

"I'd bet on it."

Orsler seemed to consider this. Then he said, "Why do you think that man tried to kill you back on the desert?"

"I don't know. I'm hoping the sheriff will have some answers when he comes back."

Orsler nodded as if that would be entirely possible. "Jim Willis is a good man, the best sheriff we ever had in San Romano. He might look like a kid, but don't let that fool you. Once he took away a man's gun and almost killed him with it for calling him Baby Face."

Les said, "I can believe it."

The steaks came, big and rare and in a hurry. Les cut into his quickly, chewed and swallowed. He was half finished when the potatoes came.

Orsler was saying: "How did you get to know our mountains so well?"

"I did some scouting and charting through here for the army," Les said. "It was my job to find ways to get troops through." He felt better now with red meat in his stomach, but he was still tired and sore and it wouldn't be long before he'd be wanting a bed.

Orsler was nodding his head soberly. "It might just work," he said. "Of course, I'd want to go over your plans with you before I threw in with a trail herd. But if it looks good, I've got about a thousand head ready for market."

Les whistled softly. "That's a pretty good herd."

"I own the Circle-X outfit," Orsler said. "It's the biggest around, except for the Landson spread."

As he said it, two men walked in the front door and looked around. They both had thin, serious faces and pale eyes that looked as if they had been faded by seeing too much San Romano sun. They looked enough alike to be brothers, but too much age separated them for that. They were father and son. They saw Orsler then and started over to the booth.

"Howdy, J. D.," the older man said. He shook hands with Orsler and glanced briefly at Les. The younger man stood by aloofly, not saying anything, but not missing anything either. He wore a short barreled Navy gun, but it didn't look right on him. He wasn't the type for guns. Les Roark put his knife and fork down slowly and looked at the older of the two.

He said, "You're Mr. Landson?"

"Why yes." Those pale eyes were wondering how he knew.

"I'm Les Roark," Les said. For a moment Mr. Landson's eyes shadowed as if he were thinking of something that happened long ago. Probably about his son that had died in Georgia. When he shook hands his eyes were clear again.

"I'm glad you came, Roark. Maybe I shouldn't have asked you, but Jeff talked about you so much in his letters..."

"I'm glad you did," Jeff said. "I hope I can be of some help."

Orsler was puzzled by it all. He said, "I didn't know you knew Landson, Roark."

He said, "I was a friend of Jeff's." He was still too tired to do much explaining.

The younger man was Ray Landson, but he was nothing like his brother had been. When they shook hands he said, "I'm glad to meet you, Roark," but his eyes called him a liar. "You look like you had a hard trip."

Les and Orsler moved over for the two men to sit down. Orsler said, "He did have. Somebody shot his

horse from under him back in the desert."

Ray Landson's eyes widened. His father showed his surprise more.

"Who would do a thing like that?"

"I hope we'll know when the sheriff gets back," Les said. "He's gone out to look at the body."

Orsler took a big silver watch out of his pocket and snapped it open. "Almost three forty-four," he said as if he were running on schedule. He got up and Landson let him out of the booth. "I've got an appointment at the bank now. You get the ranchers together for a meeting, Landson, and we can hear more of what Roark has to say. You set the time and let me know." He nodded around, paid the bill at the counter and went out.

"He's a funny one for a rancher," Les said.

Landson shrugged a little, as if his mind were back in Georgia again. "Orsler? Maybe, but he's a smart man though. He had a big spread up north until he sold out and came to San Romano about a year ago."

"He wasn't too darn smart," Ray Landson said dryly. "Coming to a place where he couldn't get his beef to market." He laughed suddenly, but without humor. "San Romano, some of the best cattle country in the world, and the ranchers are going broke. In another year, they'll give it up and the government will be selling the land for taxes. They'll sell it if there's anybody crazy enough to take it!"

"Are things that bad?" Les said.

"That bad," the old man said heavily. "It doesn't do any good to raise beef if you can't sell it. Some of the smaller ranchers have been forced out already. I took some of their holdings, Orsler took some, hoping that a market would open. But nothing has. If your idea doesn't work we're through."

Ray Landson said, "It won't work. It can't. You'll never get a herd through those mountains."

Les looked at the younger Landson but said nothing. He discovered that he was only half listening. His eyes were heavy and his muscles ached for rest. He said, "Where can I see

you tomorrow? I'll show you how I think we can make the drive then, but I don't think I'd make much sense until I get some sleep."

"We can put you up out at the ranch," Landson said.

Les shook his head. "I'd never make it. I'll ride out tomorrow if I can hire a horse."

They got up and went outside. Orsler had already taken care of the bill. Les found his way across the street to San Romano's one hotel. He didn't bother to notice that his room was unclean, or that there was no lock on the door, or that the wall mirror was broken. He lay on the bed and went to sleep.

At first he didn't know what had awakened him. He rolled over restlessly and opened his eyes. The room was dark. He had slept through the afternoon and into the night. It was black on the other side of the window. And dead quiet.

He could feel it now. Something was wrong and he didn't know what. He listened to the silence until his ears hurt. Then he heard it, the incredibly small sound of a latch being lifted and a door being eased open. He couldn't see anything, he only knew that he was no longer alone in the room.

A board complained slightly as a weight was put on it. Les wondered quickly if he could reach his gun down at the foot of the bed. He didn't think that he could, but he was ready to try it when he saw the tiny flash in the darkness. He forgot about his gun. That small flash had told him all he needed to know. He flipped over suddenly and fell to the floor as the bright blade sliced through the darkness and thudded into the wall at his head. It quivered and groaned like a live thing. Les jerked up and fumbled quickly for his gun, but already he knew that he was too late. The door slammed and boots were hurrying down the hall.

Les made it to the hall in time to see a shapeless figure going out the rear door. By the time he got to the door himself the figure had gone out on the overhanging roof of the porch, and had dropped the one floor to

the ground. A horse snorted in surprise, reared once and spurted off into the darkness, taking the knife-thrower with him.

Les breathed hard with anger. He had his gun but he couldn't see anything to shoot at. He could hear the horse, but he couldn't go after it without a horse of his own. After a moment he walked stiffly back to his room.

The knife was still buried in the wall by the bed. He found it and pulled it out. There was nothing unusual about the weapon. The blade was good steel, it had a good balance for throwing, and the grip was made of laced leather. Mexicans made a thousand like it every day. It could have belonged to anybody.

He sat on the edge of the bed and bounced the knife in his hand. He began to get the idea that somebody in San Romano didn't like ex-cavalrymen.

CHAPTER III

THE SHERIFF was in his office the next morning when Les came in. His face hadn't changed, but his eyes seemed to have gotten a little older. Les dropped the knife on his desk and said, "You know anybody that fancies stickers like this?"

The sheriff studied it for a moment without picking it up. "A lot of people on the border carry knives like this one. Why?"

"Somebody came into my hotel room last night and tried to put it in my back."

The sheriff said, "Oh" as if he had more or less expected it.

"I didn't see what he looked like. He had a fast horse and my feet were too sore to go after him."

That reminded the sheriff. He said, "I brought in your saddle and roll. They're down at the livery barn. It looks like you told a straight story about the bushwhacking. I found where the gunman had been hiding in the dry wash. The bullet that stopped your horse fit his carbine all right."

Les said, "Did you know him?"

The sheriff sighed heavily. "His name was Tod Wiggins. He didn't have a bad name. Lived around San Romano most of his life I guess." He looked up at Les with those tired eyes. "He was my deputy."

For a moment Les only stared. The sheriff said wearily, "I don't know why Tod Wiggins would take up bushwhacking as a sideline. But I mean to find out."

Les said, "I hope you find out in time to do me some good."

The sheriff stood up. "I think I'll ride out to the Landson spread with you, Roark, if you don't mind. Knives and guns are kind of a hobby with Ray Landson. Maybe he can tell us something about this one."

They went down to the livery barn for the horses. Les threw his saddle on a hired roan and they headed south.

Landson's Lazy-J outfit was about an hour's ride from San Romano. The grass was lush and cool-looking down by the river and it was hard to believe that only a few miles away there was a barren desert. The ranch house was something that Les hadn't been ready for. It was a big, aloof, Mexican style house set back from an acre of landscaped front yard. A tunnel of giant cottonwoods cut through the yard to the front porch of the house, and some smaller oaks guarded the flanks of the property. Les Roark whistled softly in appreciation. He hadn't seen anything like it since the big plantation houses in the Carolinas.

Sheriff Willis read the question on Les' face. He said, "The Landsons came here from Georgia before the war. They were one of the few families that could look far enough ahead to see that there was going to be a war, and that the plantation owners were going to be ruined. They sold out and moved down here to go into the cattle business."

For a moment Les wondered if it was his imagination, or if a tinge of resentment had crept into the sheriff's voice. He couldn't be sure. They rode out of the cottonwood tunnel and took a horseshoe path that led around to the back where the barns and corrals were. Landson and his

son were sitting on the top rail of a corral admiring a new colt, but Les hardly saw them. His attention was suddenly fixed on a girl with bright copper hair.

The old man climbed down and came over to them. "I'm glad you came out, Roark. Hello, Sheriff."

Les said, "I thought maybe we could get settled on a trail drive." The sheriff nodded.

Mr. Landson said, "We'll go in the house and talk about it." Then he noticed both of them watching the corral. His voice held a gentleman's quiet pride as he said, "The colt's our new pet here on the Lazy-J, a registered Thoroughbred. We brought a few of them when we moved from Georgia."

The sheriff's resentment hadn't been imagined. Les could see it in his eyes now. They got down from their horses and went over to the corral, but neither of them paid any attention to the colt. The copper-haired girl was sitting on the top rail beside Ray Landson. She smiled as they came up and said, "Hello, Jim."

Les knew then that the knife hadn't been the only reason the sheriff had made the trip to the Lazy-J. He was in love with this girl. Everything about him said it. The girl turned her gaze and her smile to Les.

"You're Captain Roark," she said matter-of-factly.

"Just Les Roark," Les said. "You must be Donna. Your brother used to talk about you. He said you were a brick-headed brat with knobby knees and bad manners."

Donna Landson laughed. She was about twenty years old and she had all the beauty a girl of that age could ask for. Les glanced over to Ray Landson to say something, but the words never came out. There was a slight curl to the younger Landson's mouth that bred uneasiness and slow anger.

Ray Landson said to his sister with cool authority, "You'd better go back to the house, Donna."

"I will not. This is my colt and I'll look at him as long as I like."

Young Landson's face spotted with red. Les noticed that the sheriff's face was also warming above his

collar. Then he had the answer. Donna's brother had been taken out of the South—but the Deep South hadn't been taken out of Ray Landson. He still had all the false family pride of a duke, or an old plantation owner. He didn't like his sister speaking to people like border sheriffs—or ex-cavalrymen without family or background.

A sticky discomfort touched all of them. At last the older Landson said, "Sheriff, perhaps you and Mr. Roark would like to come inside. We can talk better there I believe." He had all the Old World politeness, but not the snobbery of his son.

Les said, "Yes, I think we'd better do that."

Silence lay heavy on them as they rode back to town. The sheriff stared straight ahead and his mouth was pulled in a hard line. He was still thinking about Ray Landson. The personality of the younger Landson didn't bother Les one way or the other. He was just a man trying to get a trail-driving job where cattle had never been driven before. He had no reason to worry about Donna Landson's brother—but then he wasn't in love with Donna the way the sheriff was.

When they reached San Romano again the sun was still high but it was edging slowly to the west. They hitched their horses in front of a saloon and the sheriff said, "Let's have a drink, Roark."

Les looked at him, but that boyish face told him nothing. They pushed through the batwings to the bar and ordered whiskey.

The sheriff downed two drinks and his face relaxed, but his mind was busy behind those eyes of his. Les said, "You look like a man that's getting an idea."

"Maybe I am."

"I've gone more than a half a day now without getting shot at. If you get an idea that will keep it that way, let me know."

The sheriff said, "You asked a funny question this morning. Who in San Romano doesn't want to find a market for their beef? Maybe the question wasn't so funny after all. Maybe there is somebody."

Les waited. He was beginning to see what was going on in the sheriff's mind, but he waited and let him tell it his own way. "The ranchers are broke." Sheriff Willis talked to his whiskey glass. "If they don't sell on this year's market they will be broke—all of them but maybe one. Say that one rancher has ambitions, he wants to own the whole valley, lord it over everybody. He could buy this land for taxes if he could force everybody else out—and he can force them out if he can keep this drive of yours from going through."

It made sense. It left a dark and sickening feeling in Les Roark's stomach, but it made sense. He said, "Do your ideas go any farther than that?"

"When we decide who that rancher is I think we'll know who hired Tod Wiggins to bushwhack you. And we'll know who the knife thrower was working for."

Les said, "How did Wiggins know I'd be coming through the desert yesterday?"

Suddenly he knew the answer himself, but he waited for the sheriff to put it into words.

"You sent a card ahead telling old man Landson when you were coming. He would know. Ray Landson would know."

That was the answer. It was the only one that added up, but still it wasn't coming out right. Why would Landson send for him to come to San Romano and then try to have him killed before he got here? He added things up again and got a new answer. He thought it was the right one this time. It hadn't been the old man that had set Tod Wiggins on him—but maybe it had been his son, Ray.

That night Les Roark pulled the mattress off his bed, put it on the floor in front of his door and lay on it. There were no visitors. But there were dreams. He dreamed about a friend of his, a kid who had died in Georgia with a musket ball in his gut, a kid with the name of Landson. And deep in the sleep he saw another Landson, a man who was blown up with a pride that was dead, a man who would perhaps kill a man

to bring it back to life. A man who made a hobby of knives and guns. And through it all he caught a glimpse of an old man, and a girl with copper-colored hair. Les Roark didn't rest well that night.

CHAPTER IV

THE CATTLEMEN called their meeting for three o'clock the next afternoon. A half an hour before that time the gambling room over the saloon was filled with them. Serious faces edged with worry. Anxious faces.

When Les came in he shook hands with the stern-faced Orsler and Mr. Landson. He nodded to the sheriff and Ray Landson. He searched young Landson's face closely but he learned nothing. He took his place in front of the ranchers and began.

"All right, gentlemen, I don't think we have to go over your problem. You've got good cattle and no place to sell them. It's my job to get your beef to market—if you want to hire me. I know the mountains and I believe I can get a good sized herd, say three-thousand head, through them.

"Once we're through we've got a government market at the Crow Agency in the Wyoming country. That's about all there is to it. It'll be a gamble, but I think the odds are on our side." He paused for a moment and studied the faces.

"It sounds good to me," Orsler said. "I'm willing to throw in with a herd."

A doubtful voice said, "You say you know the mountains to the west?"

"I charted and mapped them for the army. I know them."

The answer seemed to satisfy.

"Knowing mountains is one thing," Ray Landson spoke up, "but taking a big herd through them is something else. On that high ground you've got a late spring and early winter. You'd get caught in the snow. The cattle would starve before the drive was half finished."

Les glanced quickly at the sheriff and the meaning in his eyes was

clear. "I said it would be a gamble," Les said. "But the way I look at it, it's the only chance you ranchers have. Take it or be forced to get out of San Romano for lack of a market."

A sound of agreement went up from the cattlemen, and Ray Landson's face flushed in sudden anger. He talked quickly with his father, but the old man only shook his head.

"You can count me in, Roark," Mr. Landson said. "I'll throw in with the herd."

That seemed to be a signal for the smaller ranchers to fall into line. One after the other they stood, holding up their hands to be heard.

"Count me in for two-hundred head."

"I've got a hundred and fifty beeves ready for market."

Les cut in, "We'll have to hold the herd down to three thousand. I'll be taking at least one rider from each outfit. If this drive works out there'll be plenty of men who'll know the trail and you can send other herds out next year."

That seemed to satisfy them. The sheriff was smiling as the ranchers came forward to sign up for their part of the herd. Even the stone-faced Orsler was smiling. But nobody ever formed a plan that would please everybody—Ray Landson walked out stiff with anger.

Everything seemed to be nicely settled. The ranchers went for the plan. They were out now getting their stock together, gathering and branding them at the Lazy-J spread where the drive would start. Everything was settled for everybody but Les Roark. He was still waiting for another bullet. Or another knife.

A week went by slowly. And when nothing happened, the tension didn't go away, but got worse. It didn't make sense that a man would try to kill him twice and then suddenly give it up.

Every shadow got to be a threat. Les had to steel himself to keep from wheeling every time a leaf rattled. It wasn't the prospect of death so much that made him so suddenly edgy, he had faced that enough in the war. It was the waiting, and

never knowing where it was coming from, or how. Even the Sheriff noticed the change it was making.

"Your nerves are showing Roark," he said once. "You look like a man that sleeps with a gun in his hand."

"I am a man that sleeps with a gun in his hand," Les said evenly. It was nothing to be ashamed of. Bravery was a word they put in books. It was the careful man that would be standing when the shooting was over.

In two more days the herd was shaped up and ready to go. From the way things looked, there was nothing to worry about. There hadn't been any more trouble from Ray Landson. The next day they'd start the cattle for the mountains and hope that they could open a market for the San Romano ranchers, and that would be that. From the way things looked.

It was late that afternoon that the fat hotel owner came across the street to the eating house and took Les away from his steak.

"She says it's important, Mr. Roark," the hotel man wheezed. "She says she wants to see you right now. I was to come over and get you."

Les said, "Who is it, and what's more important than supper?"

"It's Miss Landson." The fat man said. "She didn't say what it was."

Donna Landson? Les pushed his steak away and got up. He began to get that feeling again.

She was waiting in that bare hole-in-the-wall that served as a lobby for the San Romano hotel. She turned quickly as Les came in, but she didn't speak until the hotel man had padded heavily up the stairs and they were alone.

She said hurriedly, "Mr. Roark, you've got to help me."

That feeling got stronger. "Sure," Les said carefully. "But you'd better tell me about it so I'll know where to start."

"It's Ray, my brother. He's angry, ... crazy angry. He says he's going to find Jim Willis and kill him."

Now it was the sheriff that was under Ray Landson's gun. Les tried to make that peg fit, but the hole wasn't right. A man would have to get pretty angry to go gunning for a sheriff—especially a man like

Sheriff Willis. It might mean that the sheriff had found out something that Ray Landson didn't want to get around. It might mean anything. Les said, "You'd better start at the first and bring me up to date."

"There isn't much time," she said urgently. "It's one of those things that build up over a long period. Ray has never liked Jim Willis. He says he doesn't trust him, and he thinks Jim and I are...well, engaged or something." She breathed deeply. "But it isn't that way at all. I like the sheriff but I never felt that way about him."

The sheriff wouldn't be happy to hear that. "Is that the reason your brother's after the sheriff now?" asked Les. "Just because he doesn't like him?"

"It's more than that. Last night part of the trail herd stampeded and Jim accused Ray of putting outlaw steers in the herd. He said Ray doesn't want to see the drive go through because he wants all the ranchers forced out of San Romano."

The sheriff hadn't been very subtle about it. "Is that all?"

A horse clattered up to the hitching rack outside before she could answer. The chunky, blackcoated figure of J. D. Orsler dropped down from the saddle and hurried into the hotel.

"There you are, Roark," he said. "That's good. You'd better come right out to the herd, there's been trouble." He stopped when he saw Donna Landson and shot a questioning glance at Les. Roark waited for him to go on. He might as well get all his trouble in one package.

Orsler said. "The story has it that young Landson is trying to hold up the drive, and it looks that way, all right. A lot of the ranchers are about scared out. Me for one. I'd rather keep my beef here in San Romano than to lose them in the mountains."

The full meaning of that struck Les. For a moment he forgot about the troubles Ray Landson and the sheriff had. He had troubles of his own.

"Mr. Orsler," he said, trying to keep his voice down, "if all the small

ranchers take their stock out, the herd will have to be re-made. We won't be able to do that in time to beat the mountain winter."

Orsler knew that as well as anybody. If the small ranchers followed Orsler out of the herd there would be no drive until next spring—and that would be too late. The ranchers would be broke and gone by then.

Orsler only shook his head. "I know," he said, "but I'd rather have worthless beef than no beef at all."

Les Roark felt anger warm his face. He had come to San Romano to help—he had got shot at, almost knifed, and it was turning out that it was all for nothing. If he were smart he'd spend his last few dollars for another horse and start putting distance between himself and San Romano.

Let Ray Landson and the sheriff shoot out their quarrel. It was no affair of his. And the cattlemen could sit on their rumps and watch their worthless beef get a year older. A lot of good it would do them. It all didn't mean a damn to Les Roark any more. He was through.

That was what he told himself. But he hadn't counted on Donna Landson. Her face was tense as she stared at him. It was as if she had read the things in his mind. It gave him a strange uncomfortable feeling as he watched the hope go out of her eyes.

Against his own will Les turned to Orsler again. "Do you know where young Landson is now?"

Orsler darted a glance at Donna. "He was at the herd when I left. There had been a big row about the stampede and he was blaming the sheriff for the thing."

"Was he going back to the ranch house?"

Orsler shook his head. "I don't know about that. But he wasn't armed. He'd have to go back to the house to get a gun, if that's what you mean."

That's what he had meant. He turned to Donna and said harshly, in anger at himself, "You get back to the ranch. I'll see what I can do, but I'm not going to stand between them if they're bound for a shoot-

out." He watched her go.

Orsler said, "There's bad blood between Jim and young Landson. You'd better let them alone."

Les didn't have an answer to that. He said, "If I bring the other ranchers back into line will you throw in with them?"

Orsler studied him. "Of course," he said, "if you can do it."

Les went outside and up the plankwalk toward the livery barn. He looked in at the sheriff's office on the way. It was empty.

CHAPTER V

"TROUBLE down at the Lazy-J" the baldheaded liveryman said. "Trail herd stampeded, before they even got started."

Les got his saddle, strapped it onto the hired roan and wished he had a better horse. The liveryman watched disinterestedly. "The sheriff's mad," he commented. "Word got to him that young Landson's stirrin' up trouble. He lit out of here like a goosed cottontail a while back. Guess he aims to put an end to it."

Les jerked his head up. "Do you know where he was going?"

"Can't rightly say, but I seen him take over the ridge to the west. That's a short-cut to the Landson spread."

Les said, "Thanks, pop." He hit the saddle, and the roan snorted as spurs raked his ribs. They fogged through the middle of town and cut over toward the ridge to the west that the liveryman had mentioned. The sun was just dying behind a lonesome hill.

It was dark by the time they reached Landson's Lazy-J. They came in the back way this time, threading between the darkened bunkhouses and corrals. Off to the south Les could see the red dancing of campfires. That would be the riders with the herd in the holding corral.

He didn't think he would find Ray Landson there, or the sheriff. He didn't know where he would

find them. He wondered if one, or both, would be dead when he finally got around to it.

There was a light in the big front room of the ranch house. Les got off his horse and went up to the door and knocked. He hadn't expected to find Ray Landson there, but it was a place to start looking.

The old man opened the door. His face was tired and his pale eyes were worried. He would know something about his son's trouble, but not all. Just enough to keep him worried. Les said, "Mr. Landson, there's been a little trouble down at the holding corral. I'd like Ray to give us a hand if he's around."

The old man shook his head vaguely. "He isn't here. He went out to the barn a few minutes ago to saddle up. I heard a horse come in the front way a while back. Was that you?"

Les stiffened. He had come in the back way. He said, "Yes sir. That was me." He backed away from the door and left the old man nodding politely.

He went around to the back of the house again and looked around. Of course, that rider the old man had heard could have been Donna. But Les didn't think so. He thought it was the sheriff, and somewhere, not far away, he and Ray Landson would be coming together.

A horse stamping nervously in the night was what he noticed first. Les followed the sound around some of the empty corrals. He saw the barn then, and the open doors, and the pale orange light of a coal oil lantern. The horse was wandering free at the rear of the barn, a big gray mass in the shadows. It was the sheriff's horse. Les walked stiffly into the light of the open doorway ready for anything. They were there.

They could have been stone men for all the fuss they made. Ray Landson was in the back where he had been getting his saddle down from the rack. The saddle was on the ground now. Landson was crouched like a cornered animal, with his hand stiff beside the butt of his gun. The sheriff at ease near the doors. He was relaxed, even smiling,

with his gun in his hand. He started a little as Les' boots crunched behind him, but only a little. Some sixth sense seemed to tell him who it was.

He said easily, "Come in, Roark, but keep out of the way. I'm about to settle an argument that's been going on for a long time."

"Don't you think it's my argument too? Remember, I'm the man that got a horse shot from under him."

The sheriff's smile seemed to stretch a little. "Maybe you're right. Well, there's your man. He doesn't look so much better than anybody else, does he, no matter what kind of high and mighty airs he puts on? Guns are great equalizers. In a gunfight it doesn't make any difference how much money you've got or who your family is. The man that aims the best and shoots the fastest, he's the best man when it comes down to it."

Les stared at the sheriff as if he were actually seeing him for the first time. He had known that the lawman had hated Ray Landson for his snobbery, but he hadn't known of this cold bitterness that had been locked up inside him. Landson's face was frozen in anger. Or perhaps fear.

"How does it feel now that things didn't work out?" The sheriff said to Landson. "It would have been nice, wouldn't it, if you could have bought up this land for a little or nothing? You'd be Mister God, like on your plantation in Georgia, lord-ing it over people. Putting your sister against me."

Landson's eyes never left the sheriff, but his voice was directed at Les. "He's crazy," he said tightly. "I didn't think the drive through the mountains would work out. I did what I could to stop it, but I didn't try to kill anybody. I didn't have any plans to buy this land up later. We're broke like everybody else."

The sheriff laughed abruptly. "Listen to him."

A long moment went by while Les tried to get something settled in his mind. If Ray Landson was guilty he wanted to know about it. But if he wasn't he wanted to know about

that too. He looked carefully at the sheriff.

"Did you get any new proof that Landson's the one?"

"I don't need new proof. He's the one."

"What are you going to do with him?"

A little muscle tugged nervously at the corner of the sheriff's eye. "I'll take him in and lock him up, like any other common criminal."

An icy breeze came out of nowhere and brushed across Les Roark's face. He knew the sheriff was lying. He had no intention of taking Landson in. He had come here to kill him and that was what he meant to do.

Les heard his voice saying. "You can't do it without proof, sheriff. You've got to have that."

The lawman laughed in that abrupt way again. "What more proof do you need? When you got bush-whacked he and his old man were the only ones that knew you would be on the desert. This one hired Tod Wiggins to do it. He had to because he was the only one that saw that card you sent."

Then, suddenly, the whole nightmarish puzzle fell into place. The card. The sheriff had mentioned it once before, but it hadn't meant anything then. Les had sent a card ahead to Landson, telling when he expected to arrive in San Romano—but he hadn't told the sheriff about it. That could only mean that the sheriff had seen the card before Landson had ever got it. It wouldn't be difficult for a sheriff to get around a small town postmaster. It also meant that the sheriff had known that he would be coming through the desert.

It seemed a long time before he grasped the full meaning. It had been the sheriff that had tried to kill him. He had planted his deputy there in the dry wash, and he hadn't intended that Les Roark should ever reach San Romano. But why?

Slowly, Les thought he was beginning to understand that too.

It was almost as if the sheriff had been reading his mind. His face hadn't changed. The corners of his

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letting him run over you that way?"

Dunbar was confused but he got his arms around her.

"I'm just—just peaceful," he said.

"Huh!" old Shannon snorted.

Sam Bogler and Tapper came in. Tapper muttered something about how they had just happened to be passing. He cast a professional look at Root, still inert. "Well!" Tapper said pleasantly, "that's the first time I ever saw *him* laid out!"

Tapper Light, Dunbar could tell, wanted to roll on the floor and laugh at his double-cross, and if things had not taken the turn they had, Dunbar would have helped him to the floor.

The marshal came in. "You Mell Dunbar?"

"Now wait a minute!" Dunbar said.

"I told you, Marge," Shannon said. "These cowboys—"

The marshal set himself. "I want you for intimidating with a lethal weapon, threatening to kill, invasion of—"

"Forget it, Marshal," Bogler said. "Okerberg left town a while ago, right after I bought the Watrous property from him. No complainant."

"No complainant. Hmm." The marshal considered. The wind began to leave him.

"A crook," Bogler said. "Underhanded. See you around, Marshal."

"Yeah, Mr. Bogler." The law departed, muttering, "No complainant."

"You bought the Watrous place?" Dunbar asked.

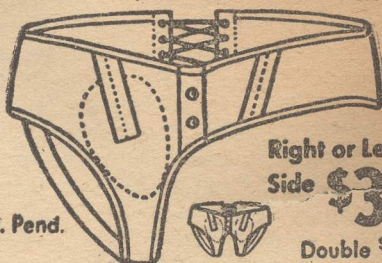
Bogler nodded. "Someday, considering my temper, I may tell one of my superiors a little more than he cares to hear. In that case, it will be very nice to have a little ranch to retire to in peace. In the meantime, Tapper is going to manage it for me."

Tapper smirked a little.

The miner on the floor sat up. He looked in awe at Marge. "Cripes, ma'am—"

"Get out!" Marge said. "You're disturbing a peaceful gathering."

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mouth were still turned up, not in a smile. He said mildly, "You're beginning to get it, aren't you, Roark? It took you long enough. Too long for most men, but then you've been lucky."

But his luck had run out now. That's what the sheriff meant. There was only one thing in the sheriff's mind, and that was to kill both of them here and now. He moved his gun just a fraction, but enough to cover both Les and Ray Landson. He held his left hand out to Les and said, "Your gun."

CHAPTER VI

CAREFULLY, Les got his .44 and handed it to him butt first. There was nothing else to do. Without seeming to take his eyes off his two men, the sheriff inspected the gun. There was an empty chamber under the hammer, as usual. He moved the cylinder back until it clicked. Then he handed the .44 back.

That action spoke his mind more clearly than words. He was going to make the killing look good. He was a sheriff making an arrest. The arrested man resisted, and he was shot. Another man tried to interfere and he was also shot. That's the way it would look when the smoke cleared. The sheriff wasn't worried about Landson's shooting, but he didn't know about Les. It would make it look better if both men had their guns. It would be self-defense that way. Nobody would ever know that Les' gun had been fixed to fall on an empty chamber, and that by the time he could fire the second time it would be too late.

The sheriff motioned with his gun. Les walked stiffly back to where Landson was staring dazedly. He almost said, "You can't get away with this, sheriff," but he didn't bother. They both knew that he could.

The sheriff's smile was real as he flipped his own gun and put it in his holster. That was a nice touch. It salved his own conscience and he could tell himself that it had been a

fair fight with everybody starting from a draw.

The barn was dead quiet except for the sound of someone's heavy breathing. Les discovered that it was his own.

The sheriff said, "I'm giving you a chance. Draw."

A fine chance. Ray Landson didn't move. He seemed to be frozen. Les said tightly, "Don't you think we've got a right to know why we're being killed?"

"Don't you know?" the sheriff said.

Les supposed that he did know, in a muddled sort of way—perhaps as well as the sheriff himself knew. Time was running out. The sheriff's hand was rigid near his gun. He wouldn't wait much longer. A long moment dragged out, and those old eyes in the sheriff's boyish face said he was through waiting. Les was tense, ready to throw himself on the ground and hope that the sheriff's first shot wouldn't be good—but knowing that it would be. And then they heard the sound of a horse running in the night.

Les snatched at the small grain of hope—but then the sheriff's face told him that there was no need to hope. The sheriff was relaxed and smiling again. He knew who the horseman was, and he was waiting for him.

They heard the hoofbeats come up the horseshoe path in front of the house and come back toward the barn. The horse came to a nervous stop outside, the rider swung down and walked quickly to the open doors of the barn.

The sheriff didn't even bother to turn around. He said, "You're late, Orsler. But it doesn't matter, everything's working out fine." He laughed shortly, as if he enjoyed dragging it out this way. "They want to know why they're being killed," he said to the figure behind him. "Do you think we ought to tell them, Orsler?"

Without waiting for an answer, the sheriff went on. "I'll tell them. It's because we want this land. The whole valley. You had the right idea, Roark, but the wrong party. Orsler

and I were the ones that didn't want that drive to go through."

Les couldn't hide the strange twist on his face. The sheriff said, "What's the matter, Roark? Are you surprised? You wouldn't be if you had ever been sheriff. Doing all the mean, dirty jobs that nobody else would touch. Taking things that went against the grain from blown up snobs like Landson. Having your girl turn you down because you were nothing but a cow-town sheriff. Are you surprised, Roark?"

Les only felt a sickness inside. Young Landson still hadn't moved. The sheriff was about through talking now as he said, "Now you know. Are you going to draw, or am I going to have to shoot you like you stand?"

The figure behind the sheriff made a strangled sound. "Jim!"

The rider hadn't been Orsler. It was Donna Landson.

The sheriff's face was suddenly bloodless. Instinctively, Les knew he would never get another chance. He took this one. He lurched to one side, knocking Landson to the ground. Les hit the ground himself, rolled, and came up with his gun. The hammer fell on the empty chamber. Before he could cock to fire again, the sheriff's gun blasted. The heavy leaded slug smashed against his shoulder and spun him crazily.

After that first shot, the sheriff didn't seem to care. He pulled the hammer back as if he had all day. His eyes were still stunned from that one word that Donna had spoken. The sheriff was aiming his gun carefully, almost leisurely, at Les' head, but he didn't pull the trigger in time. He didn't seem to care. Not even as Les' gun roared and slammed him back against the barn.

Ray Landson was still on the ground struggling for his gun when the sheriff died. The lawman sank to his knees and his .44 clattered to the ground. The last move he made was to try to get a knife from his waistband—a plain knife with a laced leather grip, the kind that Mexicans make every day.

There would be no more wondering who the knife thrower had been

BADMAN ON HIS BACKTRAIL

(Continued From Page 76)

"Oh, isn't it?" she challenged. "You big, strong men—you'll stand up to a dozen gunmen, to show how brave you are; but when your personal affairs get out of hand you'd rather run from them any time! It's like I told Martin Talbot, just now—"

"Let's keep Martin Talbot out of this!"

"—When he said for the last time if I wouldn't marry him, he was going to sell out his ranch and leave this valley. Men are all like that, I told him unreasonable! Expecting, I suppose, that a girl can help who she falls in love with...."

She turned away before he could half credit the meaning he thought he read into her eyes and voice. But then, choking out her name, Chick went limping after her and caught up with her in the doorway. She turned, smiling, her arms already opening to him.

"Josie!" he cried, thickly. "Golly, I—I—"

There was no need to finish. For she had thrown her arms around his neck and brought his mouth down to meet her warm kiss. And Chick's own arms seemed to know right then too, sort of by instinct, just where they both should be.



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in the hotel that night. Those ageless eyes stared for a moment, and then the sheriff went down. He looked as if he were glad it was over.

The next morning, with the sun at their backs, the trail herd started toward the mountains. There were the last minute handshakes around the holding corral as the drags went by; the ranchers' faces still shocked and not quite believing what had happened the night before. Ray Landson, and the old man, and Donna were waiting back on the fringe of things as if they couldn't make up their minds to come down with the others. At last Les broke away and rode up to where they were.

He said, "With some luck, Mr. Landson, we ought to be back in about four months—with Government cash for that beef of yours."

The old man nodded vaguely. "Your shoulder, is it all right?"

"It was just a scratch," Les said. "It burned like hell."

At last the customary things were said and Ray and the old man head-

ed back toward the house. Ray Landson had come down from his high perch since last night. He would come down some more before they got back from Wyoming.

Donna said, "I...don't know what to say. I want to thank you for what you did for my brother."

Les said, "There isn't anything to say."

Then, as he sat there looking at her, Les Roark learned some things about himself. He knew why he had done crazy things when his common sense had told him better—because she had asked him. And he had a better idea of what the sheriff had been up against. It was going to be a long four months.

She said, "You'll take care of yourself?"

He said, "I'll take care of myself."

She smiled then. It was a half sad smile that said all the things that words didn't cover. Les Roark remembered it for a long time, as the herd wound its tortuous way up to the high ground and bitter wind. At last, he felt that he belonged somewhere. It was a good feeling.

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