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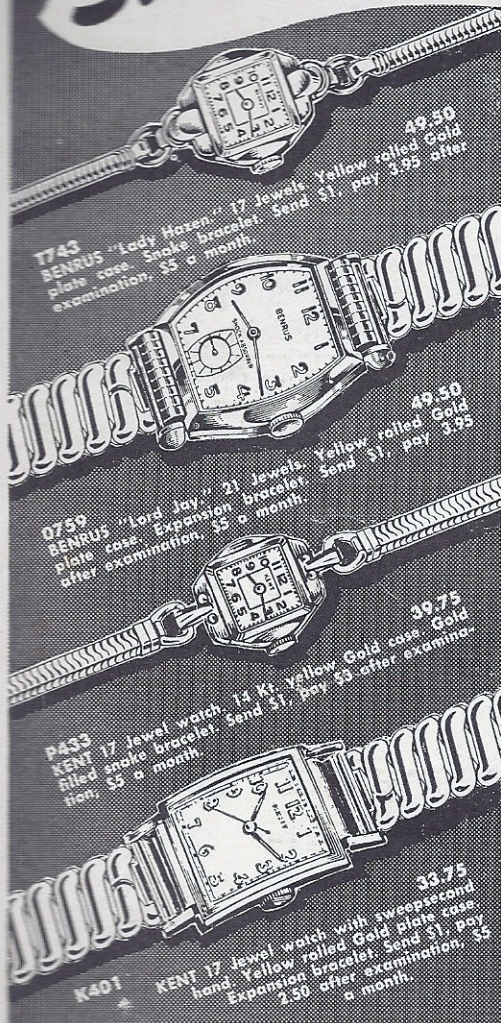


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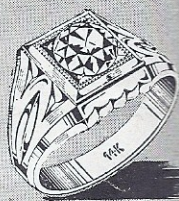
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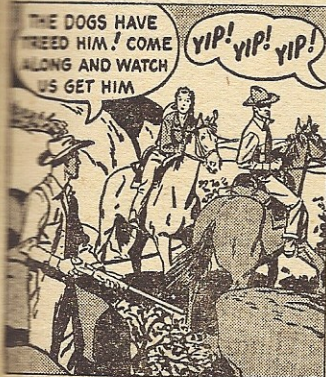
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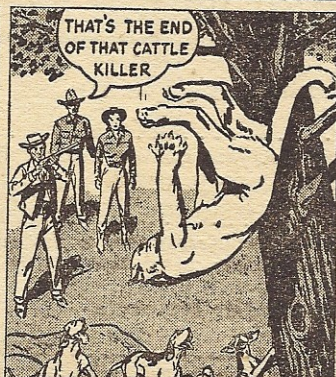


SALLY BRETT AND HER BROTHER JOE, ARE JUST TURNING HOMEWARD AFTER A DAY-LONG RIDE IN STATE CANYON FOREST WHEN...

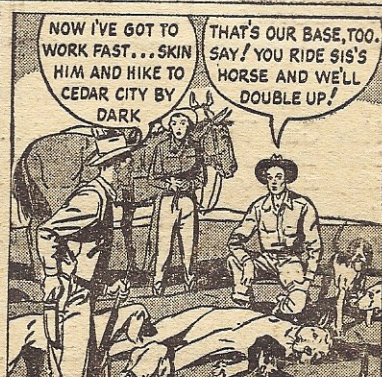


THE DOGS HAVE FREED HIM! COME ALONG AND WATCH US GET HIM

YIP! YIP! YIP!



THAT'S THE END OF THAT CATTLE KILLER



NOW I'VE GOT TO WORK FAST... SKIN HIM AND HIKE TO CEDAR CITY BY DARK

THAT'S OUR BASE, TOO. SAY! YOU RIDE SIS'S HORSE AND WE'LL DOUBLE UP!



DINNER? THANKS, BUT I'D BETTER DRIVE TO THE RANCH. I'M HARDLY IN SHAPE TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC

DON'T WORRY, WE CAN CLEAN UP IN MY ROOM



RAZOR? SURE THING!

SHE'S A BEAUTIFUL GIRL



SAY, THIS BLADE'S SURE KEEN AND EASY-SHAVING... AND MY BEARD'S LIKE WIRE

TOUGH BEARD'S NO PROBLEM FOR THIN GILLETTES

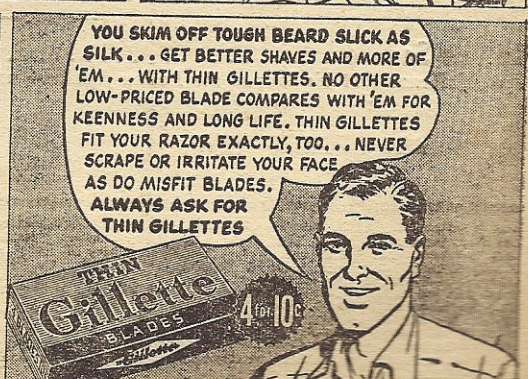


I SURE WISH YOU'D ACCEPT, THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE RANCH AND...

WE STILL HAVE A WEEK, SIS. HOW ABOUT IT?

I'D LOVE IT

HE'S SO HANDSOME!



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WESTERN
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JUNE ISSUE PUBLISHED MAY 5!

VOLUME LII

MAY, 1948

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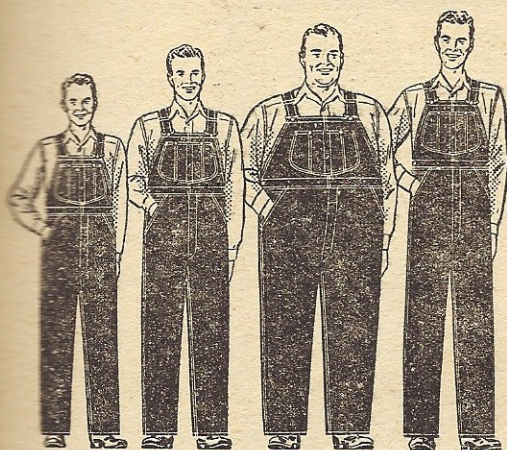
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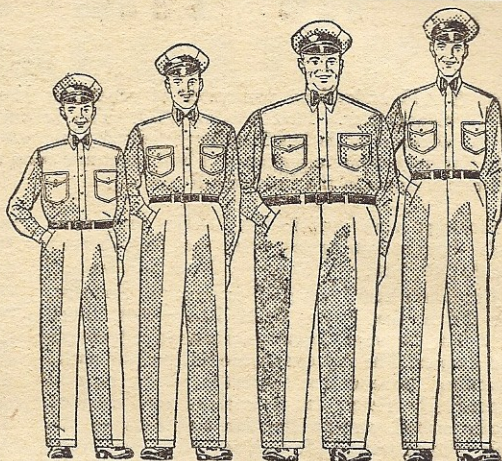
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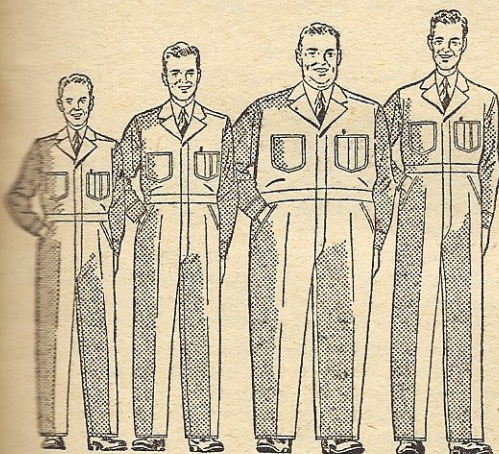


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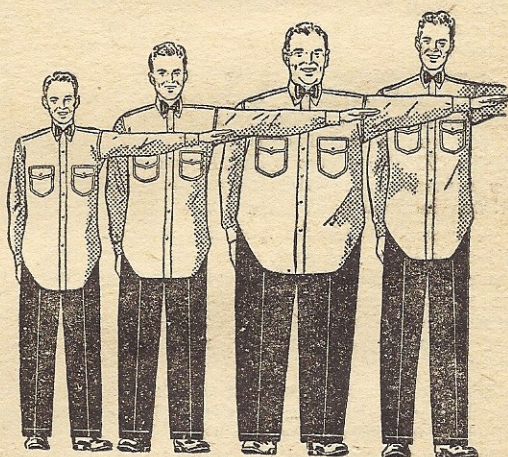


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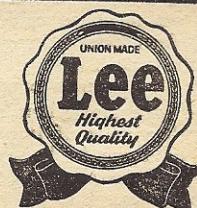
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IN THE SADDLE

AS AN undersized youngster of seventeen Jim McKenna got his first job on a Mississippi sidewheeler. That was in 1877. The following spring found him a roustabout on a bullwhacker train heading for Trinidad, Colorado. Chipping in with three other young adventurers, Jim helped buy a wagon and bull team and soon the quartet was pulling for the gold diggings at Elizabeth Town in the Colorado Rockies.

Pickings were poor in the Rockies and, what with winter coming on, Jim and two others decided to head for Socorro, New Mexico.

Jim didn't find much gold or silver in Socorro, nor did he find riches in Hillsboro and Silver City, but he sure found excitement, adventure and danger. The Apaches were on the war path! Roaming around the desert regions became exceedingly risky. In mountains and canyons death lurked, and in the far corridors of the hills torture waited. It was foolish to be abroad and no sane man went prospecting for gold or silver while Victorio's braves were out on a scalp harvest.

Not to be idle, Jim decided to take up a homestead. He marked off a hundred-and-sixty acres along the Gila. Then he set out to file his claim in Las Cruces, a three-hundred mile round-trip.

It rained during the entire journey. He had to cross the Rio Grande. There were no bridges, and there was no ferry. It was swim or stay where you were. The river had once been dubbed El Rio Bravo (The Fierce River) by the conquistadores when they saw it in flood. It was in flood now.

A crowd of excited paisanos watched Jim drive his horse and pack mule into the swirling torrent. Jim slipped off his horse to hang onto its tail as beast and man battled the fierce, mud-laden current. The Mexicans were yelling and screaming on the bank, as if that would help.

The horse was nearly exhausted when she finally struck hardpan on the other side and climbed out. The mule was swept half a mile down-stream where he got stuck in quicksand. Only Jim's lariat and a horse with still a shred of strength left in its bones saved the mule.

The trip back was not quite so exciting; the Rio was lower and the rain helped to keep wild animals and wilder Apaches from prowling around and stalking their victims. Jim got safely back to his claim.

He put up a log cabin. Hardly was it completed then Cochise, with two score of braves, left the hated San Carlos Reservation. For safety Jim took on a partner, Jason Baxter.

One afternoon Jimmie set out for the creek to catch a mess of trout for supper. When at dusk he came back he stumbled into a flock of Apaches crowding the clearing. They grabbed him.

Jim's partner lay dead and mutilated in the

dust. Squaws were gathering wood for a fire. Jim wondered if this was for him. Just then the Indians' ponies stampeded. Every brave ran to catch them. Jim ducked into the brush and ran.

Two days later he showed up in Kingston, starved, half-crazy, his feet in ribbons. They fed him and fixed up his feet and in another day or so Jim had enlisted in Colonel Blake's Volunteers. With Blake he served till the Apaches were driven into Old Mexico.

Back on his claim again, Jim took on another partner, John Dwyer, recently of Iowa. Things were tough on the claim and Jim took a job in the Superior Mine to earn some cash. A few weeks he worked, sending provisions to Johnny Dwyer. Then Jim got word that Indians had ambushed his partner and that Johnny was lying wounded in the brush. The man who brought the word had lacked the guts to get Johnny out.

Jim immediately set out on a one-man rescue expedition. He found his partner with a bullet wound in the thigh. Managing to get the stout six-footer on his back, Jim lugged the wounded man to where he had left his horse and got him into the saddle.

A troublesome journey brought them to a cabin from where Ed Doheny—who later on became famous as a California oil magnate—hauled Johnny in his spring wagon to Kingston.

Jim again went into the field with the Volunteers. When he returned to Kingston he found Johnny near death of gangrene. The local sawbones, a sot and an incompetent, had botched a simple surgery job. Johnny Dwyer, only nineteen years old, died.

That hit Jim below the belt. He sent two hundred dollars back East to Johnny's folks. Then Jim caved. He was worn out and his nerves were shot. For two years after Johnny's death he never slept more than three hours a night. The slightest sound jerked him awake in a sweat to sit bolt upright clutching his Colt. All his hair fell out and when the new crop came up it was white.

In time Jim got over his affliction. He prospected all over New Mexico and Arizona, but never struck it rich. For several years he was justice of the peace in Deming, beloved by paisano and gringo alike. To them he was Uncle Jim. He died a few years ago, respected and revered by both red man and white.

—Roy Vandergoot

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★ ★ ★ HOT GUN

Great Frontier Novel

By
T. T. FLYNN

From their battling, ragged boyhood on the St. Louis levee, through the smoky years to their grim, final meeting at death-mad Denton City, Bud Keyhoe and Trace Ballard did their tough damndest to kill each other . . . Until there came that red day of reckoning—when the ghastly judges of Boothill's bloody court claimed their final pound of fighting men's flesh. . . .



TOWN



CHAPTER ONE

Iron Horse Trouble-Shooter

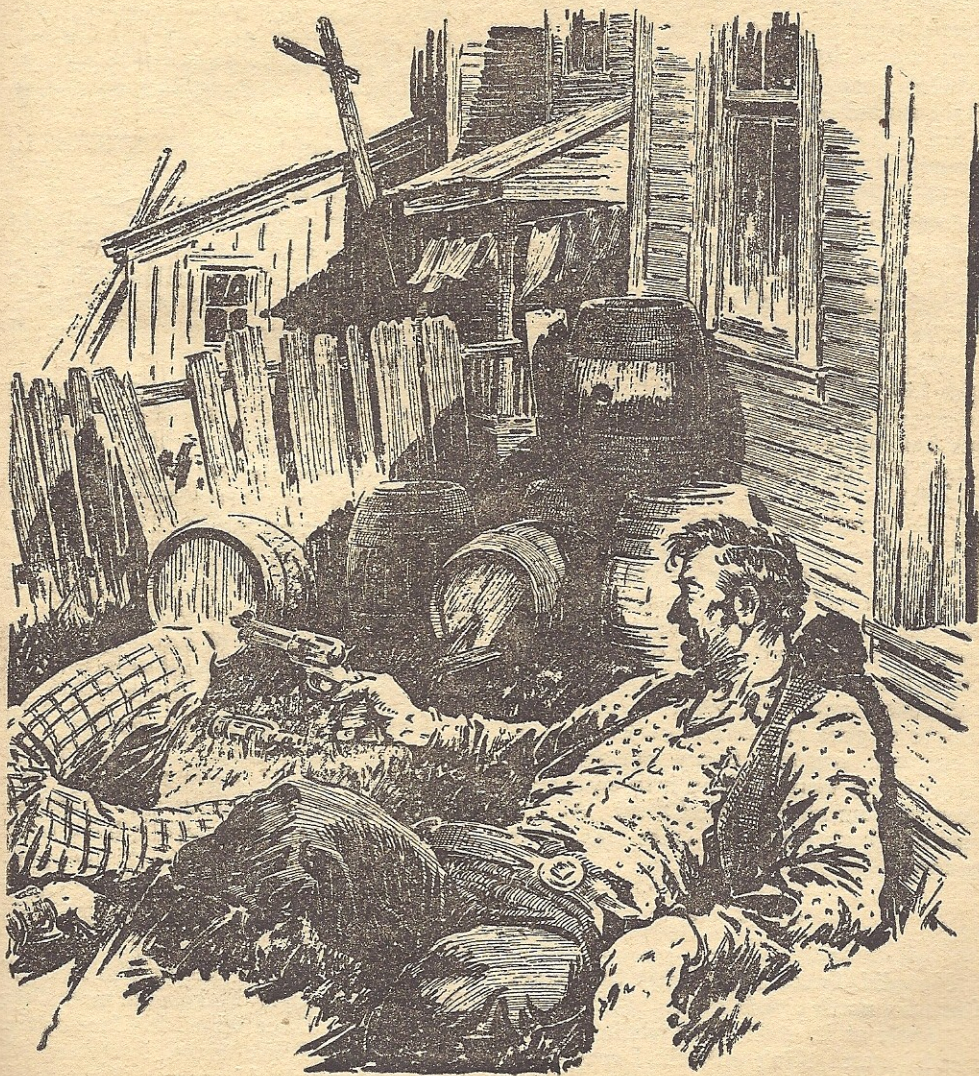
IT STARTED on the St. Louis levee, two boys fighting furiously among the great piles of freight, before a whooping audience of steamboat hands, roustabouts, teamsters, top-hatted townsmen and brawny immigrant passengers attracted by the excitement. Perhaps it started long before, as Fate. Who knows

such things? Who dares to answer?

Bud Keyhoe was the bigger, looking older than his ten years, a solid-muscled boy with a bold shock of yellow hair and white, strong teeth. Trace Ballard was nine, shorter, more chunky, with black hair. A swing of Bud's fist knocked him down again.

Trace rolled toward the circle of spectators and heard the bawled warning of a big Wisconsin log raftsman.

"Git up, young 'un! He'll stomp you!"



Trace rolled violently. Bud's bare, caloused heel missed his head. "You're licked!" Bud yelled. "Say you're licked! Say I'm right!"

Trace scrambled away and lurched up. He wanted to yell back but the words clogged in his throat. It was always this way in anger or a fight. Everything stayed bottled up inside.

Bud plunged at him.

"Look out, young 'un!" the raftsman shouted. "He's got a rock!"

Keyhoe smashed Ballard above the ear with the rock. . . .

When Trace opened his eyes the bearded raftsman had him down by the river's edge, slopping water on his face from cupped hands.

"He's gone, boy," the raftsman said as Trace started up groggily. "I run him off. What was you young roosters spurrin' about?"

"He helped my kid brother, Wes, and me haul packages to the *North Queen* in our hand-wagon," Trace panted. "Bud wanted half the money. Said he was the biggest and had a right to half."

"He git it?"

"No! But Bud wants Wes to run off with him next year. Me, too. Bud says he means to own a hundred freight wagons hauling west and have lots of gold. I told him he wouldn't. I wouldn't take it back!"

"He fit you over it, huh?"

"Yep."

"Well, now, mebbe he's right."

A red flannel shirtsleeve was rolled back on the hairy arm that pointed to the freight going on and off the steamboats as far as they could see along the levee. The bull teams and mule teams. The heavy freight wagons and bowed canvas tops of immigrant wagons. Fancy dressed passengers and work-worn women with children tagging along behind them. All the exciting, busy levee life Trace was never to forget.

* * *

Nor did Trace forget what the logger from the north woods said.

"Look at it, son! The whole world's movin' west! Ain't only St. Looney here. We see it when the rafts come down-river.

They're crossin' everywhere. Comin' from God knows what-all. Wimmen-folks. Kids, too. Know what that means, boys?"

"Freight," Trace guessed.

"You ain't no knothed, boy. Wimmen an' kids mean homes to stay in. Stuff they got to have. The boats can git it up the Missouri a-ways. Some day there'll be a railroad out beyond Jefferson. Out over the prairies. God knows when. But the wagons ain't a-waitin'. There'll be more freight each year. More wimmen an' kids. This here Bud you tangled with is a good-lookin', fast-thinkin' young rooster. Might be he'll grow big an' have them freight wagons and gold."

"Wes thinks so," Trace muttered. He picked up a small, flat rock and paused, frowning as he thought hard. "If the railroads go west, they'll carry all the freight and gold, won't they?"

"Every danged load an' dollar of it, boy. Fast an' cheap. Beats a crawlin' bull wagon or stagecoach all holler."

"Wes will follow Bud," Trace said gravely. "He always does. Wes is stubborn, too, unless it's Bud telling him. We don't have folks, except Aunt Maggie. Wes don't like her much. He'll run off when Bud says so."

"Off to git a hundred freight wagons full of gold, huh?" the big raftsman chuckled. "An' what'll you do, boy?"

Trace skipped the flat rock out under the guards of the nearest steamboat—and another entry went into the book of Fate. Or perhaps it was there already.

"I'll help build railroads and carry all the freight," Trace said dreamily.

He wiped a sleeve of his hickory shirt over his wet face and winced as he touched the swelling the rock had struck.

"Bud'll get the freight wagons and gold from Wes," he guessed. "All of it. That's how Bud does. He's got to have everything, 'cause he's smartest and strongest. Bud's got to be that way if it kills him."

"Or kills the other feller!" the raftsman suggested with amusement. "Bud's a fightin' cock. Smart and greedy. He'll git ahead, I see."

"He's never made me say I'm licked," Trace said darkly. "Makes him mad when I tell him." Trace wiped his face again. "I'm learning Bud's tricks. Some day I'll lick him good. Bud knows it. I can tell."

"Well, now . . ." The raftsman was laughing in his beard as his big hand slapped Trace's shoulder. "You got guts, boy. I'll say that. Mean to lick him some day, huh?"

"Sure," Trace said, not hesitating. "Bud knows it, too. You watch."

"I'd log a winter on the Black River to see it!" the raftsman said. He clouted farewell on Trace's shoulder. "But watch him, young 'un. He'll have new tricks."

THE big logger from Wisconsin's Black River never saw it. His entry was on another page, balanced in the Yazoo swamps below Vicksburg, when Sherman's men were hurled back from the Chickasaw Bluffs.

Years later, as a train rolled through the early prairie night toward Denton City, the new boom camp at the end of westward-reaching track, Trace thought again of the bearded raftsman.

A man named Keyhoe had been mentioned by Susan Croston, who was traveling west with an aunt to join her father, Colonel Croston, commanding at Fort Denton, near the railroad town.

"I knew a Walter Keyhoe, ma'am," Trace said, watching the restless lamplight in Susan's fine brown hair. "We called him Bud. He ran away to be a freighter." Trace smiled reflectively. "And to get stacks of gold. I wonder—"

Miss Agatha Croston, the colonel's gray-haired, unmarried sister, stirred restlessly beside the window. "This Mr. Walter Keyhoe did mention, sir, when he was in Kansas City, that freighting was one of his interests. A most successful and interesting young gentleman."

"He had yellow hair," Trace recalled.

Expression could run lightly on Susan Croston's face. All day Trace had watched her face: smiling, eager, pensive. Now he watched her quick interest. "Mr. Keyhoe must be the boy you knew," Susan decided.

"Did he mention a Wes Ballard?" Trace asked her.

"I don't think he did," Susan said.

"Wes is my brother. They ran away together. They were to be partners," Trace said. He fell silent, looking again at the lamplight in Susan's hair, thinking of Wes and Bud.

Two seats back in the coach, across the aisles, where Trace himself belonged, solemn amusement held Long Jack Edwards and Hardy Wilcox as they watched him with the ladies. Trace leveled a restrained glare at the two—and then listened intently as the shrill engine whistle signaled for hand-brakes.

"Why are we stopping?" Miss Agatha asked with a thin, ascending note of alarm. "Could it be Indians?"

"Not likely, so near Fort Denton and your brother's troopers, ma'am," Trace said calmly.

But he came to his feet in the aisle, holding to the seat back against the jolting slack of speed. "If there's any trouble," he said, on second thought, "get down on the floor."

He smiled reassuringly at the mute query in Susan's look, and moved in the aisle to Long Jack and Hardy Wilcox. Both men were on their feet. The whistle still blew frantically.

"Well?"

"Better get out on the platform," Trace decided. "I'll take the front end."

He pulled a leather valise from the luggage rack, opened it quickly on the seat and took out a belt and holstered gun. He was checking the loaded cylinder when the train made a shuddering stop and a burst of gunfire up toward the engine told its story.

The train was carrying construction workers for Curby Matson's swelling pay-rolls, and dancehall girls and gamblers for their pay money. Hide hunters were headed west to outfit at Denton City for the winter buffalo kill. Miners, cowmen, settlers, dark-skinned New Mexicans and merchants would continue on West from the end-of-track by wagon freighters and stagecoach.

For the most part they knew what to do now. One man, his face pressed against the window, called out as Trace ran forward in the aisle. "They ain't Indians! That's a white man just rode by!"

Trace caught the faint jar of booted feet leaping up the car steps at the front end. He stopped and gave a last pull to the heavy gunbelt he was buckling outside his coat.

The masked man kicked the door open

and stood behind a threatening revolver. He was breathing hard. "You folks won't be bothered!" he called through the blue handkerchief mask. "Sit still!"

He saw Trace's move and fanned a quick shot. Trace's drawn gun prolonged the shattering report. The man folded slowly in the doorway; he was falling to the left as he vanished.

As Trace ran out on the platform, a woman back in the coach cried for help. He had a twist of fear that Colonel Crosston's daughter or sister had been killed, and had no time to look. A gun flash reached toward him from the prairie night.

CHAPTER TWO

A Town to Tame

TRACE heard the bullet rip into the coach wood behind him. He went off the platform in a long jump and took two steps before he dropped, chest down, on the short, dry grass.

The masked gunman died below the coach steps as Trace lay watchfully out beyond him, trying to see clearly the man on horseback who had fired the last shot.

The same man drove another bullet within a foot of Trace's shoulder, kicking dirt against his face. Offside the rear of the coach a gun blurted from the buffalo grass. Still farther out a second gun drove another shot. The dimly-seen rider went down, evidently dragging the reins. His horse stood uneasily.

"You hurt, Ballard?" Wilcox called from the direction in which the first gun had hammered.

"No," Trace said, rising. "There's a payroll in the express car."

A hard-ridden horse swung well out around them toward the head of the train. The fast beat of another galloping animal went forward on the other side of the coaches. Long Jack's cautious voice lifted out beyond Wilcox.

"They're in the express car. The rest are keeping out on the prairie in the dark. Plenty of them too. How about it?"

A burst of gunfire sounded well out from the express car. Trace went close against the ground. "More of them than I thought," he decided reluctantly. "Stay down."

He understood the regret in Hardy's

comment. "I hate to start something and see it thin out this way."

"We started to Denton City," Trace said shortly.

Passengers had been hastily putting out the aisle lamps in the coaches. The moonless night came hard against the grass. Lights in the express car also went out. The engine headlight evidently had been shot out. A few glowing sparks whirled up from the stack; wind brought the rankness of engine smoke.

The boiler safety valve popped in a roaring plume of pale steam. It was just possible to make out blurred movements near the express car. The steam stopped blowing. Voices speaking with low intensity at the express car gave way quickly to the hard run of horses retreating south, toward Indian territory.

Trace stood up, listening. Long Jack and Hardy joined him and Trace said, "Let's see what they left."

Two dead buffalo piled on the track had stopped the train. The fireman had a shoulder wound. Two men were dead in the express car.

"They knew better than to watch what I was stopping for," the engineer said glumly, looking in at the bodies. "Got picked off in the doorway just as we stopped. Joe Black was married, too."

"Two more back there to ride with them," Trace said. He added regretfully, "Not enough."

Aisle lights in the coaches were being cautiously relit. Armed men were emerging belatedly and gathering around the bodies.

A second saddled horse was found ground-tied. Hardy and Long Jack climbed on the horses and rode to drag the dead buffalo off the track. Trace had help in putting the bodies in the express car. He learned that the woman who had cried out was the wife of a Colorado-bound settler. Her husband had been hit in the neck by the bullet which had missed Trace.

The unsaddled horses were turned out on the prairie. The brakeman took the place of the wounded fireman and the train went on.

Trace was the last one back in the coach. He stood for a moment inside the door, a thoughtful, almost remote figure.

He was of medium build. There was a black curliness in his hair and stubborn strength in the line of his jaw.

He unbuckled the gunbelt slowly and held it dangling as he walked to the clutter of passengers in the aisle, where the wounded man was leaning back, neck swathed in a blood-soaked cloth.

THE entire coach watched him come to that seat. There was a silent shifting in the crowded aisle to let him stand where the wife sat intently watching her husband. She was past her youth. Trace sensed in her the plain dignity of inner strength that was taking her west to a new life.

"I'm sorry this happened, ma'am," he said soberly.

She turned her head. "It needn't have happened. The man said he'd not hurt anyone. You started the trouble."

"So I did," Trace agreed. "There was a big payroll in the express car I hoped to save."

She said, "Payroll!" on a soft note of tearing grief, and looked stonily back at her husband.

The silence around them weighed in behind her words as Trace went on in the aisle, lurching a little with the sway of the car. He saw Susan Croston watching his approach. Susan's aunt's thin mouth set distrustfully as he paused, asking, "Are you ladies all right?"

Susan nodded, her look a little puzzled, as if seeking in him the same man who had talked smilingly all day, but not finding him at all.

Agatha Croston leaned forward indignantly. "We might have been killed, sir, thanks to you acting like a desperado yourself!"

"I suppose it might seem that way to some folks."

"You killed a man when there was no need to!"

"I thought the need was there. I'm sorry you don't agree."

He was starting on when Susan said quickly, "I'm sure it must have been necessary."

"Thank you," Trace said.

He went on back and sat opposite his companions. Long Jack, a spare, almost elegant man, with drooping black mus-

taches and a massive gold chain across a blue-and-yellow flowered silken waistcoat, spoke idly.

"Folks out this way seem to be against killing a man—until after he kills you."

"They may be right," Trace said shortly.

He saw Wilcox's quick, searching stare, and met it. There was something in Hardy's eyes that never warmed. Hardy's mustache was brown, against a rounded face, that was always placid. Only the eyes, the blue, cold eyes, set Wilcox apart.

Trace let the question wait in Hardy's look and turned his face to the night outside the dusty window. Reflected in the glass, he saw the look Hardy gave Long Jack.

He let that look stand, too, with all it might imply in the days ahead for the three of them, and sat silently until the engine whistle and slackening speed marked the final mile into Denton City and the end of rail.

Only then Trace stood up, buckled the gunbelt under his coat and went forward to the two ladies, offering his assistance off the train.

"We will sit here until Colonel Croston comes for us!" Miss Agatha said stiffly.

Susan smiled up at him despite her aunt's disapproval. "Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Ballard. If Mr. Keyhoe visits the fort, shall I speak about you?"

"I wish you would, ma'am," Trace said.

Bud Keyhoe would visit the fort, he guessed, as he went back for his valise and rifle. Her aunt would see to it. Bud was still getting the best of everything. What had Wes got since he'd run away, Trace wondered.

HE HAD not been to Denton City, but he knew how it would be, and it was all there when he stepped down by the plank shack which served for a station.

Not long ago this had been the blue distance of empty buffalo prairie where wagon trains and stages had lifted dust in their slow passing. Trace threaded the confusion alongside the train and walked out alone into the ribald, lantern-spotted night.

It was like other railhead towns he had known. Long side tracks out on the prairie held cars loaded with supplies.

Iron rails, cross-ties, boxes, barrels and kegs were stacked high under the stars.

The town itself was a place of tents, shacks and a few larger, portable structures. A place of saloons and dancehalls, horse and mule and wagon corrals, the fenced yards of buffalo hide traders, and stage and wagon-freight stations for the traffic West beyond railroad iron.

He turned from the town and presently located the rebuilt boxcar that served as a rolling office for Curby Matson, the new construction chief for the next spurt of track laying.

Curby looked with a frown from a battered rolltop desk and a gaunt man standing there with a sheaf of papers. He saw it was Trace and bounced to his feet with welcome, snatching a dead cigar stump from the side of his mouth.

"Did you get my telegram about Colonel Croston's women folks?" Curby asked.

"I did what I could for them."

"Good! We need the colonel's good will."

Curby rocked restlessly on his toes, a compact, muscular man. He was ambitious, energetic. Matson would never pause while there was empty country calling for railroad. Trace understood him; Trace had something of the same long vision.

"How many men did you bring?" Curby asked hopefully.

"Two," Trace said, eyeing the gaunt man beside the desk.

"Only two?" Curby exploded. He held back further comment and indicated the gaunt man. "Otto Soderholm, our paymaster. Otto, this is Trace Ballard. Worked under me on the Union Pacific. Been East since then getting some new engineer learning. He's replacing Darcy."

Soderholm looked startled and seemed to see Trace for the first time. He was a harried looking man, as if work under Matson was too heavy. "I'll put your name on the payroll," he told Trace.

"You'd better telegraph for more payroll money," Trace said, putting down the valise. "The train was held up."

Matson hurled the frayed cigar to the dusty floor. His oaths were fluent and bitter. "That money was shipped two days early! Only a few knew it was on

the train! Couldn't you stop it at all?"

"Too many of them. We killed a couple. After that it seemed best to wait."

A flush came to Curby's face. "I haven't time to wait! Over three thousand men on the payroll now, including the forward grading camps! They won't work without paydays on time! They aren't working anyway! I started this job behind schedule! It's falling farther behind! You should have brought ten men. Twenty would be better!"

Trace flushed too. "I didn't want this job, Curby. I want to build a railroad."

"What do you think I'm trying to do?"

Curby sat at the desk again and spoke more calmly. "The town is out of hand, Trace. Hide hunters are outfitting here. Freighters and stages are meeting us from the west and southwest. A few cattle drives are already here. Soldiers from the fort make it worse. Our payrolls are fattening outlaws and gamblers instead of getting rail laid. Some of my best men have been killed!" Curby shook his head sadly. "You brought two men!"

"Hardy Wilcox and Long Jack Edwards," Trace said.

Curby's square hand groped into a desk drawer and came out with a fresh cigar, which he held forgotten. "Wilcox and Edwards," he repeated, and sat motionless.

SODERHOLM cleared his throat. "I can't keep losing payroll money. Something has to be—" He stopped, realizing neither man was listening.

"Can you do it before payday?" Curby asked.

"A month isn't enough," Trace said irritably. "You know it."

"Five days," Curby said, dropping a fist on the desk. "Get this town straightened out before payday, so my men won't be sluggish, robbed, cheated, shot and made useless for days. I've got to have that to build railroad fast! I agreed to build fast! Do it, Trace, or you're no good to me!"

Trace picked up the valise. "Is there a wagon freighter and business man here named Walter Keyhoe?"

"Got a hide yard by the Missouri corral," Curby said shortly. He bent forward. "What about the job?"

"Ask me after payday," Trace said. "You know I wouldn't have this, if it didn't go with laying iron."

"You went through it on the U. P.," Curby reminded. "That's why I thought of you. Give me reasonable law and order quick and you'll help build more railroad than the spike gangs. There's a room for you at the Travelers House." Curby took a cigar box from the bottom desk drawer, dumped an assortment of law badges on the desk and held out three. Trace picked up another badge drilled by a bullet hole a little off center. "Who wore this?"

"Frank Darcy," Curby said with some reluctance. "I sent for you after Darcy was shot. Don't know why I kept his badge."

"Who did it?"

"Nobody knows. Darcy had his gun out when he was found behind the Buffalo Corral."

"What's that?"

"Biggest bar in town. The worst," Curby said. He sat scowling at his thoughts. "I don't think Darcy had a chance, even if his gun was out."

"Why?"

"His gun wasn't fired. It was put into his hand or Darcy pulled it as he was dropping." Curby's scowl lingered. "Too much easy money, Trace. The bad ones are here from everywhere to get it. Still coming. It's getting worse fast. We'll have to make our own law quick, like we've done before."

Trace nodded and tossed one badge back and kept the punctured one. He looked back from the doorway at the worried paymaster.

"There's no good place down in the Nations to spend your stolen payroll," Trace said thoughtfully. "I'll look for it here in town in a day or so."

He left Soderholm's silence behind, guessing the gaunt man had little faith. The clamor of the boomcamp reached through the night at him and he walked into it.

Curby Matson's men crowded everywhere, noisy and exuberant. Buffalo hunters in fringed buckskins, muleskinners and bullwhackers jostled immigrant men headed farther West, who had never seen anything like this and showed it. The few cowmen Trace saw seemed to be

keeping with their own kind. The dim night pulsed with a kind of edgy excitement in which anything could happen and did happen.

In that short walk Trace heard a rip of gunfire off south of the tracks. It could be fun or death. A little farther on he stopped and looked back as men boiled out of a small saloon. Furious voices marked a fight. He waited for gunfire that did not come, and went on.

He had been through all this under Curby Matson in other railroad camps that had mushroomed out beyond the law. No one expected to stay after the rails moved on. Few wanted law and order. Life raced from payday to payday, boiling through the clamorous nights, exploding wildly on paydays.

Trace knew the answer and Curby knew it. A town like this had to be broken like a horse off the wild range, against its will, forcibly. And the town would fight back, not caring whether rails were laid or trains ran, so long as the money flowed free.

Trace walked to the hotel that faced the tracks. He thought soberly of the five days ahead. It had to be done. The rails had to push on. He thought of the settler's wife and her grief, and strangely the thought was a help to doubts that had come as he sat watching Susan Croston. The railroad was building for people like that now bitter wife, and others who would follow her. It was worth whatever had to be done to build. Trace doubted that Susan would understand the hard, violent reality. He knew her aunt would not.

CHAPTER THREE

There's Law in a Dead Man's Badge!

THE four dead men were buried the next afternoon on the swell of brown prairie north of town, guilty and the innocent side by side.

The Reverend Samuel Doane, a solemn little man with gray chin whiskers, whose church was a weathered tent south of the railroad, stood bareheaded beside the common grave and lifted his voice. "*Man that is born of woman. . .*"

Trace stared at the common grave and thought, "The lion and the lamb shall lie down together!" His aunt used to say

that. He could almost hear her now.

An engine whistled loudly on the railroad; the minister's words went on, and Trace looked toward the woman who was sobbing softly. He had marked her handkerchief going repeatedly under a heavy black veil. Two other veiled and stylishly dressed dancehall girls silently sided her without visible grief. Most of the men, Trace guessed, had come from curiosity. Hardy Wilcox was on the other side of the grave, standing placidly alone. Long Jack Edwards was not present.

It was over quickly. Trace walked past Hardy as the three women hurried toward a polished buggy and sleek team of matched bays. "Find out who that girl is," Trace told Hardy in a low voice, and kept going toward the black gelding he had rented.

He had not put on the badge, but he was known as the killer of one of the bandits. He saw eyes following him as he reined the black horse toward the army fort.

The flagpole and the flag were visible when the fort was still far across the prairie. The brave flag flew high in the sunlight and west wind. It represented the long arm of government; the shield of protection raised over all the blue empty distance. Turning in the saddle Trace saw the dwindling town and black smoke from the railroad. White-sheeted supply wagons were crawling west beside the straight new scar of unfinished grade. For a musing moment he was nine again, on the St. Louis levee, with the rock bump swelling on his head, caught by the thought of freight flowing West to families who were settling on the empty land.

Trace smiled wryly and faced toward the fort. The four dead men and the lawlessness of Denton City were hard reality against past visions; against Curby Matson's troubles; against the few short days ahead.

The flag gave way to a bull-voiced sergeant yelling commands at troopers drilling on the broad, sun-baked parade ground. Trace pinned on the punctured badge before he crossed the covered veranda of post headquarters and, with some hope, asked a fresh, pink-faced adjutant for a word with the colonel.

The hope began to fade when the spit-

and-polish young second-lieutenant looked him over languidly and carried in the request, his voice audible through the open door. "Sir, a civilian by the name of Ballard. . . ."

The crusty reply, "That fellow? Very well, Sedgerton."

Fate gave a man like Colonel Hilary Croston a smiling brown-haired daughter who could twist a man's thoughts far from his work. A lifetime in the regulars had made the colonel what he was, a man intolerant of all things outside uniform and regulations.

He sat at the desk and listened impatiently, braid and authority on his square shoulders, long rides under a cavalryman's sun stamped in the cooked leather of his face, the handsome white mustache bold above a hard mouth, and temper rising as Trace spoke calmly.

"Keep my men inside post limits? A damned impertinent suggestion, sir!"

"I only suggested putting the town outside limits for a time, Colonel."

"Same thing! There's no other place for the men to go!"

Trace tried again. "It's a construction town, sir, and out of hand. Your men may get involved in something not concerning them."

"My men can take care of themselves, Mr. Ballard!" Croston snapped. "That's the name, isn't it?"

"It is, Colonel."

"Yes. Well, Mr. Ballard, I'm due to thank you for offering your services to my sister and daughter on their trip from Kansas City, as I requested of Mr. Matson."

"Not at all, sir."

"Also," the colonel said coldly, "I understand you endangered their lives with the reckless use of your gun."

"I never use a gun recklessly, Colonel. Good day, sir."

THE SUN-WHIPPED parade ground seemed to quiver as the bawling sergeant wheeled fifty sweating horses and men. Good men, who would face an Indian charge without flinching and take without complaint the bitter alkali taste of desert-swollen tongues as they followed Comanche or Apache trails out over the rim of the world. Good men, but no help

to law and order when they blew off the boredom of garrison routine in a wild town.

Then Trace forgot the troopers and the colonel. The two-seated buggy just ahead on officer's row had yellow tassels fringing the top, and a fine fast-looking pair of white horses.

Susan Croston was being helped out of the buggy by a tall young man with a mane of yellow hair. Something close to excitement hit him when Susan saw him and called, "Oh, Mr. Ballard!"

He was already reining to them, swinging down, certain of her companion despite the years. "A pleasure once more, Miss Croston," Trace said. Then, to her companion: "Bud Keyhoe, isn't it?"

Susan watched, smiling, as they shook hands, measuring what the years had done to each. Bud was still the taller, solid and boldly handsome.

"I'd have known you anywhere, Trace, even if Miss Croston hadn't told me you were on the same train."

"So you got the freight wagons," Trace said, chuckling. He touched his head above the ear, remembering the rock.

Bud saw the gesture and remembered too. He grinned. "I said I'd get the wagons, didn't I?" He saw the drilled law badge and stopped smiling. "What's that badge, Trace?"

"I'm wearing it . . . for a time."

"In town?"

"Yes."

Bud pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. "Dangerous," he remarked, and shook his head. "A little luck on the train last night makes it worse," he added.

Susan looked troubled. "There'll be more danger?" she asked.

Bud said slowly. "That badge is the real trouble. Some men in Denton City don't like badges. Trace, isn't that John Darcy's badge?"

"They tell me so." Trace smiled at Susan's troubled look, and after a moment she smiled doubtfully, still sensing more than they were putting into words. Trace's question sent her quick glance to Bud.

"What happened to Wes?" Trace asked.

Bud stood smiling and parried the question. "Wes was doing all right the last I heard. I'll tell you about him when you

see me in town. Ask me about it."

Trace let it stand. He didn't look back as he rode away, skirting the parade ground and on toward the railroad. He rode thoughtfully again, with a new slow crawl of nerves in his belly, as men have in rare moments when they seem to see too well into the future.

* * *

Denton City straddled the railroad, the structures which had been erected first facing wide dusty roadways on each side of the grade. The rest straggled out to the wagon camps and more distant bed grounds of cattle drives already seeking this nearest point of shipment.

Trace rode a long swing around the outer camps, placing each tent, structure and wagon camp clearly. Now and then he stopped for idle talk. Finally he came in past freight wagons cluttered along the railroad tracks.

Curby Matson's men were swarming about the supply spurs, tent rows and portable warehouses, where gangs of them lived. The racket of the town closed in. Even in daytime dancehall music struck through the work sounds. Trace dismounted behind the small plank railroad station, walked around to the front and went in.

The agent was a dour, drawing man named Meeks, who stayed at the clicking telegraph key for some minutes after Trace entered. Finally Meeks pushed up a green eyeshade, adjusted black cloth sleeve-guards and came to the counter with a handful of yellow slips covered with writing.

"Here they are, mister. Copies of all telegraph messages both ways for the last four days, except train orders." Meeks complained, "I got too much work now, without all this! It don't make sense to me anyway."

"It makes sense to Matson," Trace said good-naturedly, folding the slips and putting them inside his coat as he went out.

Hardy Wilcox was standing idly at a corner of the station, his round face placid. "Saw you ride here," Hardy said. "The girl's name is Grace Higgins. She works at the Buffalo Corral. Pretty one, they say. She's taking the day off"

"Did you find out which dead man she was crying about?"

Hardy shook his head. His cold blue eyes considered Trace. "Her boss might know," Hardy suggested.

"Why didn't you ask him?"

"I did," Hardy said. "Fellow named Martin. He told me it was none of my business."

"Where's Long Jack?"

"Still looking the town over. There was a killing in the Buffalo Corral while you were at the fort. A gambler named Kelsey shot a big Irish grade gang foreman who made some remarks about the cards."

"Where's Kelsey now?"

"Playing cards in the same place, I guess. Want me to go talk to him?" Hardy asked mildly.

"I'll see him," Trace decided. "Then we'd better have a talk."

Hardy cleared his throat. "I saw this Kelsey kill a man at Hays City. Same kind of an argument. Kelsey wears a holster under the left arm. But he's left-handed and keeps a derringer up his left coat sleeve."

"Thanks," Trace said.

He had an idea Hardy was watching as he rode back along the street to the Buffalo Corral, which faced the railroad. The front was painted red. Sun-bleached buffalo skulls were nailed above the entrance. Two of Curby Matson's men staggered out as Trace dismounted.

When he batted his way through the swinging doors he found this place different. Two large portable warehouses had been set together in T-shape, the second one across the back of the first, so they formed one big building. Overhead, under the high peak of the roof, brace timbers were hung with bright cloth streamers, flags and brass lamps.

On the right a long bar ran far back; on the left were gambling games and card tables. The dancehall was at the back, extending to right and left out of sight, with closed booths around the walls and a floor clear for dancing.

Trace guessed forty or fifty men were in the place. The bullet-drilled badge on his coat was sighted and men nudged others along the bar and turned to stare. A tightness ran through the big room and among the gambling tables, until piano

music in the rear sounded loud in the spreading quiet.

TRACE walked to the bar. A heavy-framed, bearded man asked, "Looking for someone, mister?"

Trace looked the speaker over. "A man named Kelsey in here?"

A chair scraped on Trace's left, beyond range of his vision. He watched the man at the bar.

"I ain't Kelsey," the man said.

Silence came down again. Then, from behind Ballard: "I'm Kelsey, stranger. What was it you wanted?"

Kelsey had been seated at a card table, talking with another man. He was standing when Trace turned. Tall, slender, wearing good broadcloth, immaculate linen and black string tie, everything about him said 'gambler'. His thin face didn't look worried.

Trace looked him over carefully, noting the coat open in front, revealing the shoulder holster and gun Hardy had mentioned. Kelsey's right hand came up carelessly to the right coat lapel and Trace lost a small hope that his words would make an impression. He went to the table, stopped and said politely, "You're leaving town, Mr. Kelsey. Any direction you like. I'll walk outside with you."

"Very kind of you," Kelsey said. His right hand moved slightly. His left arm came carelessly up; he was still smiling when Trace shot the left hand into a bloody pulp.

The derringer spinning down onto the table top told its story. Few eyes saw it. Other men were dropping to the floor or dodging to safety. Kelsey caught at the shoulder gun with his right hand and Trace shot him again.

Silence caught the big room as Kelsey fell along the table edge and down to the floor. His companion had made a crouching lunge away from the spot.

Trace wheeled, waiting for a challenge. A man stepped through the swinging doors. It was Hardy Wilcox. He looked, and turned on his heel and walked back out.

"I've taken over Darcy's job," Trace said after a moment. "When you see a badge in Denton City, do what the wearer says. Any objections?"

The bearded man, still standing in the same spot at the bar, said carefully. "Not while you've got that argument in your hand."

Trace put the gun back under his coat. "Any objections now, mister?"

"Not from me, young fellow."

A voice spoke from the back end of the long bar. "I told Kelsey he'd try that sleeve trick once too often. Have a drink on the house, gentlemen, and be friendly."

Men might say a voice could not be remembered through the long years. They were wrong. The excited prickle of old and deep memories ran through Trace as he walked toward the speaker. The young man who leaned smiling against the bar back there had dark curly hair and a cockiness about him that belonged with the memories.

"Hello, Wes," Trace said.

"Hello, Trace."

They stood eyeing each other, the past with them and no words to speak of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullet Brothers

"THE NAME is Martin now," Wes said. He reached for a bar bottle and filled glasses that had been put out as Trace started back. "Where'd you learn to shoot like that, Trace?"

"I was a green kid in the army and a couple of mountain men taught me what they knew. I got better under Curby Matson when the U. P. was building. We had towns like this."

They had the drinks and studied each other, still without words to bridge the years.

"What happened to the freight wagons you and Bud were going to have together?" Trace asked.

Wes grinned. "Bud still has some wagons. But the railroads are building fast now. A man can make money quicker other ways."

"Like this?"

"Sure."

"Why isn't Bud in it?"

Wes shrugged the question off. "That badge of Darcy's is bad luck, Trace."

"Hasn't been so far. Who killed Darcy?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I knew. Don't

be a fool, Trace. Take that badge back and move on."

Trace shook his head. "Who was the man I killed on the train last night? No one seems to know him."

"I didn't go over and look at him," Wes said.

The dancing had stopped. Trace looked toward several of the girls standing about the piano. One tall blonde, he thought, had been at the graveyard with the Higgins girl. He sobered. "This is dirty business, Wes."

"There's money in it."

"Is money all you're after?"

"What else? I'm using my head," Wes said irritably. "Don't start preaching, Trace. We aren't kids any more."

Trace stood for a moment, turning the empty glass slowly in his fingers, staring at it. "We're still brothers," he said softly. "This business won't last, Wes. The town will quiet down after the railroad builds on."

"There'll be other towns," Wes said sullenly. "I know what I'm doing, and I'll keep on doing what I damned please. Don't walk in here, Trace, after all these years and start this kind of talk."

"I wonder if you ever knew what you were doing," Trace said. It was as if they were boys again. "Bud always told you what to do and you did it. How much of this business does Bud own? All of it? He used to get everything from you."

"Leave Bud out of this!"

"Was he ever out of it?"

"I told you to mind your own business!" Wes said sharply. "John Darcy was the third man who didn't mind his business in this town. Use your head, Trace; take that badge off and move on!"

He was a man, speaking with sullen force, meaning it. And he was still Wes.

"I'll see you later," Trace said abruptly. He was turning away when Wes demanded, "What about Kelsey?"

"He worked for you; bury him," Trace said coldly, and he caught the first faint uncertainty in Wes' expression, and walked away from it, through staring silence along the bar and out the swinging doors.

Word of the shooting had passed through the town while he talked with Wes. Mounted, Trace watched men

standing alone and in little groups, eyeing John Darcy's badge and searching his face, weighting him. He was mildly surprised when he reached the hotel without trouble.

Long Jack and Hardy were waiting on a shaded bench in front. They watched silently as he tied the horse and sat down beside Long Jack.

"It's started," Trace said, taking the yellow slips from inside his coat. "Four more days. Colonel Croston won't keep his soldiers out of town."

"You see Martin?" Hardy asked.

Trace met the cold speculation in Hardy's look. "He's Wes Ballard, my kid brother. You knew it, Hardy. Something on your mind?"

"He looks like you," Hardy said. "You spoke about a brother once. Nothing on my mind, Trace."

Long Jack was leisurely using an ivory toothpick. He spoke past it. "Suppose we have trouble with your brother?"

Trace stared out toward the railroad track. "I'll try to see that we don't have trouble with Wes," he said, and knew it was no answer at all, and Long Jack and Hardy knew it too, and let it hang between them.

"I haven't seen any Lazy S brands like those two horses had last night," Long Jack said past the toothpick. "The bodies we brought in don't seem familiar to anyone. At least no one will admit it."

"I looked over their guns and saddles this morning," Trace said, reading the yellow slips. "One gun had eight notches; the other three. The rest of the bunch must be as bad."

Hardy stirred restlessly. "I'm making a guess they left a trail toward the Nations and then scattered. If they come here, I'm guessing they'll drift in from different points."

"They'll be here and we won't know it until they hit us," Long Jack said dryly.

"Curby Matson's men make more noise than trouble," Trace said. "It's the worst of the bad ones who keep the camp wild. We'll get them first—and quick."

"I've seen four who ought to be traveling by sundown," Long Jack remarked. "Want me to tell them?"

Trace nodded. "Put on your badge." Hardy Wilcox silently watched Long

Jack depart and slowly pinned on his own badge. "I can think of a couple myself," Hardy remarked, and when Trace nodded Hardy also walked away, an inoffensive looking man.

TRACE watched them go, knowing he might not see either again. He finished reading the yellow slips and put all but one back inside his coat.

The message had been sent from Kansas City to Grace Higgins, in care of Wesley Martin. It consisted of three harmless words: MOTHER LEAVING TODAY.

Trace stared at the writing, and a slow anger built deep inside as he thought of Wes. When he looked up, Bud Keyhoe was striding along the plank walk. Trace put the message in his pocket and stood up.

Bud was smiling again, big and sure of himself. "I see you've killed another one, Trace." Bud shook his head. "Better go slow. Wes says he warned you."

"How much of the Buffalo Corral do you own?" Trace asked abruptly.

Wes must have spoken of it. Bud parried the question without surprise. "Who said I owned any?"

"That's not an answer."

"It's all you'll get." Bud's smile broadened. "Wes says he told you to mind your own business. Why don't you?"

Trace turned without answering as a stagecoach came from the west, the driver's long whip cracking.

"I own part of that line," Bud commented with satisfaction. He stepped to the edge of the walk and watched as the coach whirled gray dust toward them.

The six lathered horses pulled up sharply. Wheel brakes pressed hard. The dusty coach swerved to a stop in front of the hotel. Bud lifted a hand in greeting to the driver.

Trace looked beyond the blowing horses and wide dusty street to the rails which pointed West.

"Stages won't run much longer, Bud."

"I'll have all I want by then," Bud said carelessly. "There's money where a railroad is building. There'll always be money for a man who uses his head. I'll get my share."

"You always did," Trace said.

"You never liked it, did you?" Bud asked, his smile widening, and he swung suddenly toward the sound of gunshots tearing the afternoon.

The driver dropped lightly off the front wheel and spoke dryly. "Gets woollier here every trip."

"Three shots," Bud said. He looked at Trace. "Well, Marshal?" He fell into step with Trace.

They followed hurrying men around the next corner and found a dead man in the dust at one end of a hitchrack. Long Jack Edwards, elegant and impersonal, stood with his back against the rough board side of the building, watching faces.

"What happened?" Trace inquired.

"He's Bill Nickerson, a horse-thief and killer who used to hang around El Paso," Long Jack said. "Bill saw me coming in the front door of this corner saloon with the badge on. He smelled trouble and walked out the side door there."

Keyhoe's suspicious question reached the strangers who were still gathering. "Did you follow him out and shoot him?"

Long Jack ignored him and spoke to Trace. "Bill was watching the side door there with his gun out when I went back out the front door, and around the corner and called to him. Bill jumped a foot when he turned. But he came down shooting. Just a mite hasty though."

"Did he shoot first?" Bud persisted.

"Keep out of this, Bud," Trace said curtly. Then, to Long Jack: "I'll have the body moved if Nickerson doesn't have friends to claim him."

"He never had a friend," Long Jack said, and walked away.

Trace watched men stare after the tall

elegant figure; the glances shifted to him, guarded, estimating. He surprised the same look on Bud's face. Puzzled. Undecided.

"I didn't know you had a deputy," Bud said.

"You know it now, Bud. Keep out of these things. You tried to put Jack Edwards in the wrong then."

Bud flushed. "What in hell do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

Bud's temper flared. His teeth showed, as when they were boys, fighting on the levee. It wiped away the years. Trace went tight, watchful. When Bud looked like that, he'd try anything. They faced each other and Bud suddenly relaxed and smiled.

"I know this town, Trace. Bill Nickerson didn't amount to much. You'd better listen to me. Go easy."

"How well did you know Nickerson?"

"He was thinking of outfitting here and going after hides this winter. We talked some."

Bud grinned again and walked away. Trace watched the man's confident carriage. He could almost feel the hard clout of farewell and hear the booming humor and warning of the bearded raftsman from the Black River country, long ago.

"Watch him, young'un! He'll have new tricks!"

He had a queer, disturbed feeling that nothing much had changed since that day. Nothing about Bud, Wes or himself had changed. Only they wore guns now.

They wore guns now. Wes ran the Buffalo Corral and only a handful of days remained.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Killers' Market

IN THE morning Trace came awake suddenly, thinking about it. About yesterday, today, tomorrow, and that telegram in care of Wes.

The stamp of yesterday was on the town when he went out for breakfast, and later walked through a tangle of freight wagons along the railroad tracks. Men watched him.

He skirted a long construction train that was loading. Shouted orders ran along the cars. Gangs of men heaved iron rails on top of other rails, and the long iron clanged harshly. When one looked closely, it all turned out to be orderly confusion. Some of the men gave friendly grins and Trace grinned back. Others only paused and stared.

Curby Matson came walking on one of the supply spurs. He waved as Trace cut across tracks. Matson was in fine humor, chewing the stump of the inevitable unlighted cigar when they met. "You didn't lose any time yesterday, Trace."

"It hasn't started," Trace said calmly. "You know it."

Curby rolled the cigar across his mouth and squinted against the early sunlight. "My clerk says you had more trouble at the Buffalo Corral last night."

"I asked the colonel to keep his troopers out of town. He wouldn't."

Curby was silent a moment. Then: "Did you have to shoot a sergeant? What was his name—Sergeant McCorkle?"

"You seem to know all about it."

"Not all," Curby denied. "I heard the sergeant was just back from a hard three week's patrol." Curby cleared his throat. "Ready for a little fun."

"They came in town fanning lead around, and rode horses back on the dance floor at the Buffalo Corral. Four of them. You want order, Curby, or you don't! Say so now!"

"It's your job," Curby admitted. "But trouble with the soldiers won't help."

"The sergeant was drunk and looking for trouble. I told him to get his horse outside and he started shooting at my feet. I couldn't get him off the horse any

other way. The soldiers have got to learn too, Curby, or the civilians won't handle. McCorkle's shoulder will be all right, if the post surgeon doesn't butcher him too much."

"Damn McCorkle and his shoulder too! But dismounting those soldiers and sending them back to the fort in a wagon, without their guns, will have every private, non-com and officer at the fort cursing about regimental pride."

"The colonel's opinion should be worth hearing," Trace said dryly.

Curby chuckled at the thought and changed the subject. "What about the telegrams Meeks copied? Anything in them about the payroll being on that train?"

Trace side-stepped a direct answer. "How about Meeks, Soderholm or your clerk? Would they have talked?"

"Only Meeks and I knew," Curby said. "Meeks wouldn't talk." Curby jerked the cigar from his mouth again. "The engineer heard one man asking another if the payroll was in the car! That bunch knew! But how?"

Trace let the silence draw out. He was suddenly angry because he did. "I'll try to find out today," he promised. Something in his voice made Curby look quickly at him, start to speak, then hold silence.

* * *

In mid-afternoon, under a blue, flawless sky, with the sun thrusting hot on the far sweep of short grass, a slow-cracking mule-drawn wagon hauled three more rough wooden boxes out on the prairie north of town.

Three more. Kelsey, the gambler. Bill Nickerson, the horse thief and killer. The third a loud-boasting gunman named Brady who had overlooked the cold blue eyes in Hardy Wilcox' placid face when ordered out of town before sundown yesterday.

Hardy had watched Brady draw a gun, and had shot him once, incredibly fast, an inch above the hammered silver gun-belt buckle. Hardy had walked on without comment to find his next man.

Spectators had come by dozens and scores this time, on foot and horseback, in wagons and buggies. Trace guessed

half the dance-hall girls in town had come, wearing their finest clothes. The gamblers and saloon men had come, dressed in their best broadcloth and linen, some wearing high silk hats.

They were still straggling out past the smoldering chip fires of the last wagon camps when the Reverend Doone stepped to the new grave and opened his worn Bible.

Trace stood near the head of the grave, holding the reins of the black gelding—a man who seemed remote.

Wes was there, beyond the grave, alone, scowling now and then. But when Wes glanced across the new-piled dirt into Trace's unsmiling look, a faint smile jumped wryly across Wes' face, as if asking how they happened to be facing each other across this common grave outside Denton City.

Trace had been thinking it. The slow crawl of nerves came back under his belt as he looked at Wes, dressed as fine as any gambler present, handsomer than most with his dark curly hair and young, reckless look.

Bud Keyhoe had not come. Nor had many of Curby Matson's men. A few cowmen and freighters and curious travelers were in the crowd; but most of the men had soft hands and the look of easy money taken from men who worked hard.

"I am the resurrection and the life. . . ."

Trace barely heard the solemn words. Many in the semi-circle about the grave were watching him and the punctured badge John Darcy had worn. They reminded him of a wolf pack bunched and waiting.

"Whosoever believeth in me shall never die!"

WES looked across the grave again, sullen, worried; and then Wes stood staring at the earth until the service was over. He was still there when the crowd began to break up. Trace turned beside the black gelding to study a lone rider far out on the prairie, heading toward town. Wes suddenly was beside him, speaking angrily.

"Don't be a fool, Trace, and turn your back on strangers! I know of two who've

said they'll put lead in you when they get ready! Front or back won't matter!"

"Which two men?"

Wes swore for an answer. "I could look in that hole and see you when we were kids! You were laughing like you used to, and the dirt was ready to go in on you!"

A slow smile spread over Trace's face. "Did it matter?"

"Damn you!" Wes said huskily. "Get out of town!"

Still smiling, Trace hit him on the shoulder, gently, with a clenched fist. "Go with me?"

"I can take care of myself!" Wes said.

"Can you?"

Wes cursed him again and swung away. Trace watched him go, the smile fading. He remembered the lone rider in the distance and swung aboard the gelding and rode that way.

It was Susan Croston, riding alone. Trace watched her easy grace in the side saddle as she reined toward him at the gallop. The wind whipped her full skirt and streamed in the red plume curved about her small hat, and she was smiling as her blowing chestnut mare pulled up beside him. Trace pulled off his hat and turned in close beside her, smiling too.

"I wasn't sure it was you," he admitted. "Then I was afraid you'd turn back to the fort."

"I'm bringing an invitation," Susan said. She leaned forward and patted the mare's neck and gathered the reins in one small hand. "For dinner tonight, if you can come, Mr. Ballard."

"Very kind of you, ma'am." Trace drew a soft breath, remembering that Kelsey, the gambler, had said those same words yesterday before he died. Now dinner at the fort. The full stiffness of the colonel's quarters. The chill disapproval of Miss Agatha Croston.

"I had a little trouble with the soldiers last night," Trace said, watching her.

He saw that Susan knew. Her nod was grave. "I'm told the sergeant is in no danger now, Mr. Ballard. Was it necessary to use a gun?"

"I thought so, ma'am." Still watching her, Trace added, "There was more trouble yesterday. We buried three men this morning."

"Three!" Susan repeated. "Three more!" She looked away, biting her lip.

"There'll be others!"

"Why?"

"Ask your father the next time he sends out an armed patrol!" Trace said with some bitterness, losing hope that she would understand. "This isn't Kansas City or St. Louis!"

"My father is in the army, ordered to watch the Indians," Susan said, still not looking at him.

"Ma'am, will you look around you?" Trace asked.

Susan shifted in the sidesaddle, searching his face first, and then off around the horizon, and back to him.

"What do you see?"

"I see the town and the railroad and the flag at the fort," Susan said calmly.

"What should I see, Mr. Ballard?"

"You'll never see it the way your eyes are looking!" Trace said, almost harshly.

"Will you close your eyes, ma'am?"

Susan closed her eyes, flushing as she rode the slow-pacing mare in silence and waited for him to speak.

"I saw it in St. Louis when I was a boy!" Trace said softly. "The settlers, ma'am! See them now if you can! The settlers heading West. Out this way. Out beyond the mountains. Women, children riding the wagons toward new homes. Thousands of them from everywhere, year after year!"

Susan, her eyes still closed, answered steadily. "My father is at Fort Denton to protect them, Mr. Ballard."

"They need more than protection. They need what the railroads can bring them. Some of them have been waiting a long time, ma'am! Too long!"

"I know," Susan agreed. She opened her eyes, turning, studying him. "I've heard them speak of it when they visit Kansas City. The women telling of sickness and no doctors. The men complaining of high prices they must pay and low prices they get because of the long freight haul by wagons. I've heard them talk of danger, loneliness and need of neighbors who won't come until the railroads are built. Isn't that what you mean, Mr. Ballard?"

Trace met her level regard blankly. "You do understand," he said uncertain-

ly. He rode for a moment, thinking of it, and then pointed toward the railroad.

"Curby Matson and three thousand men are building railroad as fast as they can. They're out beyond the law." Trace stopped, not knowing exactly how to say it. "This is a hard country," he said finally. "But Curby will build his railroad. No one will interfere. Nothing else matters."

Susan gave him a long, pensive look. "My father talks of the army as you do the railroad. Nothing else matters." Her square shoulders came back, and after she spoke Trace guessed she must be thinking of her aunt's tight-lipped disapproval and her father's anger over the sergeant.

"Will you come to dinner, Mr. Ballard?" Susan asked.

Trace studied her and said regretfully, "I'm needed in town tonight."

The girl sobered. "You said there will be more trouble."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Trace said easily. "The railroad will be built on west and Denton City will be a quiet place before you know it."

Susan gathered the reins impatiently. "The man who wore that badge before you, Mr. Ballard, must have thought the same! Are you a better judge?"

She wheeled the chestnut mare away and slashed with the quirt hanging from her wrist.

Trace reined the gelding around and watched the mare gallop toward the fort. Then he rode on toward town.

CHAPTER SIX

Train for the East

HE CAME in behind the Buffalo Corral, where small one-room plank cabins were reached by duckboard walks over the dust and mud. Trace checked the gelding and spoke to a tall auburn-haired girl who stood in a doorway, still wearing the fine silk moiré dress she had worn to the graveyard.

"Where will I find Grace Higgins, ma'am?"

She looked him over insolently. "Going to run Grace out of town too, Marshal?"

"Maybe," Trace said. "You too, perhaps."

She laughed. "Light and talk it over," she invited.

Trace shook his head. She shrugged. "Grace lives in Number 9," she said.

He rode on past the numbered cabins. The auburn-haired girl walked toward the Buffalo Corral. Trace smiled thinly. She was carrying word of his presence back here at the cabins.

Number 9 was in the next row over, its solid plank door closed. The auburn-haired girl entered the back of the Buffalo Corral. Trace wondered if the Higgins girl were in there too.

Then he saw a pink ruffled curtain stir at the cabin window. In a moment the door opened. He stepped up on the duckboards and brought off his hat to the girl who faced him.

She was a brunette with smooth olive skin and fine black hair caught at the back of her head. Her voice was bitter. "What do you want?"

Trace shook his head. "Nothing. Is there anything I can do?"

"You do for me?" Her bitterness seemed almost to touch him. "I would have had my own home! My own kitchen and furniture! Perhaps children!" She swallowed hard. "I watched you bury all of it yesterday!"

"What was his name?"

"Does it matter? He's dead! There'll not be another like him!" Her hand touched the doorframe. It was as if, inwardly, she frantically struck the rough wood. "This will be home now! Always!"

"Why don't you go home to your mother?" Trace suggested.

"My mother is dead!" Her lips thinned out. She searched his face and found no expression there. She said heavily, "When they bury you I'll feel a little better!"

Trace nodded. "When will they bury me?"

She straightened, looking past him toward the Buffalo Corral. Trace heard the jar of feet on the duckboards and guessed who it was. He was right. Wes was coming, a stranger striding along with him.

Trace watched the stranger. About his own age, Trace guessed, a man wearing sun-faded, wear-rumpled overalls tucked

into plain boots, a stained buckskin vest and workman-like revolvers worn low and forward. He carried a repeating rifle and walked stiff-muscled, with a tired slump to the shoulders, as if he'd not rested recently. But the long, full-lipped face had the fresh look of a barber's hand. Just in town, Trace decided, the trail stubble shaved off, and still too busy to sleep.

Wes came with an angry challenge. "What are you doing back here?"

"Talking," Trace said mildly.

Wes looked at the girl. She said, "He was asking questions."

"What questions?" the stranger demanded.

"Just questions," Trace said. He spoke to Wes and watched the stranger. "This a friend of yours?"

Wes nodded. His anger had turned to sullenness.

"Name of Smith," the stranger volunteered. He had the same cold blue eyes that were in Hardy Wilcox' placid face and none of Wes' worry. He stood easy and tired, holding the rifle loosely, sure of himself.

"I know the lady," he said in the nasal tone. "She doesn't feel like answering questions today."

"Smith," Trace repeated. "New man in town?"

"An hour ago," Smith said, watching him.

"Where from?"

"West." Smith's hard blue eyes raked up from the badge Trace wore. "I missed the burying. They tell me the law's been busy since you took over, Marshal."

"Moderately," Trace agreed.

He stepped off the boards and swung aboard the gelding, and noticed that Wes moved forward between Smith and himself as the gelding turned away.

TRACE turned into the dusty way fronting the railroad and rode slowly, studying faces and the horse brands at the hitchracks. Presently he began a methodical check of the public corrals, dismounting at each, talking with the handlers and scanning horses and brands.

He saw Hardy Wilcox come out of a small saloon. He rode to meet him, and dismounted to talk.

"Strangers in town, Hardy. Wes was with one at the Buffalo Corral. Man who calls himself Smith and has been traveling hard."

"How about your brother?" Hardy asked.

"I'll handle him," Trace said. He met Hardy's gaze. "Wes acts worried. It's coming quick now. Better let Jack know."

Hardy did not ask how Trace knew. "Going to let them start it?" he asked.

"More or less." Hardy shook his head at that and Trace added, "I've got a reason."

"It better be a good reason," Hardy said, and turned away.

Trace rode toward the station. The railroad still seethed with activity from supply spurs and warehouses to the westward horizon where black smoke drifted up from the construction trains. Beyond that far smoke the long lines of heavy loaded wagons rolled on West with supplies for the forward gangs.

Empty freight cars stood on the main track. Trace rode over and spoke to a railroad man. "These cars going East?"

"Soon as the engine hooks on, mister."

Trace turned in the saddle, gauging the low sun in the West. Curby's gangs would soon be knocking off work. The town would quickly fill with the noisy throng which kept the nights boiling. He put the horse into a trot and dismounted behind the station.

Curby Matson and Soderholm, the gaunt paymaster, were together again in Curby's boxcar office on a side track when Trace stopped inside the doorway with a brief request.

"Can you hold this next string of empties East?"

Curby spun around in his desk chair. He opened the engraved case of a thick gold repeater watch and studied the time. "It's due to leave in a few minutes, Trace. Why hold it?"

"I may need it."

Soderholm cleared his throat. "Thinking of leaving us?"

Another time Trace would have smiled at the question. He said, "Possibly," and let it stand.

Curby sensed a difference in him. His look narrowed. "I'll hold the train," he

agreed, closing the watch. "Anything else?"

"Send some carpenters with tools over to the Buffalo Corral."

Curby started to ask why. His mouth almost framed it and then he nodded and said, "Colonel Croston is in town. Just left here. He complained about the way his men were handled last night."

"Complained?"

"He pounded the desk," Curby said dryly. "I pounded too. Forget him."

Trace nodded. "Hold the train," he reminded, and went out.

* * *

He had to wait for the backing engine of the freight to pass before he crossed the last tracks. Yesterday he had ridden from the station to the Buffalo Corral where Kelsey waited. He rode the same way now, angling across the wide dusty street to the bone-white buffalo skulls nailed on the red-fronted building.

Today it was different. The taut somberness that Curby had noted went with him into the huge bar and gambling room.

Watchful silence struck men to his right and left as he walked through the long room. The silence drew out, as he turned to the bar and spoke to a bartender.

"Where's Wes Martin?"

The bartender, fat and wheezing, sleeves rolled up and a damp towel forgotten in his hand, said, "I'll tell Martin you asked."

"Where is he?" Trace demanded so savagely the fat man jerked a thick thumb toward the back.

"Around the corner there in his office, Marshal."

Every eye watched him as he turned right at the rear of the long bar and skirted the edge of the dance floor.

The office was in the corner ahead, its door closed. Trace tried the knob, then knocked. He heard steps come to the door and a bolt go back. Wes opened the door an inch or so, saw who it was and said, "I'm busy, Trace!"

He was closing the door when Trace hit it with his shoulder and shoved it open. Wes jumped back and brought up a revolver.

"Get out!" Wes grated.

Trace shut the door and shot the bolt. They were alone. Wes had been counting money on a table against the wall. Small stacks of gold coins stood in neat rows beside an uncounted pile of the money.

"Business must be good," Trace remarked.

He walked to the table, picked up a stack of double eagles and ran them from one hand to the other in a clinking stream. He looked at several closely, put the stack down neatly and turned, ignoring the gun.

"Grace Higgins hasn't got a mother, Wes," he said softly. "But someone back East telegraphed that her mother was leaving. It meant the payroll, didn't it?"

Wes went sullen again. "Prove it!"

"You're guilty as hell, Wes," Trace said slowly. "A freight train out there is starting back East in a few minutes. Go out and get on it."

Wes jeered at him. "You're crazy! You think I'll let you put me out of business like this?"

"I put you in business," Trace reminded. "With the old handcart. Remember? But not this kind of business, Wes. You're through now."

"We're not kids!" Wes said violently. "I can kill you with the first shot, Trace! I mean to if you crowd me with that badge!"

"We were kids," Trace said. He paused. The crawl of it worked under his belt again and his mouth was dry. "My kid brother!" he said. "Now look at you. Put up that gun."

Strain was eating at Wes too, putting a damp sheen on his sullen young face; and when Trace moved toward him, Wes blurted thickly, "Don't make me, Trace!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Steel for the Last Frontier

"I COULD have had a gun on you at the door," Trace said, moving forward.

He was perspiring too, his voice going harsh. That was Wes behind the gun; Wes—with his dark curly hair and stubborn recklessness, and all the past about him and between them.

"You'll lose if you do it," Trace

warned. "Not even Bud Keyhoe will talk it out of your mind as long as you live."

"Leave But out of this!"

"He was never out of it."

Wes was backing away. He stopped against the wall. "Keep back, Trace!"

"I'm building railroad for people who need it. Your kind is holding it up, Wes. You're tearing down. Now you're through here."

"Damn you!" Wes said hoarsely. He closed his eyes. Muscles tightened in his neck. He was sweating. Trace took a last step and batted the gun aside and it went off. The report brought Wes' eyes wide open.

Always Trace would remember that look. Wes hadn't meant to shoot. Trace chopped hard with the barrel of his own gun. To the head. Above the ear. Wes' head drove back against the wall with a thud and he started to sag.

Trace caught him under the arms and heaved the dead weight up over a shoulder. He turned to the table and scooped gold coins into a coat pocket. Then, with Wes face down over the shoulder, he unbolted the door and walked out, gun cocked in the right hand.

They were waiting. The girls, the gamblers and men who'd been at the long bar, all crowding back to see who had died in the small office.

Trace paused, balancing his burden, eyeing them. He spoke coldly through the silence. "Finish your drinks! Get your money from the games and move out! The place is closing!"

He walked toward the front under Wes' dead weight and no one tried to stop him. Long Jack Edwards stepped inside as he neared the swinging doors.

"I'm closing the place," Trace said, not stopping. "There's a bunch of money on a table in his office. Get it."

"Need me with you?" Long Jack asked.

Trace shook his head. "Carpenters are coming. Tell them to nail up the doors and windows." He pushed through the swinging doors and heard Long Jack step out behind him.

The setting sun was slanting crimson light and lengthening shadows as Trace started across the roadway. Men stared at him. Along the busy railroad more men stopped work to watch. East of the

station Curby Matson stood beside the waiting engine of the freight train.

And behind the station Bud Keyhoe's tall figure was beside a two-horse buggy, the bold yellow hair uncovered and black hat politely in one hand. Bud swung around, staring too. And Susan Croston and her Aunt Agatha looked with frozen interest from the buggy seat.

Curby Matson started to walk back from the engine. Bud said something to the two ladies and left the buggy with long, hurried strides; he arrived a moment after Trace rolled the limp figure into an empty boxcar.

"That's Wes!" Bud exclaimed. He looked into the car, at the blood showing in Wes' dark curly hair. "Did you kill him?"

Trace threw the gold coins in against Wes and stepped back, facing Bud and the approaching Matson.

"Lock him in, Curby, and let him go east," Trace said, watching Bud. "I'm closing the Buffalo Corral."

Bud's temper exploded. "You can't close the Corral or run Wes away!"

"Step back, Bud, or I'll send you east with him!" Trace warned. He gestured with the gun.

TEMPER mottled Bud's face. His lips came back off the white, strong teeth. In a flash of insight Trace saw themselves facing each other on the levee long ago, and this now was a part of it, the old fight still between them, unsettled.

Bud sucked a harsh breath, "Wes ran the Buffalo Corral for me! It's on paper, signed, witnessed. I'm taking over now!"

Trace smiled tightly. "That's what I wanted you to admit, Bud. Now answer this. All the gold money I caught Wes counting in your place is scratched slightly beside the mint date. It was done when the bank made up the payroll. Who brought that money to your saloon today? And why?"

Bud's look went dark and furious and cautious. He mastered the temper and wheeled to leave. "Ask Wes," he threw back. "I let him run the place."

Curby pushed the car door shut, fastened it and signaled the engine. A whistle answered. Couplings clashed and the train moved.

Trace watched the closed car start East. "My brother," he said heavily. His face was drawn and hard as he turned. "It's started, Curby. By morning you'll know how it is."

Curby chewed slowly on a cigar in a corner of his mouth. "Want me to arm some men?"

"You'd make it worse," Trace said. "I'll handle it." He turned away too, holstering the gun under his coat.

A crowd was gathering in front of the Buffalo Corral. Bud Keyhoe had not returned to the buggy behind the station. Trace walked there.

Miss Agatha Croston looked pale. Her thin mouth set tight when Trace came to the buggy side, hat in hand. "You ladies should return to the fort," he told them bluntly.

Susan wore the same small hat with the curving red plume. She looked under strain as she held the reins loosely. "Did Mr. Keyhoe give you my message?" she asked in a low voice.

"He didn't, ma'am."

Her aunt spoke coldly. "Small wonder! I saw Mr. Keyhoe threatened with a gun!"

"Bud was close to being shot and knew it," Trace agreed.

Miss Aagtha gulped; her reply was stifled. "Leave this place, Susan! We're not safe here with this man!"

"I think we are," Susan replied, not looking at her aunt. She hesitated. "If Mr. Keyhoe was in danger, there must have been a reason." Her eyes asked Trace to say it was so.

"There was a reason," Trace said slowly. "What was Bud to tell me?"

"The enlisted men are planning to make trouble for you tonight," Susan said, meeting his look. "The sutler's wife told me. I thought you should know."

"Planning to take over the town and run me out?"

"It sounded that way."

"Susan! I understood we drove here to meet your father!" Miss Agatha protested indignantly.

The sunset light was on Susan's face. Trace waited a moment, watching her.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, and looked toward the Buffalo Corral.

Saloons and dancehalls had emptied:

by scores and hundreds a crowd was gathering at the Buffalo Corral—girls and gamblers, hide hunters, cowmen, fighters, Curby's men. . . .

"You'd better drive back to the fort now," Trace said.

Susan shook her head. "My father should be here somewhere. I'll tell him about his men."

Miss Agatha spoke with shrill nervousness. "Susan! I insist—" Fright struck her thin face as a gunshot slammed hard through the sunset light and its twin roared louder. "*He killed that man!*" Miss Agatha cried in hysterical protest as Trace spun toward the trouble.

The crowd had evidently started to scatter an instant before the shooting. Beyond the running figures Trace saw the swinging half-doors of the Buffalo Corral, Bud Keyhoe entering and Long Jack's tall figure staggering, falling to one side of the entrance.

Long Jack was a dead man, Trace guessed instantly and was sure of it when he recognized the faded overalls and buckskin vest on the man who stood on the other side of the entrance. The stranger who called himself Smith had a rifle in one hand and a revolver in the other hand as he looked over the scattering crowd toward the station where Trace stood.

"Drive away from here!" Trace snapped to the women.

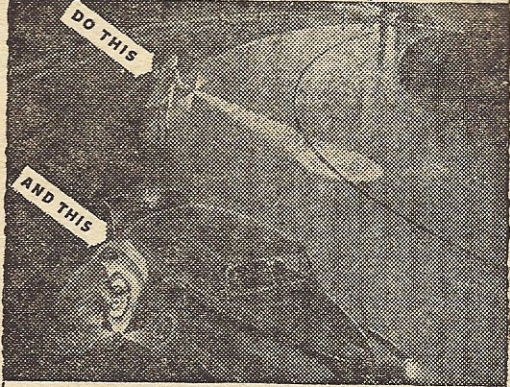
THE heavy Colt's gun was in his hand again as he ran hard from the buggy across the street toward a freight wagon and the nearest building fronts.

He saw Smith jerk up the rifle and fire. The whip-lash pass of the bullet was close. Then he had part of the scattering crowd between himself and Smith's aim, and thought he saw two more men, then a third, with rifles, joining Smith in front of Bud's place.

Smith poised for another shot. Trace ducked behind the freight wagon and a bullet drove into the back corner of the wagon bed. Other guns opened up, hammering the wagon wood and geysering dirt underneath.

A horse coming at full gallop drew Trace's attention. The buggy was still at the station. Colonel Croston was spurring furiously toward it. The man had never

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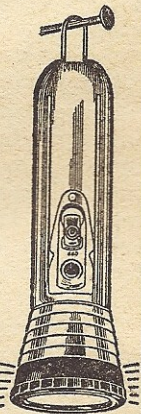
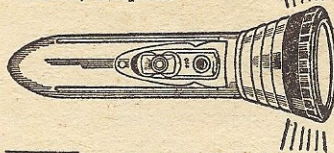
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ridden toward hostiles, Trace guessed, as he did now toward daughter and sister. There was a desperate look about the colonel's haste.

A heavy gun slammed twice. Uneasy quiet followed. Trace stepped from behind the wagon. Another man was down in front of the Buffalo Corral and a last swing of the half-doors showed that Smith and his friends had followed Bud Keyhoe inside.

Beyond uneasy horses at a farther hitchrack Hardy Wilcox was swiftly reloading a sawed-off shotgun from which he must have fired two buckshot loads.

Trace ran up on the boardwalk and advanced, keeping close to the building fronts. Hardy saw him, lifted a hand and looked quickly around for threat from other directions.

Sunset light poured softly on trampled dirt and the emptiness of the wide roadway. The crowd had scattered and vanished. Here and there heads peered from cover. In doorways men silently watched Trace pass.

Hardy closed from the other direction, keeping outside the hitchracks. He fired suddenly at the doorway of Bud's place without lifting the shotgun. Splinters erupted from the swinging doors. Hardy pushed in a fresh shell and came on without any expression on his round face.

Trace stopped at a corner of Bud's big building. Long Jack lay a few steps away, the gaudy blues and yellows of his fancy silken waistcoat bright in the crimson light. He had an elegant calm look, even in death, and the sunlight glinted on the law badge, drilled dead center by a bullet.

Hardy stopped in the street at the other corner of the building, eyeing the swinging doors. Trace tapped the hole in his own badge and indicated Long Jack's body. Hardy spat and nodded his understanding.

Trace signaled his next move. Hardy nodded again. Trace swung back, running past the next two buildings, turning left between structures, running toward the rear of Bud's big saloon. He wandered if he was too late.

Several muleskinners had sought safety back in here. One, with a long rawhide whip coiled over a shoulder, called sar-

castically, "They running you off, Marshal?"

Trace let it stand that way. The skinner's voice had sounded loud. Tension, almost breathless, seemed to hug the town. Since yesterday the tension had been building. Now it waited.

His own light-running steps seemed noisy as he reached the back of Bud's place. Out front the dull blast of Hardy's shotgun shook the quiet. Big pellets slapped against the rear wall inside. A voice in there yelled in angry pain and answering shots racketed out.

The duckboard walks and small cabins were off to the right. Girls watched from doorways and a few stood in the open. The black-haired Grace Higgins was defiantly in the open. She called a bitter reminder that warned anyone listening:

"Tomorrow at Boothill, Marshal!"

Trace ran forward. Smith must have been standing in the back doorway of the big dance room. He lunged out in the open so fast Trace's shot missed. Smith landed crouching, long full-lipped face set hard, a Colt in each hand, the right gun firing as he came down.

Trace stopped when his first shot missed. He fired again with almost deliberate care. Smith wavered, his answering shot going wild. Trace's next shot knocked him back, both guns sagging, and when he was on the ground he stayed there. Trace walked forward, watching the doorway, and suddenly he was spun hard and helplessly against the building, numb with shock as another gun report beat at his hearing.

He saw stupidly that his revolver was in limp fingers down against his left leg and he was falling and couldn't stop it.

HE WENT to the ground, knowing what was happening. He struggled and there was feeling in his right side. His right arm moved. When he looked, the cabins were there before him and Bud Keyhoe was standing at the doorway of the nearest, revolver in hand, watching him.

From the ground Bud looked even taller, his hair boldly yellow in the last daylight, his strong white teeth showing in a laugh as he jeered, "You never could stop me, Trace!"

Trace found his voice; it was clogged, almost a croak. "Always got a rock, haven't you, Bud?"

He rolled a little, gasping to get air in a numbed chest and he glimpsed Bud watching. More feeling was back in the right arm now. His will drove the right hand over, groping for the gun held loosely in the useless left.

Bud stood watching in a kind of fascination until the right hand closed on the gun. Trace struggled around and then plopped back against the wall.

"You're licked!" Bud yelled suddenly. Lips were off his teeth as he started forward, firing wildly. A bullet struck by Trace's head, driving dirt into his face. His own big handgun seemed heavy, the hammer slow to work as he thumbed it back. He was almost dreamy, calm, somehow certain as Bud ran toward him like a wild man.

Trace fired from his position against the wall, with the right hand, hardly aiming. It was almost as if the aiming were done for him. Bud's face seemed to dissolve in a scarlet smear. Bud went down without a sound. He struggled and got his head up a little, staring for a moment, and his face went down in the dirt and he lay still.

Trace lay motionless, dreamily eyeing the yellow hair and thinking, queerly enough, of the big log raftsman from the Black River woods.

It was Hardy Wilcox who burst out of the back entrance, sweeping the sawed-off shotgun warily around. Hardy called back inside, "Bring whiskey!"

Hardy satisfied himself the two men were dead and knelt by Trace, the gun and his cold glance covering the cabins.

"Got 'em all, I think," Hardy said evenly. "So Keyhoe was one of them too!"

"The top one," Trace said, still dreamy. "Bud always had to be the top one." He fell silent, thinking about it.

Curby Matson, holding a rifle, brought the bottle at a run, and knelt, helping Trace sit up and get a drink down. Trace choked a little, got his breath and said, "I called Bud's hand before his full gang gang drifted back into town. Knew how his mind would work. He wouldn't wait, with part of the payroll there in his saloon. I've always known Bud."

Curby was examining the bloody right shoulder. "Missed your lungs, I think. No blood in your mouth. I'll have the doctor at it in a few minutes."

"The soldiers are coming in tonight to take over," Trace said, worried again.

"I doubt it," Curby, differed dryly. "Colonel Croston just told me over at the station that the town is out of bounds now for everyone at the fort until order is established. His sister fainted. He thinks his daughter just missed being killed."

Curby stood up and shoved a cigar in the corner of his mouth. "I'd better take the colonel a drink and tell his daughter everything is all right and she can drive back to the fort now."

Trace looked up suspiciously. Curby's face was blank, his voice innocent.

After a moment Trace nodded. "Tell her it's all right now," he said.

THE END

RAWHIDE AND REDSKIN

A rawhide thong was directly responsible for Geronimo's last bloody escapade. It was in 1885, and the infamous Apache chief had decided Arizona reservation life was too peaceful. But he knew the instant he slipped away the soldiers at Fort Apache would warn the entire Southwest by telegraph. He wouldn't get far.

Geronimo had an idea. He began riding along the telegraph wire leading from Fort Apache. Soon he found a place where the line hung over the fork of a tree. Carefully he cut it and connected the severed ends with a rawhide thong. The wire seemed completely untouched when he hung it back over the tree fork. Then Geronimo climbed down. He and his warriors lit out for the mountains.

It was noon the next day before the soldiers found the cleverly hidden break. By that time Geronimo was already raiding. It took over a year of hard riding and fighting to whip him—all because of a rawhide thong!

—Robert Bromley

THE MADNESS OF BIG OLAF

By BILL GULICK

Small wonder that every horny-handed, boot-tough tie-cutter in Hope Hollow took a hundred-to-one chance against a blazing Colt, rather than face the sledgehammer, berserk temper of the man-breaking Swede called Olaf!

THE horse was tired and Jeff Holt was tired, but it wasn't weariness that made his lean face tighten into a thoughtful scowl as he rode along the mountain trail. It was the silence. An ominous silence. An oppressive silence.



Olaf picked up a man, lifted him high and then smashed him down on the floor

The woods should have been alive with the sound of men working to take advantage of the fading evening light, but there were no men visible and no sound. The silence told him that McKay had been right. There was something wrong in the woods.

Stack after stack of newly-cut railroad ties lay along the banks of the mountain stream, turbulent and rushing now with the flood waters of spring, and the sharp smell of fresh-trimmed fir was pungent in Jeff Holt's nostrils. Plenty of ties had been cut during the winter, he could see that. But you couldn't build railroad with ties stacked far up the mountain slopes long miles away from where they were needed. Those ties should have been in the water days ago. That they were not was the puzzle he had to solve.

Jeff Holt was a man who did not believe in looking for trouble. As assistant engineer in charge of the track-laying crew, trouble had a way of seeking him out. This time it had come seeking him in the form of Angus McKay, his dour, hard-headed chief.

"Something's wrong up in the woods," McKay had said when Holt had gone to the engineer's tent in response to his superior's summons. "The last word I had from Pop Barden he was figuring on starting the ties down-stream in a day or two. That was two weeks ago and we haven't seen a single stick yet."

"Maybe the snow's still too deep to move them," Holt suggested.

McKay shook his head. "It's been a pretty open winter, Pop wrote. No, there's some other kind of trouble. I can smell it."

"Walt Riley, maybe?"

McKay shrugged and said his nose wasn't that good.

Next morning, Holt had saddled up and hit the trail, and he hadn't let any grass sprout under his horse's hoofs on the three-day ride from the track-laying camp on the plains to the tie-cutter's camp in the mountains. It had been spring on the plains, but here in the mountains patches of snow still lay under towering fir, spruce and pine, and now, with blue twilight closing down, Holt shivered in his thin clothes and wished he had had the forethought to bring along a mackinaw.

He rounded a bend in the trail and saw the shacks of the camp in a clearing ahead. A thin trail of smoke rose from the chimney of the mess hall and the smell of food made his scowl vanish. It took bad trouble to affect Jeff Holt's appetite.

He ground-tied his horse, swung out of the saddle and went into the mess hall. Fifty or so tie-cutters sat at long wooden tables, eating with the concentration of men whose huge bodies demanded an equally huge amount of food. They were Scandinavians for the most part, blond-haired, blond-bearded men, shaggy as yellow bears from long months away from civilization. In contrast to them, Holt's well-muscled but lean figure looked boyish.

The men stopped eating and fifty pairs of cold blue eyes swung toward him inquiringly, and there was no friendliness in them.

"Where's Pop Barden?" he asked.

No one answered. The men looked at one another, shrugged, then turned their attention back to their food. He watched them, feeling their hostility. Then his own face went cold and he walked over to a table, singled out a broad-backed Swede sitting near its end and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Where's Pop?"

The man turned slowly. Above the straw-colored beard, his face was wide and heavy, blond eyebrows beetling down over eyes the color of a mountain sky on a sunny day.

"Engineer, ain't you?"

"What if I am?"

"Then you can yust go to hell!"

JEFF HOLT had never been a man to care for violence. But he had a strangely stubborn habit of accomplishing whatever he set out to do.

His hand closed on the collar of the Swede's flannel shirt. He jerked hard. The Swede toppled backward to the hard plank floor. Stunned with surprise, he lay there a moment. Then he gave a bull-like roar of rage and lumbered to his feet, blind-mad.

Holt had counted on that. Coldly he hit him twice. First with a sharp left to the nose that threw him off balance, then with a perfectly-timed, powerful right to

a spot on the jaw which Holt had found through considerable experimentation to be a quick ticket to a long sleep. Just to settle the matter positively, he stepped nimbly aside and kicked the Swede's feet out from under him as he rushed past.

The crash was satisfyingly final. Holt gazed down at the inert mass of bone and muscle, repressed an inward shudder at the thought of what the big man would have done to him if his first strategy had failed to work. Then he turned and swept the room with a smiling look and said quietly, "Where did you say Pop Barden was?"

There is a strange thing about men who work in the woods: they respect physical prowess above all else. And they have a sense of humor. Holt had banked on that, and he was not disappointed. Grins touched bearded faces as the men looked down at the unconscious tie-cutter, and at last a man chuckled and said, "Over in his shack. He's laid up with a busted leg."

"How did it happen?"

"Fell off a cliff."

The man on the floor was beginning to stir. Holt turned to go. "Tell the cook to save me a plate of grub. And tell your friend if he wants any more of what he just got, I'll be glad to oblige after supper."

He found Pop Barden lying on a cot in his shack, his right leg crudely splinted and stretched out before him. Barden was a man in his middle fifties, a big barrel-chested man with a strong jaw and clear gray eyes. Those eyes lighted now as they turned and saw Holt.

"Hello, Pop. How're things?"

"How in the hell do they look?" Barden growled.

Holt pulled an empty barrel up beside the bed, sat down and rolled a cigarette, smiling a little as he gazed down at Barden. After he had applied the match, he let a thin stream of smoke filter out of his nostrils and said, "What's holding up the ties?"

Barden gave a groan of exasperation. "I can tell you in one word. Riley."

"So Walt Riley is in the woods? McKay figured he might be. When did he show up?"

"About ten days ago."

"Where is he?"

"In Hope Hollow."

Holt frowned. Hope Hollow had been a ghost town for years. A decade ago there had been a mining boom in the valley just over the ridge from the tie-cutter's camp and overnight a couple of thousand avid prospectors had flooded into the region. A town aptly christened Hope Hollow had sprung up, but after a year or so the diggings petered out and the miners drifted away, leaving nothing but their abandoned shacks and the empty shells of buildings in the deserted town to show there had ever been life in the valley.

"Another boom?"

"Hell, no! The only thing that's booming is Riley's saloon. He's carted in whiskey and dancehall girls by the wagon load and set up for business in the old Golden Eye Saloon."

"I wouldn't think he'd make much money there."

"He ain't interested in making money—that way."

"I don't get it," Holt said. "What's his angle?"

"**H** E DON'T want any ties to go down-river. He figures if he keeps my crew well supplied with whiskey and women they won't turn in a lick of work." Barden shook his head dourly. "Hell of it is, he's right. You know Swedes. And you know how they get after a winter in the woods. Like wildmen. Every man in my crew has been spending his nights at the Golden Eye for the last week. They get blind drunk, come back to camp at daylight and sleep it off, get up and eat supper just before dark and head for Hope Hollow again."

"You were a damned fool to pay them any wages before the ties were in the water."

"That's just it, I haven't paid them a penny. Riley gives 'em all the credit they want."

"Just why," Holt said with a frown, "is he going to all this trouble?"

"You know how he tried to get the tie contract from the railroad. I underbid him. But he knows that if I can't deliver in a reasonable time, the railroad will buy ties from whoever can deliver—and pay a mighty sweet price. He figures he can

"In fact he knows he can."
"How?"

"Simple. My ties are cut and stacked and ready to hit the water. But the crew is under his thumb. There ain't a single man in it but what owes him fifty to a hundred dollars. Pretty soon he'll demand payment. They can't pay him till he pays them, and I can't pay them till the ties are delivered—"

"So," Holt cut in, "he buys the ties cheap from you, takes over the crew and then peddles the ties to the railroad at his own price."

"That," agreed Barden, "is it in a nutshell."

Holt looked at the splinted leg. "When did that happen?"

"About a week ago."

"They said you had a fall."

"Fall, hell—I was shoved! When Riley moved into Hope Hollow with his whiskey and women, I went over and told him if he didn't get out inside twenty-four hours I'd come looking for him with a gun. I meant it, too. It was on the way back that it happened. Me and Rip Walton were walkin' along the cliff trail in the dark—"

"Who's Rip Walton?"

Pop Barden was silent for a long moment, his eyes filled with a fury too deep for expression. Then he muttered, "I'll tell him. God help me, when I get back on my feet I'll track him down and gut-shot him if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"Whoa, now!" Holt said soothingly. "You still haven't told me who Walton is."

"He *was* my strawboss," Barden grunted. "An' if there was ever a lowdown snake, he's it. He sold out to Riley. I didn't realize it then but I know it now. You see, even after Riley moved in I was able to keep enough of my crew sober to get on with the job. Those damned Swedes respect me. So Riley had to get me out of the way, and Walton was the son that did the job. He was on the trail behind me and it had never entered my mind not to trust him. First thing I knew he'd tripped me up and I was going over the edge. It was a long drop but some scrub stuff broke my fall. When I came to, I had a busted leg and Walton was gone. Guess he figured I was done for. I started hollerin' for help, and finally

some of the boys heard me and dragged me to camp. I been flat on my back ever since and naturally not a tie has hit the water."

"Where's Walton?"

"In Hope Hollow, I reckon. He don't dare come in sight of me."

"Does the crew know Walton tried to knock you off?"

Barden shrugged. "You know how Swedes are. They just don't give a damn. They believe in every man killing his own snakes. And by all that's holy, when I get up off this bed—"

"It'll be too late," Holt said dryly. "We need those ties now."

He smoked silently for a minute, lost in thought. After a while he got up and said, "Think I'll mosey along. Take care of yourself, Pop."

"What you figure on doing?"

"Well, first I'm going to wrap myself around a plate of grub. Then maybe I'll take a *pasear* over to Hope Hollow."

"What in hell do you want to go over there for?"

"I'd like to talk to Walt Riley."

Barden painfully raised himself up on one elbow. "Listen, son, don't mess with Riley. If I was able to get around, I could go over there and gut-shoot him and set a match to his damned saloon and the crew wouldn't raise a peep—because I'm their boss. But if you did it—" Barden shook his head warningly. "Those damned Swedes like whiskey and they like their women. They'd tear you limb from limb."

"I don't intend to have any trouble with Riley," Holt answered quietly. "I'm just going to ask him to introduce me to one of those dancehall girls he brought in. It's been a long time since I tipped the light fantastic."

Softly he closed the door on the sound of Barden's curses.

THE lamps in the mess hall had been lit and as he went in he saw that the long room was empty now save for the Chinese cook and his helpers washing dishes in the kitchen and a huge blond bear of a man who sat with his head in his hands, patiently facing the door in an attitude of waiting. The bruises on his face and the redness of his nose immediately identified him as the Swede whom

Holt had knocked out. He lumbered to his feet and his voice was thick and threatening.

"I been waiting for you, yet."

"What's on your mind?"

"You knock hell out of me in front of all the men."

"I hope," Holt said with a grin, "that I didn't hurt you."

"Nobody hurts Olaf Yensen!" the tie-cutter roared. "But never before has Olaf got the hell knocked out. The boys laugh—oh, how they laugh! That hurts Olaf inside."

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about that."

"Listen, we fight again, huh? This time I tear you into little pieces."

Observing the powerful hands, the thick forearms, the broad shoulders, Holt did not doubt but what the Swede could do just that. You could whip a bigger man once with Fancy-Dan fighting but it was not so easy the second time.

"Mind if I eat first? It's been a long time since breakfast."

Olaf studied him, suspicion in the blue eyes, then he gave a grudging nod and turned and shouted, "Wang!"

A timid Oriental face peered around the partition that separated the kitchen from the mess hall. "Someblody call Wang?"

"Run out and get some grub!"

"Grub come along chop-chop."

Holt took off his hat and sat down and while he waited for the food he gazed at the big tie-cutter, trying to read what was in the man's mind. There was no malice, no anger in Olaf's face, only a stubborn pride and a doggedness of purpose that boded no good for Holt. Olaf, Holt guessed, had a one-track mind. That was the trouble with Swedes; once their mind fastened on something it hung on like the steel jaws of a bear trap.

"You say your name is Yensen?"

Olaf nodded amiably. "With a 'Yay'. Yust like in 'Yohnson'."

Wang brought out a plate of hot beef and beans and a cup of strong coffee and Holt pitched to with a will, though the knowledge that Olaf's eyes were patiently following each forkful of food to his mouth somewhat dulled his appetite. Not that he was afraid of taking his beating like a

man, if it came to that, but he feared that Olaf would not be content with an ordinary victory; he would have to break a few bones to make up for the indignation he had suffered in front of the crew. And Holt had no intention of getting laid up now—not, at least, until he had done the job McKay had sent him up to the woods to do.

Leisurely he lit an after-supper cigarette and let his eyes circle the empty room.

"Where did everybody go?"

"To Hope Hollow."

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"I go purty quick, yust as soon as we fight."

Holt studied the ash on the end of his cigarette. "I whipped you in front of the whole crew. You're not going to have any audience when and if you whip me. What if the boys don't believe you did it?"

Olaf scowled. "They yust better believe me!"

"Sure. But what if they don't?"

Olaf scratched his head. That notion had apparently not occurred to him, but now that Holt brought it up it bothered him.

Suddenly he smiled. "Yust a minute—I got an idea! We go to Hope Hollow and fight where all the boys can see."

"I don't think I want to go to Hope Hollow."

Olaf stood up, reached across the table and seized him by the shirt front. "Listen, you do what I tell you, or else Olaf will knock the hell out of you here, then drag you to Hope Hollow and knock the hell out again!"

"Well," Holt said, "as long as you put it that way, I guess I might as well go."

IT WAS full dark when they set out and the trail through the woods among the dank, dripping ferns was precipitous and invisible to Holt's eyes, but Olaf Jensen strode swiftly along with a sure step that made Holt scramble to keep pace. The way grew easier after they had topped the ridge and started down the slope, and Holt, coming abreast of Olaf, tried to get the Swede's mind off the single thought that occupied it.

"Did the crew cut lots of ties this winter?"

"Plenty," Olaf grunted.

"I guess you'll be sending them down-
river soon, won't you?"

Olaf shrugged indifferently. "We work
the hell all winter. Now we play for a
while. Besides, Rip Walton says there is
not enough water in the river yet."

"You know better than that. The
river's at flood stage."

"Listen, Walton is the strawboss. We
do what he says."

"The track-laying crew needs those
ties."

"Purty soon they get them. Maybe a
week. Maybe two weeks."

Holt groaned. That was another
trouble with Swedes: to them, time was
a matter of small consequence. But a
two-week delay would make McKay a
case for an asylum. "Every day we're
held up," the engineer had told Holt,
"costs us five thousand dollars. You get
those ties in the water by the end of the
week—and I don't give a damn who you
have to murder to do it. But get them in
the water!"

That, Holt reflected uneasily, was just
what he hoped to accomplish in Hope
Hollow. Maybe.

The empty shells of the unoccupied
buildings along the single street of the
town looked like forlorn ghosts, their
blank, dark windows staring reproachful-
ly at the lights gleaming from the Golden
Eye Saloon, which was the only place that
showed signs of life. But there was life
enough there to do a dozen towns. Holt
followed Olaf as the Swede pushed his
way through the crowd, and at the bar
Olaf turned and said with a grin, "First,
I buy you a drink. Then we fight."

Holt said that the drink, at least,
sounded like a good idea.

In his day, he had seen plenty boom-
towns and plenty saloons, but never had
he viewed such a scene as greeted his
eyes as he toyed with his drink and gazed
around the room. The tie-cutters seemed
to have unquenchable thirsts and their
demands kept two bartenders working at
top speed. Half a dozen noisy card games
were in progress. There were a dozen
girls present, faded, hard-eyed women
most of whose charms the years had long
since stolen. But that did not keep the
saloon's patrons from vying enthusiasti-
cally with one another for their favors.
In one corner of the room a frightened
looking little man sat banging half-heart-
edly at a warped piano, one eye on the
yellowed keys and the other on the men
stomping boisterously on the tiny dance
floor, as if prepared at any moment to
dive for safety should the need arise.

A short, heavy-set man with dark eyes
and a florid face caught Holt's gaze and
came toward him from across the room.
Holt swung around. He had expected that
Walt Riley would not be long in spotting
him.

"Well," Riley said, smiling at him, "if
it ain't Jeff Holt! Welcome to Hope
Hollow."

LONG ago, Holt had tagged the man for
what he was. Ever since the railroad
had started building west from Council
Bluffs it had been plagued by a legion of
unsavory characters such as Riley. They
were men out to make all they could in
any way they could. Mostly they were
content to set up their saloons and dance-

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balls and worse near the right-of-way where the big gangs were working, moving westward as the rails moved, but now and then an enterprising individual would attempt to branch out and make a killing in a bigger field. This, Holt guessed, was what Riley hoped to do.

"Hello, Riley," he said.

"What sort of business brings you up here?"

Holt shrugged and did not bother to answer. Riley grinned. "Wanting to buy some ties?"

"Have you got any to sell?"

"I will have soon. Maybe you'd like me to quote you a price?"

"Not interested," Holt cut in coldly. "Pop Barden has the tie contract with us."

"What good is a contract if he can't deliver?"

"What makes you think he can't deliver?"

A tall black-bearded man had come up besides Riley, and the saloon owner nodded toward him and said, "Ask Rip Walton here."

Holt's eyes held steady on the tall man. "So you're Walton. I've heard of you."

"Nothing good, I hope," Walton said, as if not quite sure how to take the remark.

"I heard," Holt said, "that you pushed Pop Barden over a cliff."

Walton gave a start. His hand moved toward the butt of the Colt on his right hip, but Holt was quicker—much quicker. His own gun was out and its muzzle was centered on Walton's belly and his index finger was taut as it curled around the trigger.

"Try it," he said coldly. "Just try it."

There was a silence, a long silence, and the shadow of impending death hung in it.

Then Riley broke it with an uneasy laugh. "That won't do you no good, Holt."

The anger left as quickly as it had come, and Holt gave a little shrug and slid the gun back into its holster. Riley said, "Ready to talk business?"

"Not with you," Holt answered grimly. "Those ties are going to start hitting the water tomorrow."

"Where you going to get a crew?"

"I'm taking over Pop's."

"They won't work for you. Not as long as my whiskey holds out, they won't—and I ain't near out yet."

"We'll see."

Riley looked at him for a moment, then a smile came to his florid face and he turned away and climbed atop a table, waving his hands and shouting for silence. "Boys, be quiet a minute! I got something to tell you."

Gradually the hubbub stilled. Riley held the crowd with his confident gaze for an instant, then said, "Everything's on the house tonight, boys. Drink all you want! And when you go back to camp, I got a present for each and every one of you—two quarts of whiskey free! How does that sound?"

The ensuing roar of approval nearly lifted the roof off the flimsy building. Riley grinned down at Holt. "Now move your ties, damn you!"

Holt fingered his drink. There was an unwritten law of the woods that a crew could throw as wild a spree as it wanted to in town, but must never bring whiskey into camp. Only a crew as completely on its way to hell as this one was would violate that law. No ties were likely to hit the water for a while, he guessed.

THE bartenders were hastily filling all the empty glasses along the bar. Olaf Jensen watched the amber liquid rise to the rim of his glass, lifted it and drained it and then set it down, a disturbed, thoughtful gleam in his eyes. He turned his huge head and scowled at Holt.

"Listen, I don't like it. To drink a little, to have a little fun, that is all right, yet. But to take whiskey into camp and make of the bunkhouse a saloon—that is no good."

Holt shrugged. "What can you do about it?"

"Nothing. But, listen. A long time Olaf has been in the woods and this much he knows: when men bring whiskey into the bunkhouse, everything must go to hell purty quick."

"Why don't you talk to the men?"

Olaf shook his head. "Talk is no good now."

"Maybe you could make them see sense."

"No good," Olaf repeated, and shoved

his empty glass forward for another drink.

Olaf was right, Holt brooded. Words were no good now. Still, there ought to be some way. . . .

He gave Olaf a long, careful scrutiny, and suddenly the idea came to him, an idea so beautifully simple that he marveled that he had not thought of it before. There was only one catch to it. The catch was that he stood a very good chance of being beaten to a bloody pulp. He shrugged, tossed off his drink and nerved himself to take it like a man.

"Olaf," he said, "I'm ready."

Slowly the shaggy head turned and the bright eyes stared at him. "Ready for what?"

"Our fight."

Olaf shook his head, and there was sadness in his face. "I yust been thinking; I do not want to fight."

"What made you change your mind?"

"It is no good to see a crew go to hell with whiskey and women. It makes Olaf sad. I cannot fight when I am sad."

"That," Holt said with an edge in his voice, "is the damndest excuse I ever heard a man make for getting out of a fight."

The color began to rise in the big man's forehead. "Do not say things like that. You will make Olaf angry."

"I'll say worse than that. I don't blame the boys for laughing at you. You've got no guts."

"Yust be careful how you talk!" Olaf growled.

"—and you're a whining, sniveling woman who ought to be minding a kitchen instead of working with real men in the woods—"

That did it. Olaf let out a roar and swung a fist the size of a smoked ham at him in a mighty blow that, had it landed, would have driven him through the wall. But it did not land. Instead, it struck a bottle setting on the bar, sent it skittering past the head of a surprised bartender and crashing into the gleaming back-bar mirror. The mirror shattered with a tinkle of falling glass.

"Hey," Riley shouted, "What do you think you're doing?"

Neither man bothered to answer, Olaf being too occupied with accomplishing the murder in his heart; Holt too intent on

preventing murder from being done—his own murder.

To slow Olaf down, he jerked a chair out from under a tie-cutter who was murmuring fond nothings into the ear of a painted blonde on his lap and threw it at Olaf's head. Olaf caught it with one hand, cursed, and heaved the chair across the room. It sailed through the air, legs spinning like flails, and cut right through the midst of a poker game, upsetting the table and felling three men. One of them, somewhat the worse for drink, scrambled to his feet and took a swing at the man nearest him.

"Boys!" Riley pleaded. "No fighting in here! You'll wreck the place!"

Olaf managed to get close enough to land a roundhouse right on Holt's chest. Holt staggered backward, struck a table, and suddenly found himself on the floor entangled with several pairs of legs. For a moment he lay dazed. Regaining his senses, he clambered to his feet, managing as he did so to plant enthusiastic kicks on a pair of exposed shins, to tromp hard on a vulnerable instep and to jab an elbow into an unwary eye.

THE response was gratifying. Six tie-cutters let out howls of rage and charged one another. The fighting mass of men cut Olaf off from Holt, which Holt did not mind at all but which made Olaf angrier than ever. Leaping atop a table, he shook his fist, "Yust wait! I'm going to—"

Someone lunged against the table and tipped it over before Olaf finished explaining what he was going to do. Holt leaned against the wall, gasping for breath but very well pleased with the way the growing riot was spreading. By now, a dozen separate fights were raging. A red-headed tie-cutter slapped a buxom woman for hitting him over the head with a slipper. In retaliation she threw a full bottle of whiskey at him. Woman-like, she missed, and the flying weapon cleaned out a whole row of the best whiskey on the back-bar. Olaf picked up a man, lifted him high and then smashed him down on the floor.

The piano suddenly gave out a discordant jangle of notes, and Holt turned just in time to see the rabbit-like little

man disappear inside the box and pull the lid down after him.

Holt smiled. A wall lamp hung just above him, and, turning, he jerked it loose and hurled it to the floor. Kerosene spread in a growing pool. Then it ignited. Very calmly he drew his gun, shot out the remaining lamps in the room, crossed to the piano and dragged the cowering little man out, and then, still calmly, headed for the door.

"Fire!" a woman screamed.

Pandemonium broke loose as all present made a concerted rush for the door. Somewhere in the crush the piano player recovered his wits long enough to jerk loose from Holt's grasp and head for the wide open spaces on his own. The flames are rapidly at the dry floors, leaped up the tinder dry walls, licked at the powder dry ceiling. Holt made a careful circuit of the room, assured himself that no one was being left behind, then without haste he made his way out of the saloon.

A gun roared in Holt's face. But he was already dropping to one knee, turning, reaching for his hip. He got a brief glimpse of Rip Walton and Walt Riley standing on the boardwalk, guns in hand. Then the butt of his six-shooter was smooth against his palm and the roar of it was excluding all other sound.

THOUGH the hour was near midnight, a lamp still burned in Pop Barden's shack when Holt got back to the tie-cutter's camp.

"What kind of hell have you been raising in Hope Hollow?" Barden demanded, staring at him suspiciously. "Did you see Riley?"

"Yes."

"Didn't get far, did you?"

"Riley," Holt said quietly, "is dead. So is Rip Walton. And the Golden Eye isn't anymore."

"What!"

"Burned to the ground, I'm afraid—it and every bottle of whiskey in the house."

Barden stared wordlessly. With a curse, he shoved his body erect and said, "You fool! You *damned* fool! Those Swedes will tear you apart!"

"I don't think so," Holt answered. "You see, *they* were the ones who wrecked the place. I did shoot Riley and Walton, but I'll wager every man-jack will swear he saw me do it in self-defense." His smile widened. "But don't think those Swedes will let anybody but themselves take the credit for burning down the Golden Eye. You know how proud Swedes are of the spreeds they throw in town. This is one they can talk about for years."

"Gawdelmighty!" Barden breathed in reverent admiration. "Damned if I don't believe you're right! Tell me, how in hell did you manage it?"

Holt ruefully rubbed his bruised face and shook his head. "Haven't got time. Where did you say Wang slept?"

"In the back end of the mess hall," Barden said impatiently. "Why?"

"I want to tell him to have an early breakfast ready for the boys in the morning—and a good one. Those ties are going to start hitting the water." Holt moved toward the door. "And by the way, if you're thinking of appointing a new strawboss, Olaf Jensen is the man for the job."

"Strawboss, hell! Aren't you hanging around?"

"There isn't room enough for Olaf and me in the same camp."

"But you just said that he was a good man—"

"None better. But I'm afraid he's got a little grudge against me."

"Wait!" Barden called as Holt started to go. "You still haven't told me how you got the boys to wreck the saloon."

"Ask Olaf. He'll have it figured out in a week or so."

Five minutes later Jeff Holt was riding out of camp. It was none too soon, either, for he could hear the tramp of booted feet on the trail and the jovial voices of men happily discussing the finest brawl that these woods had ever known. But one of the voices was not so jovial. And it sounded like Olaf Jensen's.

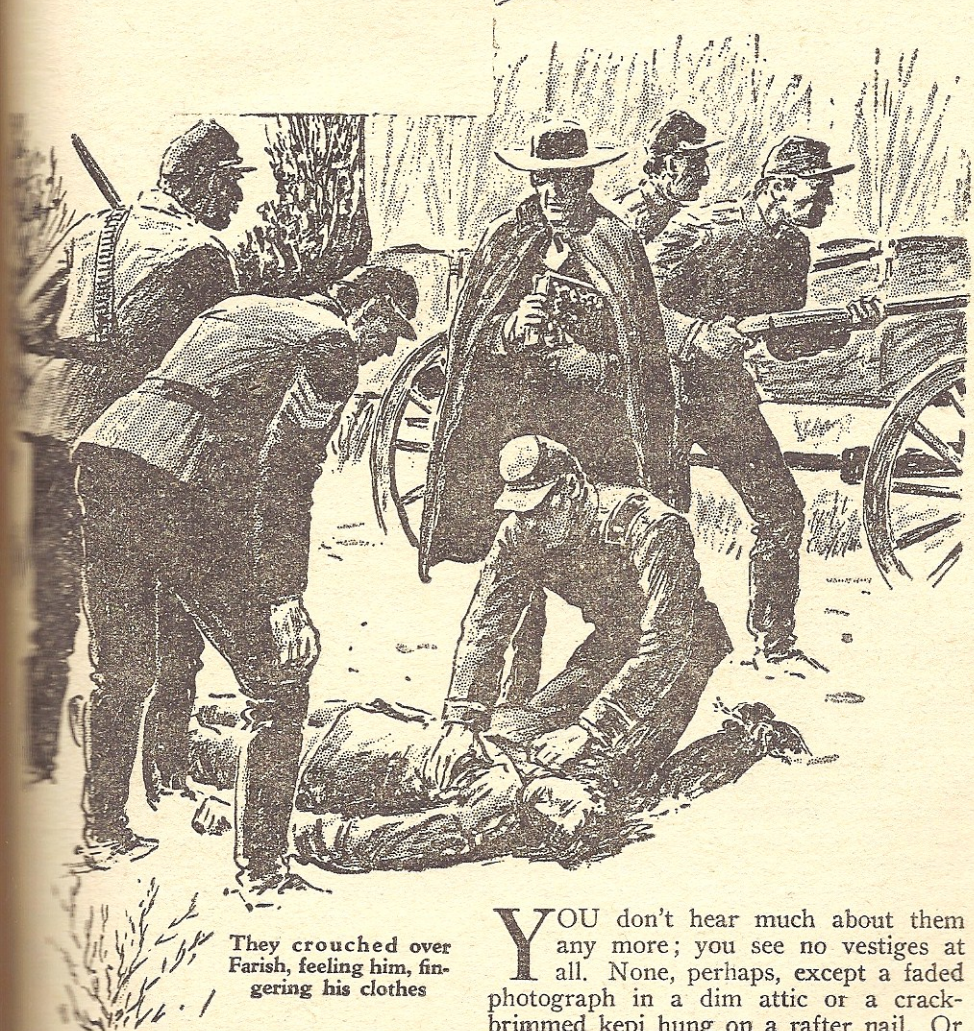
Jeff Holt sighed. Under other circumstances he might have enjoyed hanging around and getting better acquainted with Olaf. But not tonight. It was not worth it to crowd one's luck too far.

PARSON OF DAMNATION

The chaplain and his prayers, the cavalry brass opined, were just so much excess luggage. So when the deadly cold and the deadlier Comanches moved over the gray horizon, the little man in the parson's cloak set out to prove his Bible was worth a thousand times its weight in corpses.

By

GEORGE C. APPELL



They crouched over Farish, feeling him, fingering his clothes

YOU don't hear much about them any more; you see no vestiges at all. None, perhaps, except a faded photograph in a dim attic or a crack-brimmed kepi hung on a rafter nail. Or

maybe a sword wrapped in batting in a damp cellar, it's greening hilt inscribed with flowery engraving, thick now with mold and time. And the face in the photograph is shaded by the kepi as boots pop together and a hairless brown hand comes to precise salute. "Lieutenant Lowbridge reports as ordered, sir."

Major Sutcliffe husked, "At ease," and coughed. Then he coughed again. It was cold up here in this corner of Montana, and the world lay dumb and white under the snow. The major rubbed his fingertips against his chest and quivered once before he cleared his throat and said, "It's about this damned chaplain."

"Mr. Birdseye?"

"Mister, or Reverend, or whatever he calls himself. He can't leave until thaw, though why they sent him out to us is quite beyond me." The major hacked raspingly and spat. "Quite beyond me."

"The right way, the wrong way and the Army way," young Mr. Lowbridge ventured. And because he was young, and very much in love, he accepted his future father-in-law as granted and forgot to add, "sir."

The major tasted his tongue for the breath of a moment, then grated, "You forget your rank!" And coughed again and bent double to shield his embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, sir." Lowbridge thought for a second of adding, "The lieutenant reports to the major as sorry." But he thought better of it and locked his thumbs behind him and waited.

The major straightened, red-faced. "This Birdseye, now. He was supposed to spend two weeks at every post between the Missouri and the Yellowstone and get the men through the winter with prayers. But he's snowed in here, and we can't snow him out." The major sneezed mightily into a red kerchief. He wiped his mouth and blinked watery eyes. "Have you noticed the change since he's been with us?"

"The post is taut, sir."

"You're damned right it's taut! No one's relaxed. They walk around on egg shells. They don't gamble . . . My God, Corcoran hasn't been in the guardhouse for almost a month!" The two men exchanged sympathetic looks.

Lowbridge coughed into a cupped hand. "A frontier post is not exactly the place for a chaplain, sir."

"You're godda—ah-h-h," and the major rose, scowling horribly. "I'm sending him into the field. With the engineers."

The major stamped up and down the cold boards of the office, chin forward, mouth working. "I want to loosen up the post." He wheeled on his heels and stabbed a freckled finger at Lowbridge. "And you're going too! Diana needs a rest a much's the men. And she'll never get it looking at you all evening." The major spat swiftly and blew out his lips. "The Snake River Pass is closed. Locked in ice. The emigrant trains have started from Bismarck already, and they'll have to get through. So the pass must be blown this week. You command the escort. You know Snake River pretty well, don't you? Used to hunt it? There's just one thing." He stopped, thinking of the Stoga wagons creeping out of the east toward homestead land, feeling their way toward a new freedom and a new life. "Trapp might be out. Look sharp."

"Can I take him?" Lowbridge was smiling.

"Let him start it." Their eyes met and hung together. "Be careful, boy . . . And oh, yes: you'll have Corcoran along. He's a good dynamiter, and he's also cagehappy."

The boots popped, salutes swung stiffly and Mr. Lowbridge stalked from the room with kepi cocked low.

THE Reverend Eustace Birdseye rode a mule, knees high and elbows out. He plumped along at Lowbridge's side, horn-rimmed spectacles gleaming with frost, flat-face drawn deep in a muffler that was ruffled with snow. They picked their way through the whiteness in silence, dumb to the sounds of the detail behind, numb to the wall of the weather ahead.

The sigh of the passing storm filled their ears and chilled their skins and made them huddle closer to horse; knees tightened, fingers worked on reins, and heads were held low. Once, when they topped a rise and looked back Mr. Birdseye mumbled, "Nice clean snow."

"Yes, isn't it." Mr. Lowbridge had been thinking of Diana and the scatter of

freckles across her tilted nose; Diana, with the blue softness in her eyes. With her arms around him, warm cheek close to his cold one, whispering, "When you come back. . . ." And now a preacher wanted to talk about clean snow. Lowbridge turned and studied the dark figures in the fuzzy filter of the snow; studied the irregular files of the escort flanking the bumbling engineer wagon; heard wheel rims singing on icy ruts.

He faced forward and tapped boot to flank. "Good honeymoon weather, Padre."

And Mr. Birdseye snickered happily and slapped a heavy saddle bag. "The church stands ready, Lieutenant. I have my Bible with me."

Lowbridge halted again at the bottom of the down-slope to give the wagon time to brake. He listened to carbines squeak in leather ring sockets, keened the plodding riders for signs of frostbite. Saw Corcoran, lean and corded, dying for a drunk, a riot, a fight. Then he moved forward again, hat pulled low against the faint sting of the snow.

"I thought maybe you had a stove in your bags, Padre."

The chaplain shook his head. "A few hymnals and my Bible. The big one. It was given me by the Patriot Ladies of America in Baltimore. Have you seen it?"

"No, but I've heard of it." Everyone had heard of it from Snake River to Bitter Ridge; from Fort Peck to the Rosebud. It weighed fourteen pounds and was the largest book west of Omaha. And it was filigreed with gold turnings said to be worth five hundred dollars. A Bible for a whole army, indeed.

"Maybe you'll marry us from it, Padre." Lowbridge winced slightly, smiled wryly. "It'll be big medicine."

"Medicine?" Mr. Birdseye blinked.

"Yes. What the Indians work up to give 'emselves strength."

"Oh, indeed. Of course. Haaa . . . but a Bible could hardly be described as medicine."

Lowbridge thought of Gideon Trapp and what he'd make of a Bible said to be worth five hundred dollars. Trapp was supposed to be east of Bitter Ridge somewhere, doing his business with Cheyenne

and Comanche, with Kiowa and Sioux. "Ever meet Gideon Trapp, Padre?"

"Not personally, but I've been shocked by tales of him."

"I don't think even a fourteen-pounder could convert him."

Mr. Birdseye hitched hips in the saddle and smiled wanly. "He sells things to the tribes, does he not?"

"Guns. Guns from dead soldiers. And liquor." Lowbridge drew a cold breath. "And sometimes ladies."

The chaplain sucked spittle in surprise but Lowbridge pretended not to notice. "When he burns out a homesteader, he sells off the women. A handful of years ago, when Mackenzie chased Crazy Horse away from the Big Horn, he found some ladies. Nothing you'd like to look at."

"Oh, God!" Mr. Birdseye made a face and tried to swallow. "Why can't they do something about it?"

"Never any witnesses."

The chaplain sniffed. "I don't think I should like to meet him."

"I hope you never will."

The snow was thinning out now, falling away to spinning flakes flickering down from the heavy gray sky. Lowbridge saw Farish, ahead with the point, rein in and throw off. "Wait here, Padre." He spurred diagonally down a shallow slope and reached the point patrol. "Yes?"

Farish pointed silently to the trail in the snow. It came from the west and vanished in the east. "Bout an hour old, Loot-nant."

"A lot of 'em shod, Farish."

"Yessir. One in three, I guess."

Shod horses were white men's horses; the others would be Indian ponies. "Riding together, Farish."

They watched while flakes trickled into the hoof marks, watched in silence while the trail lost sharpness and shape and went dull in the snow. "Looks like Trapp, sir. Him an' his Comanch' friends."

Lowbridge nodded. "They must have heard about the Bismarck train before we did . . . Mount up. I want to bivouac in the pass tonight."

THEY awoke creaking with cold. The fall had stopped but snow whitened the world as far as the eye could focus.

The flat country fell away from the ragged height of the pass in rolling folds that blinded vision and brought hands to faces to rub away the refraction.

And then coffee tang stung nostrils and frying bacon sweetened the air; men stamped themselves to warmth on the picket lines and laughed at the blanket shelters of the night before. Today they'd throw squad shacks together and tonight they'd be warm; this night and the next night. After that, they would track back to the post feeling better for the outing; feeling released, somewhat, from the crawling ennui of barracks fever.

Mr. Birdseye, munching hardtack and bacon, sidled up to Lowbridge and asked when the dynamiting would start. "I've never seen dynamite, Lieutenant." His flat jaw slid from side to side until he swallowed.

"The engineer detail will lay its charges this morning. Probably start blowing at noon."

Lowbridge finished his coffee and led the chaplain to the break in the long ridge that in good weather was Snake River Pass. "It's too long to go around so the trains go through it, here."

Sergeant Reinhard scrambled down over the jumble of ice and frozen fill and waved the detail after him. He stood spraddle-legged, hands on hips, judging the best place to set off an initial charge. An early quick thaw had loosened the sides of the pass and brought them together in a tangle of mud, roots and rocks; and the surprise storm of early spring had cemented the slide into a barrier. "Over there. I want forty pounds over there." Reinhard shouted and his voice echoed away on the stillness. "Wagon! Stand by to haul it away!"

They planted the charge and reeled out wire, laying it loosely on the snow. Then they cleared the pass, attached the wire to the crank and cried a warning. Reinhard seized hold of the crank and spun it furiously.

A blast shook the morning and filled it with a sheet of flying ice and spinning logs. The debris spattered back to earth and the wagon moved in to haul it off.

Ten yards had been cleared.

The second charge opened fifteen yards, and Lowbridge noted that the fill was be-

coming looser toward the center. "We may finish by night or by morning," he told the chaplain. His mind went warm with thoughts of Diana, waiting for him to come back. He saw her again, touched her once more, stared deep into her eyes . . . and had to beg the chaplain's pardon. "What did you say?"

"I said: We ought to have vespers this evening, to leave prayers for the safety of the emigrant train as it approaches the pass."

"Why, certainly," the lieutenant said. "Have all the vespers you want." Then he turned quickly at the sentry's call, high on the crest: "Column approaches from the west!"

They plumped up the pass and peered westward at the low, white prairie beyond. Threading across it, coming toward them, was a line of single-file riders. Almost all sat huddled in blankets as they rode. Two, riding ahead, wore short coats and round fur hats. "Trapp," Lowbridge snapped. "Corp'ral Corcoran! Saddle up! And mount the guidon too." He nudged Mr. Birdseye. "You fork that mule of yours, Padre. I don't think Trapp's ever seen a preacher before."

"Where do we go?"

"Down to meet him. I don't want him up here. . . ."

Gideon Trapp waited on the prairie, hock-high in snow. He bent forward slightly, one arm on the stock of his booted carbine. Then he sat up in the saddle as Lowbridge moved toward him at a trot; the chaplain, Corcoran and the guidon behind.

"Morning, sojer boy." Trapp's uncertain eyes flickered from face to face. "This the army?"

Lowbridge reined in and nodded curtly. "Anything we can do for you?" He glanced down the long column of Indian riders, some mounted on big shod horses. "Didn't know the tribes went in for blacksmithing."

"They don't." And Gideon Trapp smiled up one side of his face. "Hear you're blowin' the pass."

"To let people through."

They stared hard at each other; stared for almost a minute, until Trapp shifted his eyes. "What's that?"

"That?" They both turned toward Mr.

Birdseye. "That's my medicine man."
"Oh."

A blast split the sudden silence and Trapp jerked a hand to his carbine.

Lowbridge pulled at his nose and pursed his lips. "My medicine."

Gideon Trapp relaxed in the saddle and murmured something to the half breed beside him. Then he looked at Lowbridge and winked. "Funny. We got medicine too." He swung a thumb over his shoulder. "Look at it."

But Lowbridge already had looked at it, had counted more than a hundred quiet figures; had noted stolen stock and looted rifles and raided bridles. He remembered the major's warning words: "Let him start it;" and took a breath and said, "Stay west of the pass, Trapp. There's a train coming through—and it crosses first."

Trapp raised his brows in innocence. "Homesteaders?"

"Homesteaders. And we're here to see that they reach their land."

Trapp side-stepped his horse to Mr. Birdseye's mule and reached out to buckle a saddle bag. "That wouldn't be

liquor, would it, Parson? We ain't lifted a drink in a long time."

Mr. Birdseye sighed wearily and unstrapped the bag. With two hands he dragged forth the Bible and balanced it on his pommel.

"This, Mr. Trapp, is my medicine." He hefted it once and eased it back to the pommel. "It was given me by the Patriot Ladies of America in Baltimore."

"Well, now." Trapp traced a black-nailed finger along the filigree. He ticked at it with the nail, then rubbed it once. "Don't drop it, Parson." He pulled his hand back, fingers working. "Someone might pick it up."

Lowbridge booted his horse around and faced Gideon Trapp. "On your way now. Back track. And don't leave any of those Comanches behind."

The fourth blast rattled across the hills and died in the distance. Trapp's eyes bored through Lowbridge's head. "Maybe them emmies won't be first through the pass, sojer. This is a free country."

"Not with you in it." Lowbridge stiffened. "Now back track!"

Trapp raised his eyes to the pass and

NOW the girls ask BOB for dates

JUST COOKED
A SURPRISE
PARTY FOR PEG
TODAY! BOB, CAN
YOU TAKE ME?

SURE, GIVE ME A SEC TO GET
READY!

WISH JOAN ASKED
ME, BOB. YOU
ALWAYS WERE LUCKY.

WHY DON'T YOU
CHANGE YOUR LUCK
THE WAY I DID?

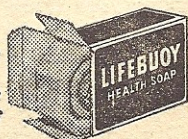
ALWAYS USE
LIFEBUOY—THE
NEW SOAP ESPECIALLY
MADE TO STOP B.O.—
CONTAINS AN
EXCLUSIVE
SMOOTHING INGREDIENT.
LIFEBUOY EVERY DAY
SURE KEEPS
B.O. AWAY!

THIS SURPRISE
PARTY WAS FUN,
BOB—THANKS
FOR TAKING ME.

THANKS FOR ASKING ME,
JOAN...
AND THANKS
TO LIFEBUOY!

MY DAILY LIFEBUOY BATH
IS THE ONE BEST WAY
TO GET LASTING ALLOVER
PROTECTION AGAINST
B.O. USE LIFEBUOY FOR
A WEEK AND YOU'LL
USE IT FOR LIFE!

Used in
the homes
of
40 million
Americans



ANOTHER FINE LEVER PRODUCT

probed it with narrowed lids; pried at it as if he could count the men behind its crest. He lowered his look to the Bible and his jaw hung loose as he licked his lower lip. "All right, sojer." He called in the Comanche tongue, and the long file of blanketed riders turned slowly and started back over their tracks. "We'll see." And Gideon Trapp and the half breeds cantered across the snow and were gone.

AN HOUR passed. Two hours. A handful of hours, and it was early sunset. Half the pass had been ripped open by now and Lowbridge ordered Recall.

Mess over, Mr. Birdseye passed the word for vespers, but only four men showed up. Corcoran walked past in the shaking shadows, watched for a moment and spat tobacco juice into the snow.

"You'll not join us, Corporal?" the chaplain asked.

Corcoran made a face. "Hell, no!"

The chaplain passed out two hymnals, cleared his throat, gave the pitch, and led them in *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

Lowbridge hummed with them on the second hymn, then joined in the third. Mr. Birdseye collected his hymnals in silence and stowed them in his bags. He closed his eyes and held out a hand and spoke a prayer for those trekking west over the tortuous trail to free land and new homes; for those who set their faces to danger, because beyond the danger was the end of the trail, the promised country, the place of reward.

The hissing fires shone on his spectacles as he spoke; and finally he took them off, blinked and added, "And may the Patriot Ladies sleep well in the knowledge that their offering remains safe from the hands of the infidel . . . Good evening, gentlemen."

Lowbridge lay long in his blankets, eyes wide to the cold stars on high, thoughts erratic. He tried to think of Diana, but for once he could not. Always his mind slipped back to Trapp; to Trapp and his obscene ways, his obscene followers. He saw Trapp poised on the prairie as an evil giant, waiting to destroy; saw him as a trap, in truth, who would snap shut

on the happy people who had taken the trail. . . .

"One." It was the first post reporting the hour. "Two," a voice called . . . And "Three". . . . And Lowbridge sank into sleep and heard no more.

* * *

At half-past three the next afternoon, Sergeant Reinhard reported that blasting was finished and the pass open to wagons. "We got near fifty pounds left, Mr. Lowbridge."

"We ought to blow it for a celebration, Sergeant . . . All right, stow it." He studied the purpling western sky. "We can't move tonight. Reveille at five. Roll at six."

Lowbridge and the chaplain sat cross-legged against the wagon-tongue, munching a soggy supper in silence. Mr. Birdseye smacked down the last of his coffee and permitted himself the pleasure of a muted belch. "Garrison rations are like the finest food in France compared to this, Lieutenant."

"We might knock down some rabbits on the way back," the lieutenant said. "This blasting has scared everything off, around here." Lowbridge figured his strength: thirty-seven men in the escort, plus himself and the chaplain. Four men and a sergeant in the engineer detail, plus a driver and a mule-skinner. Forty-six men. That would require at least ninety-two rabbits, unless a stew was contemplated, in which case twenty-three rabbits might, do, winter-lean as they were. Which would make four rabbits per squad fire, assuming enough roots could be grubbed to build-up the stew. And it was extremely unlikely that even twenty-three rabbits could be shot without interrupting by a full day the ride back to the post, in which even Major Sutcliffe would be most disturbed, and no doubt angry.

And on the eve of a man's wedding it would not be politic to have that man's potential father-in-law and present post commander upset by so much as a hair. Not even by the hair of a rabbit, Mr. Lowbridge decided airily, and was pleased at his little pun.

He was about to ask Mr. Birdseye about vespers when something jarred on

his ear. Rather, an unscheduled silence, a break in the rhythm of guard call, fell vacant in his ear and brought him alert to the discrepancy. He stood up and tilted his head and opened his mouth to relieve pressure on his ears, but still no "Three" sounded in the darkness. One and Two and Four had reported. Then "Five" was called; and "Six."

"Corp'ral Corcoran!" They met beyond the bulk of the wagon, each moving fast.

"I heerd it, sir."

"You mean you didn't hear it. Three?"

Corcoran shook his head. "No Three, sir." He smelled sweetly of whiskey and sweat. "Asleep, mebbe. I'll look."

He moved away in the dark and disappeared beyond the low shadows of the fires. Lowbridge heard his spurs chinking, heard his heels scrape, then heard nothing. He found Reinhard and pulled him awake. "When was guard inspected last?"

"This is first relief, Mr. Lowbridge. No inspection due until seven."

"Who's Number Three?"

Reinhard thumbed through muddy papers, squinting in the fire-glow. "Farish."

"Well, he didn't report."

The sergeant shook his head slowly. "Farish is pretty sharp, sir. I put him on point comin' out."

"I know."

Then Corcoran appeared from behind the wagon, walking slowly, boots dragging. He was hatless. "Mr. Lowbridge." He came forward and stopped, shoulders low, hands loose. "I just brought Farish in." He wiped his palms together and Lowbridge could hear the callouses scrape. "They done him in, sir. He's dead."

THEY crouched over Farish, feeling him, fingering his clothing. His belt and side-arm were gone; his carbine was missing. He'd been hatcheted.

"Cover him up." Lowbridge poked Reinhard. "Alert the detail. Post 'em around the crest this side of the pass. Corcoran, issue one hundred rounds in bandoleers."

Mr. Birdseye stepped gingerly up to the body, eyes wide. He whistled softly and turned away. "An accident?"

"Friend Trapp's way of leaving a card.

You get in that wagon, Padre. And stay in it. Keep low in it. Hear?"

A sparkling streak of fire arced the night and rushed downward. It chuckled into the depths of the pass and hissed out. Reinhard, watching it, nodded as a man nods to an unlikely acquaintance. "Hot arrows. We better put our fires out."

Troopers kicked snow into the squad fires, stamped on cracking embers and jogged off in the sudden darkness to take position.

Two more streaks scratched redly across the sky; one thudded into the area, burned hotly and went out.

"Trapp must have kerosene to spare, Reinhard."

"He'll get more if he jumps them emmie wagons."

Lowbridge considered that possibility as being a good one. Trapp would reach the emigrant train before help arrived; and forty-six men marooned on a ridge could not be considered as any help. Forty-six men with three days rations. Forty-six men holding off more than a hundred bitter Indians led by a vengeful renegade who intended to eliminate those forty-six men and use the pass as an ambush for the train. Lowbridge conjured up a picture of the wagons rolling westward toward the pass, wheeling their way out of the east to claims still to be staked, to land yet to be tilled.

He thought, soberly, of Diana. Throat tightening, he heard once more her words: "When you come back." And he clamped his jaws shut and cursed at the truth, because the truth was that Gideon Trapp would override the ridge tomorrow or the next day or the day after that; and when he'd watched his Comanches peel off forty-six scalps, he'd plan the plunder of the pass as easily as a man plans a chess move against a blind opponent.

Any other surmise would be a piece of depressingly optimistic guesswork.

Three threads of fire rose in the night, hung on the arcs and plunged to earth. One struck stone near the wagon; the others *choked* into the snow in the near distance.

Lowbridge hunched around the waiting ring of men, checking ammunition; he spent twenty minutes on the picket line testing harness and hobbles; and when he

had finished, Mr. Birdseye called his name. "I'm over here, Lieutenant."

"I told you to stay in the wagon." Lowbridge wished fiercely that the major had not followed his whim of allowing the chaplain to take the field. Chaplains belonged east of Omaha, someplace; they belonged in churches, or at weddings. . . . "Get back in!"

Mr. Birdseye shook his head owlshly. He clutched the weight of the Bible against his chest and said, "No."

"Look here—"

"No. Those fire brands have a way of falling too near."

"All right." Lowbridge didn't care any longer, didn't believe that any precaution would save even one life. "Do as you please."

"Thank you." Mr. Birdseye played his fingers along the deep gold filigree of the Baltimore Bible, making small sounds with his mouth. He pushed his lips to a point and cocked his spectacles at Lowbridge. "What will this man do, Lieutenant?"

"Trapp?" Lowbridge tried to think of a way to tell him. But he simply answered, "He'll kill us, of course."

"Hmm." Mr. Birdseye shuddered. "When?"

"In the morning, maybe. They'll rush the ridge from every direction and—and—"

"Kill us."

"Thank you."

The chaplain riffled the gilt-edged pages and held them open, occasionally, as if he could see them. Then he closed the covers tightly and wrapped his thin arms around the big book. "Suppose we kill him first?"

Lowbridge looked weary. "How? With slingshots? Forty-six carbines against all that? And moving targets, Padre, are notoriously hard to hit."

"Hmm." The chaplain sniffled once and coughed. "They've made big medicine, I suppose. They're full of strength."

"Stronger than prayer, Padre." Lowbridge lowered his voice. "If you like, I'll issue a weapon to you."

The chaplain shook his head shortly. "Faith is stronger than prayer, boy. You've heard of David, who slew Goliath with—yes, with a slingshot? David was

weak, but he had faith. A nice allegory, and one which has stood the test of the ages."

"We have no slingshots, and I don't see David."

Another fire arrow wriggled across the sky and streaked into the ridge. A man sneezed, then sneezed again, and someone advised him to go on sick call. A man laughed.

"Lieutenant." Mr. Birdseye climbed to his feet. "We, too, possess big medicine. We are stronger than they."

"Padre, right now isn't the time for prayer. So if you'll excuse me, I'll go up—"

"Please." The chaplain's skinny fingers closed on Lowbridge's wrist. "As I recall, Mr. Trapp advised me not to drop my Bible, as someone might pick it up. He would pick it up, and show it to all and sundry as a valuable prize."

"Well? He'll have it soon enough. Now if you'll—"

"Excuse me. I detest interruptions." He coughed wetly. "I have no doubt that Mr. Trapp will have my Bible, and soon enough. But I propose to give it to him." The chaplain tightened his clutch on the book, hugging it as will a mother who says farewell to her son. "I know nothing of explosives, but I am willing to contribute this—God bless the Patriot Ladies—if you will contribute that fifty pounds of dynamite. Now, my plan is—"

The interruption was Lowbridge's, "Yes!" It revealed itself to him as the moon appears through a thinning mist. "Yes, and maybe we can—" He stopped and snapped his fingers. "I'll get Reinhard. You wait here." He sprang toward the ridge crest, heart flopping heavily, mouth dry with excitement.

THE frigid grayness of early dawn crept across the world; the very weight of the cold seemed to still the breezes, to quiet the wind. The snap of a straw at a hundred yards could have been heard like the strike of a match.

Down on the westward plain the Comanches sat like statues; to the south they sat in silence, and in the center of that fierce, cold pincer sat Gideon Trapp, waiting.

Mr. Birdseye, flat in the snow, whis-

pered from the side of his mouth, "They won't see the wire?"

And Lowbridge whispered, "No. It's under the snow."

"You think it's far enough out?"

Lowbridge nodded. "We'll be safe . . . watch there! Here comes the half breed."

The man in the round fur hat walked his horse forward from Gideon Trapp, eyes on the ground. He halted once and stared at the object at the foot of the ridge. Then he came forward again, reins high, face tense. He stopped a second time and judged his distance from the crest of the ridge but Trapp spoke sharply and the man moved on.

Reinhard giggled like a schoolboy. "Come on, baby, you're outa range. Come on!"

The half breed stopped and threw off. He swung the reins over his horse's head and advanced on foot, picking his pace with long, slow strides.

"Trapp ain't takin' chances with himself, is he, Padre?"

Mr. Birdseye winked at Reinhard. "Goliaths such as these seldom do their own dirty work, if I may use the phrase."

"You may," Reinhard allowed, feeling a sudden warmth for the little man in the clerical cloth. Last night had almost been fun, and with a Bible at that.

The half breed bent over the object in the snow, then worked his fingers under it and came up straight. The early morning sun winked off the gilt edges and gold filigree and made it look like fire. The half breed turned around, holding the Bible high, and cried aloud in the Comanche tongue.

Gideon Trapp stood stiff in his stirrups and waved both arms. The riders to west and to south broke into motion and trotted toward the half breed, still dismounted and waiting for Trapp to ride up.

Mr. Birdseye sniffed airily. "Well, they've got their medicine now."

"They'll get it in a minute, Padre," Reinhard breathed.

Trapp grabbed the Bible from the half breed and tore through it like a man finding gems. He laughed and held it up toward the ridge and whacked at it with one hand. The Comanches crowded forward, dismounted and eager, and Trapp pushed them back. He shouted, "I told

you not to drop it!" The words were thin in the distance, but the troopers on the ridge heard them.

Reinhard looked at Lowbridge; and Lowbridge looked at the chaplain. "Well?"

Mr. Birdseye sucked in a long, tight breath and bent his head. "You may fire, David."

Reinhard gripped the crank, raised his shoulders and spun it.

The breath of a moment passed.

A rush of air blew back on the ridge as the explosion filled the dawn and sent men and horses, weapons and ponies scattering toward the sky. For long minutes the living men watched fragments of the dead flop back into the snow; watched while the air cleared and the noise echoed away; waited until once again there was only cold silence to meet the rise of the new day.

They walked down the slope from the ridge and poked for a while in the ripped earth. They found part of a hand with black-rimmed nails.

They picked up some torn pages, the gilt still shining.

Then they buried what they could in the depression blown by the dynamite, and the chaplain spoke a prayer.

They broke camp at noon and saddled up and formed twos; Lowbridge paused by Farish's grave, saluted quickly and cantered to the head of the column. He reined in by the chaplain's mule. "Vespers tonight as usual, Padre. And we might camp in rabbit country."

The husky clearing of a throat grated on the stillness, and Mr. Birdseye turned to see Corporal Corcoran riding next to the guidon. "I'd kinda like to come, Padre."

"There'll be plenty of room." He sighed and fondled the limp saddle bag for a moment. "The people who gave me that Bible—they would have approved, I'm sure."

Deep in the distance to the east a faint pop sounded. A driver's whip, leading the emigrant train to the pass.

"I'm sure," Lowbridge said quietly. And they found their way west from the pass, and made their trail across the prairie beyond; rode across the new lands as yet to be staked and as yet to be tilled.



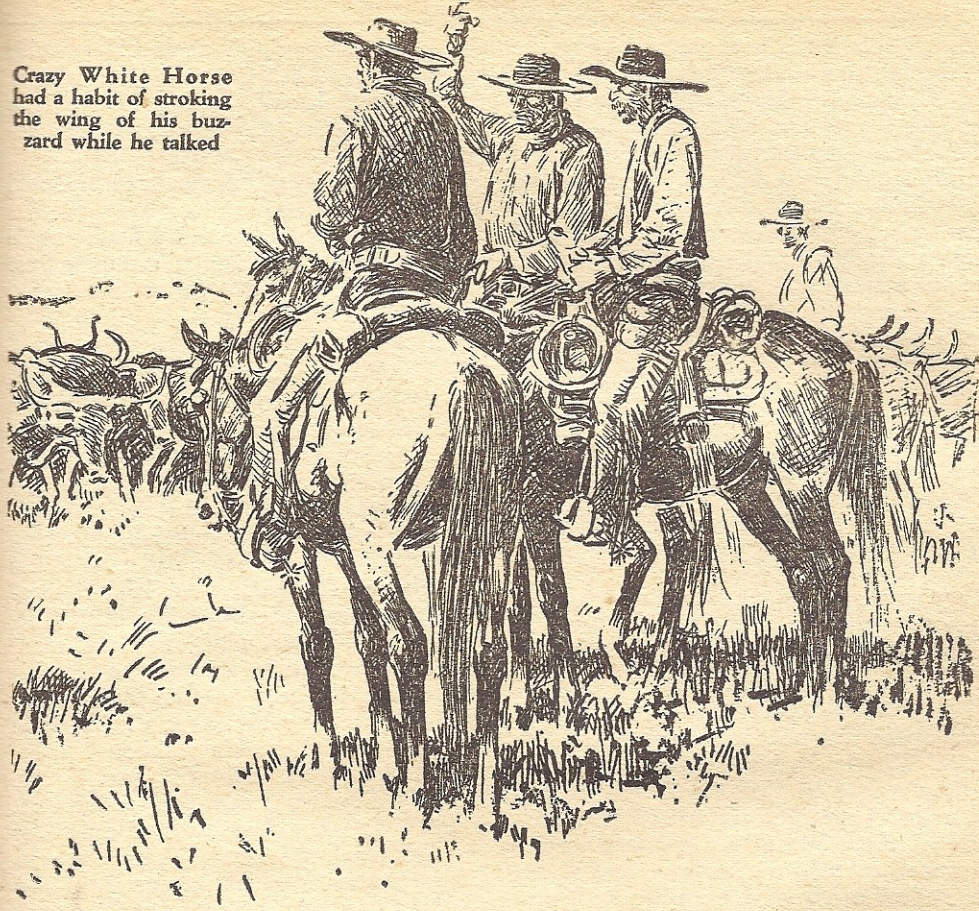
JUDAS BOSS OF MUTINY HERD

A
Novel

By
MARVIN de VRIES

The Indian chief who rode with a buzzard on a thigh taught the Judas boss of that Dodge-bound mutiny drive that peace bought and paid for by flaming guns—can only be kept by dead men!

Crazy White Horse
had a habit of stroking
the wing of his buzz-
ard while he talked



CHAPTER ONE

Wanted: Five Good Guns

IT WAS a wild, lonely country of silent hills and whispering grass, and when evening fell the clutch of loneliness took hold of a man's throat with a heavy hand. Even the dead, possibly come to their end as naturally as a leaf falls, possibly scalped and butchered by fierce and cunning enemies, must be lonely in their shallow graves. It was a country where a man could come to the end of his string with an arrow in his back, and what he owned could dribble through his stiffening fingers like fine sand.

Maybe King Land, who owned the K L Slash, felt the loneliness and sensed the lurking danger. At least he looked worried and remarked about another smoke

we had seen on a far green hill—a thin pencil writing its worrisome message against the pale blue sky—before we laid up for the night.

"Crazy White Horse," Sam Kregal said. "The buzzard with the buzzard."

Crazy White Horse was a Comanche chief whose big medicine was a buzzard that rode on his saddle horn wherever he went.

"If I'm any judge," King Land snarled, "it tastes to me like you caught that damned bird and put it in our grub. What kind of stuff you call this anyway?"

Kregal scratched his head. Barley Bill Anders, the regular cook, sick in the hoodlum, and Land had put Sam on the chuckwagon. "I don't know," Sam confessed sheepishly. "It didn't turn out right, somehow. I did somethin' I shouldn't've done, or 'tother way round, I don't know which."

King Land subsided, probably realizing

he ought to be the last to start a bellyache against the cook, since he owned the outfit. A man in his boots ought to save himself for bigger and better worries, and I didn't care how many of them he got, because I didn't like him. I had seen him lose three men on river crossings, men lost only because he was stubborn and high and mighty and expected any chore he put a man on to be done right, regardless of experience or ability. He didn't have any give. He was hard to take because he was on the make with his K L Slash and would do anything under creation to make a go of it. I had him figured out that-away right from the start and, as time went on, I couldn't see any reason to change my mind.

"We ought to have some more rifles," he said suddenly, gulping down what was left of his grub.

"They'd be handy," I agreed. "But this ain't hardly the time to think of it. If you recollect, I mentioned it when we started."

"You know," he said, ignoring the dig, "I think them buffalo hunters we met up with today are peddling guns to the Injuns. They had a kind of a sneaky way."

You've got to give the devil his due. I thought I was the only one who had noticed it. Every time I got near one wagon they had covered with a tarp, one of the men edged in and gave me a hard look until I cleared out and went some other place. I tried it several times and got the same treatment every time, and, once, one of them was ready to pull a gun on me. "Mebbe you're right," I agreed.

He did some more thinking and then finally came out with the notion to send me back to buy five .50 calibre Sharps rifles off them. "Make 'em realize you mean business and don't let 'em pull the wool over your eyes," he instructed.

"Well," I said, "I'll go back, but you want to remember it's just a guess what they are. And you'll have to pay Injun prices."

He got out some cash and counted it out to me. "That's the regular price," he said. "I ain't goin' to be gouged by no dirty, gun-peddlin' buzzards. I'll put the law on 'em."

"What law?"

He ignored that, too. "They'll give you a lot of talk, mebbe, but you bear

down on 'em an' git them rifles—with ammunition to fit."

"S'pose," I said, licking my tongue along my cheek, "they don't have .50 calibre Sharps?"

"I want Sharps," he answered, and told me to get moving.

It took me some time but I finally made a fix on the buffalo-hunters' campfire, just before dawn, and rode in on them when the sun was coming up.

WHAT King Land had said was true. They had something in that wagon they didn't want anyone to see, and they were touchy about talking about it. There were two other wagons, four hunters and a small remuda. When I rode in one of the men was making a fast job of getting the tarp over the wagon I had noticed the day before. His name was Gabe Damascus, he told me. He was a big, dirty, red-whiskered jigadee with one lone front tooth, tobacco-juice drooling down his chin and a pot-belly held up by his gun-belt. He was the big auger of the outfit and did most the talking, although a little, bandy-legged, flap-eared gent by the name of Frenchy occasionally chimed in. I didn't find out the names of the other two hunters until later. There were no skimmers around, which increased my suspicions as to their business, but Damascus said their two Tonkawa skimmers had run off.

I couldn't get anywhere beating around the bush and finally told them pointblank what I wanted—five .50 calibre Sharps with ammunition to match. "I've got the cash on me and I don't want to waste any time, mine or yours."

Gabe's jaw dropped. "My God," he let go at last, "who you think we are?"

"By Gar!" Frenchy added.

"Get 'em out," I ordered, jiggling my horse closer to the tarp-covered wagon. Gabe started to grin nervously. "You got us wrong, mister," he told me. "We ain't got no guns. We—"

"In there," I said pointing.

"Git away from that wagon!" he roared suddenly. "Git!"

I took hold of the tarp. Frenchy let out a screech and came at me with a knife. I went for my gun. Frenchy stopped in his tracks and threw the knife. It left a mark

on my neck but it didn't go in, sliding past my throat like a streak of light, the point going an inch deep into the tailgate of the wagon. It left Frenchy unarmed, but Gabe got off a wild shot. My first try cut him open from wrist to elbow, and then whined off into space. Damn the boss, I thought, he could have sent a man along.

But I made out. The gun jumped out of Gabe's hand and he froze in his tracks. The other two hunters kept out of it. There must have been some bad feeling among the four of them; Gabe and Frenchy against the other two. I motioned them to line up in a row, then cut the tarp with Frenchy's knife and looked in.

They were right. They didn't have any guns—they had an Indian girl in there. She was almost naked, tied hand and foot, with a gag in her mouth. I cut her loose and helped her out with my free hand. She was young and pretty and hate gleamed in her eyes.

"I got a mind to shoot the four of you," I snapped.

"I didn't have nothin' to do with it," a man I hadn't heard from before said. "Gabe and Frenchy done it. They grabbed her off her horse when they seen her ridin' around by her lonesome, and taken her along."

"Shut your trap!" Gabe flared.

I gave him a kick in the ribs, just for my own satisfaction, then wrapped the girl in a buffalo blanket, got her on one of their riding horses and rode off.

I didn't try to talk to her. I figured she might run off when she realized she was free. In fact, I hoped she would, because I didn't want to get into any kind of a mix with Injuns, not, at least, until there was someone around who could explain what had happened. But she stuck by me like a frightened pup and I didn't have the heart to do anything about it. I gave her a piece of jerky and a drink of water out of my canteen, and we rode on single-file, like Injun man and wife. She said something several times—the same thing over and over—but I couldn't make out what it was. The hate in her eyes died and her head sagged, and it looked to me like she didn't feel so good. I had to lead her horse, finally, and she got into a coughing spell that wore her out. I kept a close eye on her so she wouldn't fall to the ground.

I reckon the morning was half gone when I heard a rider coming toward us. I tried to get behind some greenery before he showed up, but I was too late. Horse and rider came out of a wash and headed straight for us. I held my breath till I made out it wasn't an Injun. Then I took holt of it again, when I saw it was another girl, a white one, and pretty as a picture, too. I was sure surprised.

So was King Land when I showed up at noon with the two of them in tow. Surprised, and put out, no end. "Balls of fire!" he exploded when he saw us. "I send him out after .50 calibre Sharps rifles and he comes back with a girl!"

"Two of them," I said, feeling a little ornery myself. "Can't you count?"

CHAPTER TWO

The Buzzard's Master

HER name was Edie Fontanne. According to her tell, she was a show girl. A man named Duke Lounds, who had sold out his San Antone gambling place, was taking a whole troupe of them clear up to Dodge. She said this Lounds had gotten fresh with her and she had ridden off.

"That maybe works on a buggy ride," King Land told her, as if he knew all the ropes, "but you can't do that sort of thing out here."

"I can," she answered.

This talk was going on around the campfire. King Land had let the rest of the day go by without saying much, one way or the other, but he had probably been thinking a lot. The boys stared at her hungrily, and I reckon I did my share. She wore what you might call town clothes, and they made her look like a picture in a book, with ruffles and frills that still stood out pert and fresh in spite of a day in the saddle.

She was dark, so she didn't sunburn, but she had a lot of color in her cheeks, and a quick smile came and went in her eyes and around the corners of her mouth, as if she realized how foolish she was but couldn't help it. It was a smile to warm a man's heart and make him want to touch her and tell her everything was exactly the way it ought to be. Whitey Munn,

my friend, asked if this Lounds troupe was anywhere near by. He made it sound as if he was worried about them, but she laughed outright and he laughed with her.

Sam Kregal had fixed up another buzzard stew, but it went down better than usual because we had something else to put our mind on. But I noticed Edie put the stew aside after the first few swallows and pretended she wasn't hungry. Sam noticed it, too, and got a long, dreary look on his face. But the only remark that was made came from King Lamoreaux, who said if Barley Bill didn't get better in a hurry we'd all be dead before our time. I reckon most of the crew had no idea what they were eating, and all the talk angled, in one way or another, at the girl, until King Land finally spoke up and said she couldn't stay. After that you could have heard a bird breathe, and the air was full of unspoken profanity.

Edie took it good-naturedly, no tears, no nothing, except that the cute little smile on her face got a little cuter, and I wasn't so sure King Land was going to have the last say. I couldn't tell exactly what she was thinking, but I was pretty sure she had Land measured right down to the ground and didn't think much of the measurements. Finally she looked at Sam Kregal, and said, "What on earth did you do to this?" She held up her plate, and pointed.

Sam winced. "I ain't done nothin' to it," he sputtered. Then, with sudden exasperation: "I can't help it. I ain't the regular cook."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said softly. "I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"Oh, that's all right," Sam grumbled.

"Can you cook?" Whitey asked.

She nodded, and when he specified outdoor cooking she nodded again. The talk died, but a little later Whitey suddenly threw a fit, twisting and squirming over the ground like a tromped snake, and yowling and groaning as if he was going to die on the spot.

"That's acute indigestion," Kink, who knows something about such things, told him.

"The hell it is!" Whitey moaned. "It's a bellyache. That damn' grub poisoned me. The rest of you better watch out."

"Judas Priest, Whitey," Wyatt Wall spoke up, "I believe I got it comin' on, too.

Git outa my way, everybody, dammit."

IT DIDN'T look convincing to me because I knew what they were up to. I don't know what King Land thought but he finally said she could stay. "I don't know as I ought to do it," he added, making it sound as if he were doing her a big favor, "but I'll give you a chance, seeing as how you don't have any place to go."

"Thanks," she murmured in that throaty voice, and I'm almost sure she gave Whitey a wink. At least it didn't take him long to get over his bellyache.

The young breed wrangler, Kim Otter Cull, could handle Comanche Tex-Mex talk, and found out something about the Indian girl. Her name was Tolani, and Crazy White Horse, the Comanche chief who was giving King Land the fidgets, was her grandfather. "She's dead beat," Kim stated, "and I reckon it would be a good idea to get rid of her pronto, some way or other. If White Horse was to show up, and she couldn't do her own talkin', we'd be in a helluva fix."

As it turned out, he needn't have worried, because White Horse showed up with a hundred bucks at his heels just before deep dark. Half of them carried flares on sticks, to show they came peaceably, I expect. It was a sight to see, all the wild fooferaw showing up in the big light from the flares. Even if they didn't mean us any harm, you never can tell, and it would have been a comfort to have some of those Sharps rifles King Land had sent me to get.

Crazy White Horse had a regulation army saddle, and had his buzzard perched up in front of him. He looked old, but his eyes were hot. They probably knew what a sight they made, with wind swirling off the smoke, ruffling their feathers and lifting the manes and tails of their ponies, their paint-daubed legs and bellies giving them a wild look. The crew edged off into the dark where they could back us with all the guns and ammunition they could lay their hands on, leaving King Land, Kim and me to parley. Edie Fontanne went with them, although they did get a look at her before she got out of sight.

Crazy White Horse let some time run out without a word, then he suddenly called the girl's name. She got up out of

her blankets and walked toward him, eyes on the ground, like a whipped dog. I got the impression that Crazy White Horse blamed her, but I wasn't sure. He didn't try to cheer her up any, I know that. The talk between the two of them went on for some time, Kim bending an ear to listen. He said the buck on the brown horse next to the chief was the girl's husband. "Her father, who was the chief's son, is dead. A scout trailed you part way back here, Matt. That's how they knowed she was here."

King Land fidgeted. "When you get a chance to talk you tell him what we did for her," he told Kim. "This'll work out good if you say the right things."

"They're talkin' about you now, Matt," Kim stated.

"What've I done?"

"He wants to see that slash you got on your neck. Lift up your head and show him."

"Oh, the hell with it!"

"Go ahead!" King Land snapped, so I stretched my neck.

"Of all the damn' nonsense," I muttered.

"Kim, tell him we did all we could for the girl," Land went on. "Tell him we don't want nothing for it, except to get our herd through without toll."

"It don't fit in right now," Kim said. Then turning to me. "Boy, you're sure as hell in for it."

"I don't see why. If anybody did anything for her, I did."

"Just listen to this talk."

"Hell, I can't make anything out of that. What do I do, start running?"

"Not by a long shot. You stand where you are."

CRAZY WHITE HORSE finally climbed off his horse and came to where I stood. He talked some more, making gestures, and took another look at my neck. Then he touched his hand to my shoulders, first one, then the other, and went through some more rigamarole. Finally he took out a knife and took some blood out of my wrist, and some out of his own, and mixed the two, and then went back to his horse. I felt like a fool, knowing everybody was looking on from out there in the dark, but I knew a little of

what it meant and I kept a straight face.

They loaded Tolani on a horse. Crazy White Horse made another signal and the whole bunch let out a yell that sent a shiver up my spine. Then they pulled out with a hoof-thunder that lasted five minutes after they were gone.

The crew trickled back to the fire and started talking again. "I almost plugged the old badger when he fetched out that knife, Matt," Whitey said, and wiped sweat from his forehead.

King Land was the only one who was disappointed the way things turned out, and lit into Kim for not saying anything about toll.

"It—it didn't fit in," Kim told him.

"Fit it?" Land exploded. "You could make it fit in. I told you—"

"No, I couldn't. That old coot had his mind set on just one thing. If I twisted it onto something else, I might've spoiled it all. They was jumpy as hell. If anything would've gone wrong we might've all got slaughtered. I couldn't change the subject like that."

"I could!" King Land snarled.

"You'll probably get a chance," Kim said. "I reckon he'll be back for toll."

"That's why you ought to have pinned him down."

"This was between them and Matt," Kim said, eyeing King Land up and down as if this was the first time he'd ever seen him. "It wasn't nobody's else's business."

"At any rate," Land muttered, turning away, "we got rid of one slut."

When he said that I grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around and hit him in the face. Maybe he didn't mean what it sounded like—that we still had one on our hands—but I would've hit him anyway, boss or no boss. I never gave anybody a poke that did me more good, even though, for a second, I thought sure I was going to get shot. He pulled his gun but before he got it leveled off something held him back. Maybe what Kim had told him about getting another call from Crazy White Horse stopped him. After what had happened he probably figured I could do him some good getting his herd through without toll. At any rate, instead of shooting, he threw the gun at me and hit me square in the face.

It snapped my head back and knocked me flat. I heard Whitey yell, and then a

gun went off, and Ham Loper, who always played up to King Land, told Whitey to keep out of it or he'd gut-shoot him next time. I would have let things ride the way they stood, but King Land came at me and kicked me around like he was finishing off a snake. I got my feet under me somehow and managed to hold him off till I got my wits back. Then I went at him.

He had a bulky build, and he wasn't anybody to shove around, but I hurt him plenty. His gun had cut my forehead open; blood blurred my eyes, but I made out good enough to set him on his fanny four times.

Nobody let out a peep. I know most of them wanted to see him get a licking, because he was a puffed-up buzzard and it was time he got set on his heels. What they felt, and what I felt went back a long ways. Kenny Metz had given him some sass, because Land didn't like him and gave him all the dirty chores to do. Kenny finally hit a shuck, but King Land caught him, fetched him back and had him horse-whipped. It stuck in my craw like a porcupine quill, and that and a lot of other things made me give him that first poke as much as what he had said. He would have sent a man to hell if by doing so he got his beef any closer to railhead. That's the only thing he had on his mind, and he wasn't big enough to do it the square way. He was only a little jigger, throwing his weight around to make him look big. I will say I cut him down some to his natural size, but I was a bloody mess when I got through. I couldn't see exactly what happened but I know my last poke sent him sailing through the campfire, so he landed on the other side, and some of the boys had to beat out the flames on his pants or he would have burned to death. The only remark I heard when it was over was Whitey's, and all he said was, "Well, well."

Then Edie Fontanne took hold of my arm and said she'd clean me up.

CHAPTER THREE

A Head Rolls

THE next day King Land called me up on point and said we ought to talk things over.

"Anything you say," I told him. "I'll pull out if that's what you want."

"Not at all," he said. "I wouldn't think of letting you go just because we had that little ruckus."

The ruckus wasn't little, and I knew he hated my guts for it, but I let it stand the way he laid it out.

"And just to show you I ain't got any hard feelings," he went on, "I'm going to cut you in on a piece of this herd."

If I hadn't known what he was getting at, I reckon I would have dropped dead. "You don't need to do that," I said. "I ain't worth any more to you than the rest of the boys."

"It isn't that," he said, as if I hadn't ought to spoil a nice thing he wanted to do. "I want you to feel you've got a stake in this drive. I know a good man when I see one, and maybe we could work out some kind of a partnership later, after we see how things work out."

"Just what did you have in mind?"

"Well, I want to make it worth your while to—to cooperate and make this drive go right. I tell you what I'll do: I'll cut you in for ten head right now. That'll run you as much as two-three hundred dollars in Dodge. That's quite a lot of cash. Nothin' to sneeze at."

"Yeah," I agreed. There were two thousand K L Slash critters in the herd, so his deal would give me one two-hundredth interest. "Yeah, that's quite a lot of cash, but I don't think I'd care to bother with it."

"Suit yourself," he snapped. Then he jerked himself out of it and added, "If you change your mind, just let me know. I'll hold the offer open for a while but don't think about it too long."

I went back to swing, where I'd been. I'd seen smoke in the sky, same as he had. He was still worried about Crazy White Horse and his Comanche hellions and he wanted to make sure I'd play my stand-in with them on his side if it came to a showdown. Like Kim had said, what had happened was between Crazy White Horse and me, and it didn't guarantee the K L Slash against toll. The damned little piker, making an offer that showed he thought I was as small as he was. I would have done what I could for nothing, but I didn't take to being called a lowdown coyote to my

face by the gent I meant to help. I'll fix him, I thought, when he pops up with another offer.

HE GOT back to it later, like I figured he would. This time he boosted the ante up to fifteen head. I pretended to study my answer, looking to the faroff hills to make up my mind.

"Judas!" I said. "There's another smoke off there." I didn't see any, but it was a way of getting at what I wanted to drag into this talk. "You reckon White Horse is still fixin' to raid us?"

"Oh, no—no. He wouldn't do it after what we did for that girl."

"But the way Kim said, that was just between him and me."

"We're all in this together, Matt. That goes without saying. One for all and all for one."

"Uh-huh. I reckon. But I don't know as it would be fair to him to stand on what he did, just to save us a little toll."

"A little toll! My God, he'll cut out a couple hundred head if he gets the notion. He's done it before to friends of mine. With the men he's got he could run off the whole herd and we couldn't stop him."

I said, "When you put it that-away, it looks like I could save you a lot of cash." I made out like I was just beginning to realize what he was getting at. "You mean to say you offered me ten stinkin' cows to keep Crazy White Horse offn your neck. Ten stinkin' cows to—"

"Fifteen, Matt. Twenty. Anything reasonable."

"The way it looks I got your whole damned herd right in my hand."

"Oh, no, it's not that, Matt."

"If it ain't, you don't need to dicker with me." I swung on my horse and started to ride back.

"Just a minute, Matt. Just a minute. What—what'll you do it for?"

I stopped and gave it to him over my shoulder. "Fifty-fifty," I told him. "Cut the herd right down the middle and I'll speak my piece to Crazy White Horse."

Judas! I thought he'd wilt right down to the ground. He couldn't get out a word. Naturally, I thought he'd turn me down, and, in the end, I'd do what he wanted anyway if it ever got to that point, just to

show him the difference between a stinker and an honest man.

But he didn't turn me down. "All right, Matt," he said at last, almost choking on the words, "if that's the way it's got to be, that's the way it is."

That almost wilted me down, but I got over it fast, because I saw that I had worked myself into a bear-trap, and what I was apt to get paid off with, in the end, was a bushwhack bullet. What made me reasonably sure was what he said next.

"There's just one thing, Matt," he stated. "This is between us two, and we got to keep it that-away. I don't want the crew to know. You can see my reasons."

"Yeah, I guess I can," I agreed, and rode off.

We raised a lot of dust, and, with the wind dead ahead, the clouds of fine grit swirled back a mile, which was probably the reason no one saw the buffalo hunters coming toward us until we put the herd on the bed ground for the night, and the dust settled. Whitey pointed them out first, and I recognized Gabe Damascus' outfit. He was riding a big bony, iron-gray animal, and held a rifle in the crook of his arm. The other three were on the wagons and were coming at us. They rode at a gallop along the edge of a wash.

DAMASCUS waved to us and called out something I couldn't make out. He looked back at the wagons and motioned them to hurry. The last wagon, a little closer to the wash than the others, suddenly swung away and pulled up. When the driver got the team stopped he jumped down and raced around to the tail gate where he had a horse tied. He yelled something to the others but I expect they didn't hear. He cut the lead rope and climbed aboard, heading off at an angle on a dead run.

"Looks like he don't want no part of you again," Whitey remarked.

"That ain't it!" I yelled. "Look!"

A swarm of Comanches came up out of the wash and headed for the wagons. I counted ten. Crazy White Horse wasn't with them but they were probably some of his party, out to avenge what had happened to Tolani. Damascus swung back and got his rifle going. One horse in the

lead team went down and the wagon piled up on top of it. Two paint-daubed bucks went after the fleeing rider. Two others chased the bolting team he had abandoned and downed both animals. The third wagon landed in a heap near the first, making a wedge behind which the three men forted up. The Comanche bucks began circling, throwing lead and arrows into the wagons.

"God," Whitey muttered.

The men on the bedground came racking in, but King Land sent them back, with two more to help them hold the herd. "They ain't goin' to bother us," he stated. "They want them buffalo hunters."

"You think I'm a-goin' to stand here an' look on?" Kink Lamoreaux flared.

"You ain't goin' to do anything else," King Land told him. "We ain't goin' to butt into that, you understand? What d'you think we are?"

"You mean to say—"

"I mean to say we're keepin' out of it. You think I want Crazy White Horse's whole pack on my neck. Them buffalo hunters asked for it."

There wasn't much to argue against that. If ever a Comanche was in the right, they were. But I didn't think any better of King Land for keeping out of it, because I knew it was worry over his damned cows that made him do it.

Link Lamoreaux knew it, too, and told him so to his face. "Just what are you going to do?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Land said.

Kink went for his horse. King Land let him climb aboard, then shot him out of the saddle. The slug wounded him only slightly but the fall knocked him out.

"That goes for everybody," King Land flared. "Ham, watch 'em. Don't let anybody try anything."

Ham Loder nodded. It was hard to take, but I don't say King Land was wrong. We could drive off these ten bucks, but in the end we would have to face Crazy White Horse. I knew there was one man out there who deserved a break, one of the two who had kept out of it when they could have sided Gabe Damascus and Frenchy against me. I couldn't do much for him by my lonesome, but it went against the grain not to try. What I was thinking must have showed in my face.

"I'll take your gun off you, Winthrop," Land said, "unless you give me your word you won't make a move." He told Loder to shoot me down if I tried anything. The way Ham and I got along, that would have suited him fine.

The racket out there around the buffalo wagons kept up till past dark, ungodly shrieks that made a man's hair stand on end, gunfire, blood-curdling yowls and wild, jeering laughter. I think they took Frenchy alive, because I heard him scream after the gunfire had stopped. They touched fire to the wagons, and held a big spree around the flames. Some fighting broke out among the Comanches themselves, flaring up and dying down to nothing. I saw them hoist Damascus' head on a stick and fire their guns at it.

KING LAND had sent men he trusted into what cover they could find around the edges of the camp. Edie Fontanne had gone with them. But now she came back and stood beside me, watching, white-faced, unsteady, sick with fear and dismay. "Do you think they'll come here?" she asked.

I took her hand. "If they do, you stay by me. Maybe I can do a little. I don't know."

"I'm scared to death, Matt. I can't help it."

"That's all right," I told her. "So am I, but they won't tackle us unless they go blood-crazy." I was glad she came to me. I'd thought about her a lot during the day, knowing by now that I had hit King Land the night before because of what his words implied about her. "They had good reason for going after that bunch."

"Yes, I know."

I heard a rider coming at us from the north. The horse slammed to a stop outside the circle of light. The animal was dead beat, and the rider slid off in a limp heap to the ground. It was the buffalo hunter who had pulled out when the raid started. He said he had shot one of the two Comanches who trailed him, and given the other the slip. They had had a running fight, stirrup to stirrup, but the Comanche's buck had stumbled and thrown him. That was how he had gotten away.

"I figured I better come at you from this

side," he mumbled. They seen me head out the other way and they won't be lookin' for me here."

"Climb your horse and keep on going," King Land told him. "We ain't goin' to get mixed up in this."

The man's face went white. "I'm all in," he mumbled.

"I can't help that. Climb your horse and git out of here. You buzzards asked for it."

"I didn't have nothing to do with it. I didn't touch her."

"Go tell them that. Clear out. Get him on his horse."

"Just a minute," I butted in. "He's telling the truth. He wouldn't side the other two against me when I had the ruckus with them. He kept out of it."

"Ham," Land called.

Ham Loder came running.

"Load him up," Land ordered.

"Ham, you keep your dirty boot-lickin' paws offn him," I growled. "He's stayin' here. I got a bellyful of this yellow-bellied whittle-whangin'. Hide him out if you want, but—"

King Land hit me from behind. I slammed ahead into Ham Loder and he tried to beat me off with his gun. I got him around the neck and squeezed till his eyeballs bulged. Somebody called, "Here they come," and I let him drop.

The Comanches trailed past within fifty feet of us. It didn't take them more than a minute, I reckon, but the time dragged out like an hour. Edie got behind me and put her hand on my back. I counted seven riders, blood-smeared, fierce as wild animals. One of them had Gabe Damascus' battered head resting on his knee, his hand planted over the scalped skull. A quick sound could have swung them at us like spooked cattle, but they filed past, leering and gaping and rode off into the dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwhack Pow-wow

KING LAND, like any man who figures things close and wants more than he gives, would say I owed him loyalty because I took his wages. But that's not the way it is. I owe him only my work for that. Loyalty is paid for with different coin. I would give Whitey Munn my life,

but I wouldn't give King Land a dead horse. A man who figures things close must expect to be dealt with the same way. And don't think he wasn't figuring close when he made that deal with me.

After he got shed of Crazy White Horse I'd never hear it mentioned again. Which was all right with me. I didn't intend to push it down his throat, although I wondered how, exactly, he would get out from under it. Mebbe, if I'd known, I would have cleared out, then and there. But I believe not, because, if I owed King Land nothing, I owed myself the right to see a thing through according to my own lights. That's the only boss a man ought to work for, and he ought to take the trouble to please him well. King Land could get rid of me any time he liked, but I got to live with myself right along.

By morning light we rigged the buffalo hunter up with some spare levis and a puncher's hat, and when we were through he didn't look much different than the rest of us. His name was Ap Londy. He said he had helped drive stock to the Black Hills once for the army, and knew the ropes. "I cin make a hand," he told me. "But I don't like that stinker you got for a boss."

"If we had to like him we'd all quit."

"What'd he go on the peck at me for anyway?"

I told him how things stood. "If he can get past Crazy White Horse without trouble or expense, he'll get the ants out of his pants."

"Crazy White Horse takes toll from everybody," Londy said. "That's standard expense hereabouts. Your boss hadn't ought to try to figure it any other way."

Kink Lamoreaux was in better shape than I expected him to be, and he made out he felt better than he did because he didn't want King Land to get any satisfaction out of what he had done. I didn't go myself, but some of the boys took time to see what had happened to the buffalo hunters. What he saw made Sam Kregal sick to his stomach. Whitey said the raiders had sure done a job. That was all he said, and that was all I cared to hear. I did considerable thinking about what had happened between Edie Fontanne and me, and made up my mind I couldn't be too sure that what had been said, and the way

we had been drawn together when things looked so bad was something she would want to be reminded of when the going was easy. I figured I ought to let her decide whether it was something I could hold onto the way I wanted to do. Crazy White Horse showed up again at mid-day with his buzzard and his bucks set for a pow-wow.

King Land sent me off to fetch Kim, the wrangler, when he saw them. I don't know where Kim had been during the night when all the uproar was going on. I hadn't set eyes on him. But when I saw him now he looked as if he hadn't gotten much sleep. Riding back to the big habla with Crazy White Horse he told me what was troubling him.

"After the ruckus died down last night I heard some talk, Matt, some of the damndest talk. I got to tell you."

"Won't it keep? We're in a hurry."

"It won't keep, because after this habla you're living on borrowed time. It's like that."

"What the hell you mean?"

"King Land and Ham Loder are goin' to bushwhack you."

"You're crazy, Kim."

"I heard 'em. They were off by themselves in the dark, an' I lit down behind some brush. The boss said you pushed him into some kind of a deal with the herd, and the only way to git out of it was to croak you. They'd been talkin' before I heard 'em, so I don't know what was said before that, but what I heard I'm tellin' you."

"What did he tell Ham to do?"

Kim tried to gather it together. "It ain't what you hear. It's what you guess at in between. In a deal like that nobody says 'Well, now, come next Tuesday at ten o'clock sharp you take your little old gun and shoot him between the fifth and sixth rib.' It don't go like that. It's just a word here and a word there, and the real hell you gotta put in for yourself. He left it up to Ham mostly, any time after you get through with this palaver with Crazy White Horse."

"At any rate," I told him, "I don't see how you could've dreamed that up about me cuttin' myself in on the herd."

"Did you do that, Matt?"

"You wait and see. You've got to be

in on any talk that goes on with Crazy White Horse."

KING LAND was waiting for us. The crew made a half-circle behind him and followed us to the palaver. King Land held up his hand when he wanted them to stop, far enough off so they wouldn't be able to hear what was said. Crazy White Horse had about the same number in his party as he had the night he first paid us a visit. I don't know whether the bucks who had jumped the buffalo hunters were with him or not, but the one on the paint horse—the one Kim had said was Tolani's husband—was wearing the vest Gabe Damascus had worn when I first saw him. Crazy White Horse spoke to him for some time while we waited, and Kim shook his head to let us know he couldn't catch the drift of their talk.

The first thing the old Comanche chief said to us was: "Tolani es muerta!"

"The girl's dead," Kim repeated, although I caught it direct, and King Land did, too. "The old buzzard's goin' to try to work on our sympathy," he remarked.

I'll never know, but I got a hunch they killed her, on account of shame. I don't know enough about them to be sure, but they're proud, and they would be apt to do something like that. On the other hand, she was sick when I found her.

It was the only thing he said about her, as if he wanted us to keep it in mind while he went on with this other business. He made it quite long-winded, saying this was the Indian Nations, and if that were so, we were there only by their leave. He said the Choctaws, straddling the Ozark Trail to the east, charged toll to the tune of ten cents or more a head of beef by sanction of the Great White Father. Would anyone, he asked, say that the Choctaws were better than Comanches?

Not, I thought, in present company.

Would a man pay toll to a Choctaw, and not to a Comanche? The old codger had his facts straight, and it gave him a talking point, if talking would do the trick. If not, he had other points.

"The Ozark Trail goes through reservation ground," King Land growled. "This one don't. The old buzzard knows that, damn his ornery hide!"

Kim made it all civil-spoken, regardless.

Then, when Crazy White Horse went on again, Kim's eyes began to pop, and he got nervous.

"What now?" Land snapped.

Kim answered grudgingly. "He'll let toll go, he says, but Tolani is dead, and High Bird, that's the one next to him, his grandson, seen Edie the other night, and he wants her. That's what he says. Judas!"

"Oh!" King Land sucked in his breath and looked around, first at the crew, then at me, and finally back at Kim.

The buzzard was thinking it over, wondering if he could get away with something like that with the rest of us looking on, grabbing at possible ways that wouldn't make him out too much of a skunk if he tried it. But before he got a word to Kim I spoke up.

"Tell White Horse she is bespoken to me," I told Kim. "What they say to that will show where I stand with them, once and for all. Put it in a nice way. If it won't work, we're sunk."

After Kim had spoken, Crazy White Horse and High Bird made more talk between them. I knew what I had said put quite a strain on my standing, I could hear that much. Crazy White Horse had a habit of stroking the wing of his buzzard when he talked, pulling the wing out full-length, and letting his hand slide along the dusty feathers. He did it all the while they talked, and it almost drove me nuts before they finished. Finally he spoke to me. I didn't know what he said, but Kim eased up and said it was settled, and I started breathing again.

Then we got back to toll again. If he couldn't have the girl, he wanted wohaw. And how. He gave us a long lingo on the subject.

"Did you tell Kim what to say?" King Land asked me.

I shook my head. "You tell him yourself. You told me to keep my mouth shut."

KING LAND explained about our deal. "Matt throwed in with me when this thing came up, and you got to explain it to that grabby buzzard. We own this herd together, Matt and me, fifty-fifty, and if they was to take toll they would be taking it from him just as much as me. Tell him he would be taking toll from his own

blood brother, if that's what they are. Tell him everybody knows that would be a dirty, lowdown trick. Give it to him good. Make him feel like a stinker for ever saying a word about it, but don't get him mad."

Before Kim could start off, I put in my say. "You heard Land say we're partners, Kim. Now listen to me. You cin tell Crazy White Horse he wouldn't want toll from me, because it ain't fit and seemly. But you can tell him, too, that it would be a great pleasure for me to cut out a hundred head, and give them to him as a token of our friendship and brotherhood. Put that real nice. Flower it up."

Kim grinned suddenly and went to work.

King Land swore and turned on me. "You think you're purty damned smart, don't you?" he growled. His face was beet red.

"Only reasonable," I answered. "It's out of my share, I want it understood, so it hadn't ought to bother you any. Be sure and remind me about it when we get to Dodge and divide up the cash."

He couldn't block it without losing his scalp. I had the whip hand and, after what Kim had told me about King Land's plans, it didn't bother me any to use it. At that, he was getting off easy. If he had had to do the dickering it would have cost him twice as much, that's sure. He had put the whip in my hand himself, and I didn't mind using it on him. I'd give it to him, hard.

Kim spread it out for the Comanche chief to look at, and he must have made a good job of it, because it worked. As soon as I heard the news I turned to King Land.

"You better get at the chores fast before he changes his fool mind," I told him.

He didn't give me an answer, but he turned on Kim and told him to keep his mouth shut about our deal or he'd skin him alive. "I don't want to be made out a fool before my whole crew," he snarled.

"Our crew," I reminded him, and watched him flare off to the silently waiting men.

Now, I told myself, all I got to do is look out for a bushwhack bullet. But I'm just a damn' fool in a lot of ways.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pop-off

HAM LODER, who was actually straw-boss for the KL Slash although King Land didn't give him the title because it would have cost him more, sometimes wore a patch over one eye, claiming it got untracked somehow, and he could see better by using only one. He made the patches out of stray pieces of leather tied to a string. I watched him slicing one out in camp that night, and wondered how long I would have to wait before he made a move against me, or whether it wouldn't be a good idea to badger him into a showdown, then and there, and get it over with.

Edie Fontanne had found out, from King Land's sulky sputtering, what I had told Crazy White Horse about being bespoken to her, and I wondered whether I ought to tell her why it was necessary to say what I had, or whether to let it stand the way it was, and leave it up to her to say if she liked it or not. Barley Bill Anders had just found out who was doing our cooking, and it put him back on his feet in no time. He didn't hold with women cooks, and came out of the hoodlum in an uproar, and ordered her away from the chuck-wagon.

"Why don't you go off and die somewhere?" Sam Kregal told him. "I'm not goin' back on the crumb wagon."

"Why, no, I am," Barley Bill stated. "S'pose you git another seizure?" Sam demanded.

"That's bettern havin' the flock of you croak from women's cookin'," Barley Bill snapped. "I could put my two feet in the grave an' still cook bettern any female ever lived."

"In my book that's a lie," Sam snapped back, "an' I just seen it proved since Edie taken over. She's bettern you are from here to Sunday."

King Land let the jabber go over him. He was in a fury at what had happened, but he probably figured he couldn't come out in the open with it, and sputter too much, or he might get tied in with the chore he had given Ham Loder to do. I talked with Whitey a little, just chewin' the fat about nothing at all. I didn't see any call to pull him into this thing if I

could handle it myself. At eight o'clock he and Ham Loder went out to the bed ground to ride the first night trick.

King Land smouldered like a wet haystack a while longer, and finally had some talk with Barley Bill. I didn't know what it was about, and didn't care, until he walked over to Edie and I heard him say he didn't see how he could keep her around any longer, seeing as how Barley Bill was back on the job, and he would appreciate it if she pulled out in the morning. He told her she could probably find Duke Lounds' outfit. Edie shrugged a little and let it go without a word.

I got to my feet. "You sure work hard at bein' a skunk," I flared. "I never saw the beat. Hell, you must git paid for it."

"Never mind, Matt," Edie put in "It's all right. I'll make out."

"You don't know what you're sayin'," I went on. "There's every kind of a hellion floatin' around these parts."

"I'm not staying where I'm not welcome," she said.

"You're not going. If you go, I go, too."

Everybody who heard it joined in on that, but Land faced the uproar and didn't budge. I didn't think of it then, but I expect he knew exactly what I would do, and had told Edie to clear out for that very reason. At any rate, when I thought it over later, I figured I had played right into his hands. I got them quieted down, and asked him if he was going to stand on what he said.

"I always do," he threw back.

"You better remember that," I said, and turned to Edie. "We might as well pull out right now."

"That'll be just dandy," King Land snapped.

I HAD my own horse, and Edie rode the Bar X Y animal she was riding when I first saw her. We took grub and water packs, and bed rolls, and when we were ready to go I told King Land we'd see him in Dodge.

"Don't bother," he said.

"It won't be any bother—to me," I answered. "Where will you be paying off?"

"It wouldn't interest you," he snapped, and walked off.

That statement set me to wondering,

wondering if what had just happened was a put-up job, a part of the bushwhack plans he and Ham Loder had made. I said what I did because I thought he'd back down about kicking Edie out. If I pulled out there wouldn't be anybody for Ham Loder to go to work on. But now I began to figure maybe this was part of the plan, that he knew I would pull out with her, and that he let me go on that account, that he had it fixed with Ham Loder to trail us and watch his chances to do his bushwhack chores.

We rode past the bed-ground and stopped to tell Whitey what had happened. It was on the tip of his tongue to say he'd go along, but he held it back, probably figuring I might not want him, seeing I had such good company. I let it stand like that, and asked where Ham Loder was.

He pointed off at the bushes. "Gettin' some shuteye, as usual, I expect," he said. "I never rode a trick with that buzzard yet but he didn't sleep it through. In fact, he told me this time that was what he was goin' to do."

Whitey was sorry to see us go, but I told him we'd see him in Dodge City in a few weeks, and rode on.

Kim had some horses belled, and we heard the sound a short ways off. We rode around the remuda, looking for him. The horses were in a low dip where the grass was good. I heard several run off, bells going, when we came too close, but I didn't see Kim. I had a notion we might stay there with him until morning, and sort of get used to the idea of traveling together. It meant a lot of things, and I didn't know how she would take to them. Damned if I wasn't a little shy of the notion, myself. I thought maybe it ought to be mentioned right off, and finally dug up the nerve to do it.

"You know," I said, "we got to get used to this, sooner or later, and it might be a good idea to get it out in the open, and take a look at it. I expect, for about three weeks now, we'll see quite a bit of each other."

"I expect so," she agreed.

Kim wasn't to be found, and we almost gave it up. Then I saw a rider skylighted along the edge of the bowl, and a second later, we heard a shot. It wasn't far off.

I saw the ragged gunflame slash through the dark, and heard the sharp, agonized yelp that went up afterward. A riderless horse bolted away. The tinkle of the bells stopped a second, then started up louder than ever as the remuda moved off.

Edie and I headed up the dip. A rider slanted toward us, then quartered away, and rode into some brush where he pulled up.

"Hey, Kim!" I called.

He didn't answer. But his gun roared again and the bullet hit the horn of my saddle. It was that close, although I didn't know it till later. He fired a second time, but we made it behind some cover without trouble. Although I couldn't see him. I had a good fix on him, and tried a shot. It spooked his horse and brought him out into the open, and I saw who it was. Ham Loder. He wasn't off snitching some snooze, like Whitey said, although it would make a good out for him if he needed it.

ALL AT once I realized what was going on. He was out gunning for Kim, because Kim had heard about the deal between King Land and me when we were parleying with Crazy White Horse. He had heard it from King Land himself, and because he knew about it, King Land and Ham Loder had made their bushwhack plans. If they killed Kim, I couldn't make the deal stick, if I wanted to. It would only be my word against King Land's, and it wasn't enough. Kim had overheard their talk, but not enough of it to know that they were talking about him, not me. And it wasn't hard to guess who had let out that hurt cry right after we heard the shot.

Ham Loder had trouble with his horse, and I rode in on him before he could pull it down, and hold it there. He fired twice, but both shots went wild. They weren't even close. "Damn you, Winthrop," he snarled. "I got the wrangler, and I'll get you."

"You better do it fast, Ham. I'm comin' at you."

There wasn't much distance left between us when one of my shots gave him a hard jolt, and put his horse on its hind legs again. He tried another shot when his horse was up there, clawing, and then I

put another into him, and horse and rider went over backward. Ham didn't get out from under, but it didn't matter, because he had a bullet hole square between the eyes.

Eddie and I found Kim where we'd heard the first shot. He wasn't dead. He opened his eyes when we bent over him.

"Murderation!" he muttered in a dazed voice, and then his eyes went shut on him again. It was the last thing he said for a long time to come.

KING LAND paid off the crew at a corner table in the Fandango on Whiskey Row three weeks to a day after Eddie and I left the drive. Eddie, Kim and I had beat him to Dodge by three days. I don't know whether he expected me to show up. He didn't see me walk into the place. The table in front of him was covered with currency and cash, set out in neat piles. The crew stood around in a tight circle, waiting for their wages. King Land, taking his time, counted off each man's share, and counted it again, as if he hated, at the very last, to part with the small dribble. He handed it over as if what he was parting with was more than what he kept.

I think I understood him better when I saw him there with that cash in front of him than I ever had before. I had tried to tell Eddie what he was, but didn't make much headway. I said he was a stinker, but it didn't say what I meant. I said he was a piker, but it didn't cover the ground. Now I saw him with that cash in front of him, and I saw he was in a church worshipping his God. This was what he had bull-whipped Kenny Metz for. This was why he had tried to bush-whack Kim, why he had made Ham Loder into a white-livered, crawling snake, to do his dirty bidding, and why he had given thought to the outrageous proposition Crazy White Horse had made to him about Eddie in lieu of toll. It made me a little sick to my stomach to see the man and his God. It made them both pretty small.

Whitey Munn saw me, and gave me a wink, but didn't let on to anyone else. He told me later King Land almost threw a fit when they found Ham Loder smashed to the ground with a bullet in his head, and he had gone on a three-day prowling

to find Kim, claiming the wrangler had killed his best man. And when he came back empty-handed, sulky and snarling, he let it be known all around he meant to shoot Kim on sight. I expected that would be his plan, and told Kim, who was back on his feet, and mad as a hornet, to keep out of sight until I had settled with him.

King Land had his back to me, and I stayed at the bar until he was finished paying off the crew. He made several mistakes in his count, always in his own favor, and when a man made a yell about it, he'd take back what he had handed over, and count and recount until finally he'd add what was missing, and hand it back, trying to make out all the while that the man who had complained was pretty small, quibbling over pennies and dimes. So the payoff took considerable time, but when it was finished I walked to the table.

He didn't look surprised, and he didn't stop packing away his cash. But his face got a splotched look, as if there were an explosion brewing that had to get out somewhere. I could see him bracing himself to deny that we had made any kind of a deal. That was what he was getting set to say. He must have had more than fifty thousand dollars there on the table, and I could say half of it was mine, and make it stick, if I trotted Kim out and let him talk. But all I said was that I would take my wages.

I reckon he figured then and there I couldn't make the bigger play, that I didn't have anything to back it up, except my word against his, and that I realized it wasn't enough. The crew had lined up at the bar, some of them watching us in the mirror, some of them with their heads cocked so they could see us direct. They let their drinks stand. Their feet made cat-footed sounds along the rail. Their voices stayed down, low and careful. They weren't ready to cut loose until they saw the finish of the payoff, whether it was to be in lead or cash.

"Your wages?" King Land snapped finally. "I don't owe you no wages. You ran off."

"I'll take what I had coming till that time."

"I don't operate that-away," he said, stacking it away. He must have thought he had me on the run sure.

"Figure it up," I told him, "or I'll take it outa your hide."

HHE KNUCKLED under. Whitey put his hands together and shook them at me, grinning. King Land seemed to know the right amount.

He got it counted out, and put it in a neat heap, with a few pieces of silver on top of it, but he didn't hand it over. Instead, he shoved it across the table, flipping it with the back of his fingers so it went clear over the edge and scattered on the floor.

"There it is," he snarled. "Pick it up and go buy that trollop you got on the string a meal."

The men along the bar froze. All the small sounds in a place like that died away. One small coin kept on rolling, and finally hit the wall with a thin clink, and then there wasn't another sound until I spoke.

"I gave you a beating back on the trail for a remark like that," I told him. "Then it was just because I liked her. Now, she's my wife. . . ."

His was a fast move, but it couldn't be as fast as if the gun had been in his holster. He had to pick it off the table, then tilt it to get it solidly in his fist. He got as far as any man could under the circumstances, with a shot that went into the table be-

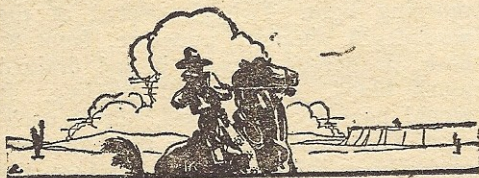
cause he hurried it too hard, a shot that went into the table, and put splinters in my ribs, and screamed away into the wall.

My gun wasn't two feet from King Land when it went off, and the bullet sent him flailing back clear to the bar. He fired again, cursing foully when I tipped the table, and sent the cash rippling across the floor. The bar-tender wrung his hands when his mirror went out. I did that with a poor shot, but my third hit King Land again, and threw his head back flat against the bar, and then he went down like a rope sliding off a ledge.

The silence lasted far past the thump he made when he hit the floor. It lasted until I turned and faced the crew with a question, not for Whitey, or Sam Kregal, or Kenny Metz, or any of them I knew were sound. But I figured there might be one or two of Ham Loder's stripe amongst 'em, and I asked if anyone had any objections to what they had seen, or to the way I had played my hand. No one did, and I holstered my gun.

The barkeep took a slice of that cash on the floor for his mirror. The rest of it, at least what I could claim for myself, was a question in my mind all the way back to Texas. I wasn't sure I could handle that kind of cash. Or whether it would handle me, like it had King Land. I wanted to be my own man. Or Edie's.

THE END



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By TOM W. BLACKBURN



Driscoll could see a
bunched party on horse-
back

FALSE dawn lasted for a half hour, a curious time in which even a trained eye could not tell shadow from substance. The dying chill night wind still played on the slopes, stirring the fine dust which lay over everything—living and dead—in the empty sink. Then, with the last of the wind, the sun seemed to explode all over the eastern horizon.

Captain Johnny Driscoll crawled in the first sunlight across the pothole from which he had watched the smoking embers

of the broken wagons below to the sand nest he had scraped out for the injured man. Driscoll's charge looked worse in the morning light. Driscoll peered at the wound. A shoulder puncture, front to back, dangerous because it had drained much blood. It was still bleeding. It would have to be dressed, but it could wait. Down somewhere on the sink floor, probably a little northward, where the river itself had not quite lost itself in the sand and there was passable water, other

He lay in that lofty, sun-lashed pothole while the mounted circle of searching Death below ever tightened and ascended. . . . And Johnny Driscoll knew he could save his hide—if he had guts enough to sign the execution warrants for a thousand trusting pioneers!

men watched the smoke climbing above the gutted wagons. It was likely, too, that they watched the slope on which Driscoll crouched. They were desperate men.

Driscoll touched dry lips with his tongue and stared out over the desert where the Humboldt River vanished. West lay the snow-tipped summits of the Sierras. Beyond was California, mecca of a thousand wagons this past season, perhaps ten thousand this year. Wagons carrying men who took with them nothing but their hopes and a determination to find a new beginning, but also wagons carrying the wealth of tradesmen, dealers and profiteers, bent on making a fortune at retail beyond the Sierras. Tons of goods in high demand across the mountains. Strongboxes of cash, hoarded for California investment. Plunder worth a huge fortune if it could be taken. Driscoll wet his lips again.

One man, with the nation's authority at his back—if an Army commission was evidence of such authority—was detailed to guarantee the safety of parties whose presence he could not even be aware of across thirty thousand square miles of desert. In his first week in the Humboldt, while on patrol along the western fringe near the last outward swing of the Truckee River from the Sierras, a string of freight wagons had been driven over an eighty-foot bluff out beyond Twin Peaks, far to the east, and their contents looted of everything of value. When he swung that way to investigate, the raiders struck a six-wagon string on the Truckee, again leaving no survivors. And long before Driscoll doubled back, the Humboldt's restless winds had covered all tracks.

LAST night had been different. Last night he'd had a little luck. He'd sighted the supper fires of this string on the flats and headed toward them, meaning to follow their flank for the balance of their crossing, using them for a decoy. But the raiders had reached the party first. The red pinpoints of the supper fires blossomed suddenly into beacons as wagon hoods were torched. And for the last mile he rode toward desultory gunfire which indicated the systematic extinction of a stubborn small party by a much larger force.

He realized now that it must have been virtually all over when he loped in on a dying horse. There could have been few wagon men, even then. But after his endless riding, after his one-man battle with the emptiness of the sink, he had made his charge with the recklessness of a man with a cavalry company behind him. He had nailed a raider with his carbine. He had fired at two others without knowing he had hit them. Then return fire had grown too hot. Starting a retreat, he saw two of the raiders dragging the limp body of a third man from a wagon. The third man was obviously hurt, but still struggling. A survivor. And Driscoll needed a survivor. A man who could remember what he had seen, who could identify faces.

His horse was already staggering. It was foolhardy. But Driscoll had his belly full of riding pointlessly. Veering his horse, he charged, shouting hoarsely. He killed the two men instantaneously—with two shots.

Bending swiftly, Driscoll lifted the injured wagoner and dumped him over the seat of his saddle. Swinging up behind, he hammered the heaving animal into a lope.

A hundred yards—two hundred—he wasn't sure, except that he was beyond the firelight. Shouting, angry pursuit was behind him. Slipping from the saddle and dragging the injured man with him, he sent the horse on. With the man cradled across his lap, he bunched himself under a low clump of brush. The raiders swept by. When they were gone he shouldered his human burden and ran heavily up a hardpan outcropping toward rising ground above the gutted campsite.

Twice the pursuit doubled back toward him, but in the darkness a motionless man could screen himself well. Finally he reached the summit of the low pressure ridge, finding it pot-holed and wind-scarred into as good a shelter as any a man could expect on the Humboldt. He had crouched here, waiting for day, knowing the raiders would not pull out until they were certain that the man he had rescued would not talk.

THERE was no movement out on the sink. Driscoll wondered if the raiders would have a glass and cursed himself im-

mediately for his stupidity. These men knew how to work this country. They'd have a glass, a good one. Only a disbursing officer—like Driscoll's superior—who did not know the sink would expect a man to operate in this immensity without the best money could buy.

The third time Driscoll touched his lips with his tongue, he knew what it was. This was the Humboldt Sink. This was the parched mouth of hell. It was a long way to where the last trace of the river from the north vanished into the sands. And the sun could be hot on these low hills. Thirst was a thing to think about—doubly, since he had a man on his hands who must also live.

Driscoll locked his tongue behind his teeth with an effort and turned to the wounded man. He thought a rifle bullet had made the hole in him. A rifle of a similar caliber to the issue piece he had carried. The piece he had dropped in the brush down at the foot of the ridge when he quit the horse with his man on his shoulder. And he saw something else besides the wound. The raiders must have been sure the wounded man was finished. Or they had been careless. A belt was about his thighs. A capped revolver hung in a holster from it.

Driscoll examined the weapon and the powder flask and shot-pouch. Both were well loaded. It made him feel better. Two guns were better than one, even if the same hand held them in rotation. If the raiders were not too stubborn, or his own luck too bad, or the sun too hot, Driscoll had a hunch he would get this witness to the army post. And with proof this man could give of the scope of raider operations even a disbursing officer who did not know the country would see this was a job for more than one man. A saddle company, well mounted and carrying light gear, could clean out the sink in a hurry.

Driscoll propped the man up and slid the injured shoulder from its stiffened shirt. He was careful not to damage the garment. Its wearer would presently have to lie under the sun. A sun which would blister white flesh like this in a quarter of an hour.

The injured man had apparently spent days in his clothes. There wasn't a piece fit for bandaging. And Johnny's own gear

was stained and sweat-streaked. There was a bunch of sawgrass down the slope. Johnny could see it plainly. And a shallow scar ran down the face of the ridge toward it. Working slowly, face down, and crawling, he moved down this. It was astonishing how far across the reach of the sink the movement of something lighter in color than the country was visible.

The sun was working well up into the morning quadrant when Driscoll wriggled back into the sandy pocket. The injured man lay as he had left him. Separating the sawgrass strands he had thrust into his shirt, he plaited them into a pair of tightly woven mats. Raising the unconscious man again, Driscoll placed one of these over each of the two perforations of the wound. He took off his own shirt and undershirt, tore the latter into strips and put the shirt back on. He wrapped a binding and fashioned a harness to hold it and the sawgrass mats.

An Army medic would likely have sworn in fluent protest, but Driscoll was satisfied. There was no body contamination on the sawgrass. The coarse, smooth-sided green blades had no absorption, but the plaiting permitted a wound to breathe and there was something in the juice of the grass which tended to harden blood. Driscoll had seen an Indian seal a six-inch lance wound in his thigh with a single blade plastered to the gash by adhesion of the blood, alone. And the poverty of life in the Humboldt contributed to an injured man's chances for life in one respect. This sun-seared air was cleaner than the atmosphere of the most rigorously sterilized hospital among all of the posts of the Army of the West.

IF HE had even the half canteen of water he had left on the saddle of his abandoned horse, Driscoll thought he could pull his man through. The lean features were not as pinched as they had been. Perhaps the damage had been shock. Shock faded swiftly when it did begin to go. And that was important. It meant that they could begin to move that much sooner. And movement at the earliest moment was imperative. The raiders, having retreated to water in the late hours of the night, were returning to renew their

search for the two men who had escaped them. It was inevitable they would eventually reach the ridgetop pothole in which Driscoll and his companion lay.

Lying behind the rim of the pothole with his eyes at the level of its lip, Driscoll could see them—a bunched party on horseback, riding steadily south. In twenty minutes he could distinguish saddle animals from pack horses. The efficiency of the party was self-evident. A portion rode flank in a group, plainly the mobile portion, able at any moment to cut away from the pack string and those who tended it. The pack string absorbed the balance of the force, each man attending three animals. Each trio apparently was linked together so that the possibility of bolting animals in the event of an emergency did not exist.

Driscoll's brows knit with concentration. The overland wagons had thrust a huge load upon the slender thread of posts with which the Army of the West blanketed this country. The military had not enough personnel of its own, and many mountain men had ridden calf-to-calf with officers competent enough among their own, but lost beyond the mountains. Civilian scouts. Some had been of great value to the service and to the wagons they were to protect. But there were others. The blacklist of discharged civilian scouts on the desk of every post commander had grown to some length before changing weather had closed the new trail for the winter just past.

Driscoll remembered one name in particular, since the man's treachery had cost him a brother officer. That mountain trader and opportunist had led a quartermaster's train into an Indian ambush north of Bear Valley because the Indians had made a fat bid in furs for the Army supplies in the train. The man had been tried in absentia, since there had been only two survivors in the train, and the man himself had vanished. Every trooper who rode the square grass of the high country was looking for him.

The word which had stuck in Driscoll's mind meant something, now. Wagon trains which had penetrated as far as the Humboldt were nearly to California—the long experience of their crossing behind them. They were not loose unions of

green hands. These men were veterans.

The raiders attacking these veterans had to be captained by a man who understood saddle warfare. And a man who rode guide and scout for the quartermaster's corps would learn such things. If he was shrewd, he would remember them. And he would apply them to his own use if opportunity arose, thus creating a force possibly as effective as the cavalry units he might one day have to face.

Driscoll nodded to himself. It was not the word military which had stuck in his mind but the fact that the pack train and its flanking force on the flats below was moving with a precision and guardedness to be found nowhere except in the operations of a supply train from the quartermaster's corps.

He slid back into the pothole. He believed he knew the name of the man who captained the devilry he had been sent single-handed into the Humboldt to stop. And proof of his hunch would not be too difficult. When the wounded man behind him roused sufficiently, he would know. An officer gave commands. The leader of the raiders would have to give commands, also. And the lone, wounded fugitive from the shattered wagons at the foot of the ridge would certainly have heard him when he did. The proof was in this. Mack Hayden had a split palate. His speech impairment was unmistakable. The all-post bulletins from headquarters had made much of this point.

The sun had crept under the brim of the hat slanted across the wounded man's face. Driscoll adjusted this. Then, because he knew how fast a quartermaster's corps train would travel and therefore how fast the party on the sink would travel, he stretched himself on the sand of the pothole for a twenty-minute nap.

AS HE slept, Driscoll again lived through his charge among the burning wagons below, the night before. He saw what he had not seen during the ride, itself—that his sudden appearance had taxed the military experience of the leader of the raiders—or that the discipline the man had built up had momentarily broken. Otherwise he would never have fired even a single shot from his rifle, let alone escape with a hostage.

He saw, too, a full picture of the ruthlessness of Mack Hayden and his men. Well organized, their risk was small. The contents of half a dozen trains, delivered to California markets which would ask no questions, would set them all up with good stakes. The one thing necessary was to be certain no witnesses survived a raid.

Driscoll roused short of half an hour with the knowledge that the search already begun for himself and his companion would be unhurried and certain of eventual success. He lay motionless, awake behind his closed lids, for a long moment locked in a struggle with himself. The struggle involved in the knowledge that he alone, by working carefully westward on the far side of the ridge throughout the rest of the day and making a long run on foot through the night, could escape the party now seeking him out. He could trade his wounded companion's life for his own. And with this was the hard, military logic that he was the more valuable man. It cost a small fortune to train an officer. A wagon man, as an individual, was of little account.

The counter-argument was stronger, as he had known it would be, and the struggle within him ceased. He had been detailed to discover, identify and break up the parties molesting wagon strings in the Humboldt Sink area—if any existed. A man rode out his detail to the best of his ability, but not by retreating when an objective was within reach.

Driscoll sat up and rolled elbows-down over beside his companion. The man's eyes were open. His breathing was steady. He was fully conscious.

"Captain Driscoll, Army," he said bluntly. "Picked you out of the mess at your wagons last night and brought you here. Been waiting for you to come around. We've got a little trouble ahead of us, I'm afraid. The devils who fired your tops have been looking for the two of us since about one o'clock this morning. We've got to move. The sooner you feel you can try it. . . ."

The man continued to look at him with unblinking eyes. He made no answer. Driscoll spoke a little more sharply.

"I dressed the hole in you the best I could. Got a tight binding on it. I think you can make it, if we go slow. We're

damn well going to have to try—"

The man's gaze did not change. There was nothing in the eyes. They could not be read. A man could not tell if there was comprehension behind them or not. He thought they might be habitually unreadable—so schooled. Driscoll swore softly and shifted position. The eyes followed him, betraying at least a consciousness of movement. Johnny raised a little and glanced out over the rim of the pothole. The party which had come back from the river had separated into its two components, now.

Those with the pack animals were already at work on piles of supplies heaped among the wreckage of wagons below. The flank party, in light saddles, had already discovered the tongue of hardpan which had concealed Driscoll's tracks when he began his climb up this ridge. They were deployed on either side of it, a line of men abreast, a hundred yards or more in reach, cutting methodically through the scrubby brush. He turned his head and saw his companion was looking fixedly at the gun Johnny had removed from him and which was lying on the opposite lip of the pothole.

Driscoll wormed over to this and belted it on above his own so that the gun hung in reverse on his left thigh.

"We've got to move," he said again.

HIS companion said nothing still, the opaque eyes resting steadily on Johnny. There was no flush in his face, no heaviness in his eyelids. He was not fevered, not delirious. Conscious, all right, but dazed. Driscoll had seen something similar at Fort Laramie. A trapper had taken an arrow and been scalped, only to climb to his feet when the Indians were gone and come riding in across two days of country to the Army post. Shock, again. There was only one trouble. The hole in this man's body didn't amount to a hell of a lot.

Driscoll beckoned to him and crawled back to the lip of the pothole. The man raised himself a little stiffly. When he reached the lip, Johnny nodded below. The pack detachment in the party below was still methodically at work on its looting. The balance was working onto the slope of the ridge.

"Hunting us," Driscoll said. "They'll be up here by mid-afternoon. We've got to be gone by then."

The man looked below. His eyes swung to Driscoll. A grin parted his lips. His eyes brightened. Suddenly, without warning, he lurched unsteadily to his feet, exposing the upper half of his body. And Driscoll saw with horror that he was about to cry out. There is no limit to the speed with which a man can move. Driscoll did not know how he dragged his gun from under him. The chop he made with its heavy barrel against the standing man's near shin was not premeditated. The steel made dull sound against bone. The man doubled and came down hard on the sand. And as he came down, Driscoll flung himself on him. The fellow fought frantically for a moment. One hand clutched the extra gun on Driscoll's thigh, but Johnny rolled on this, jammed an elbow into his face with a sharpness which half stunned the man, and clamped his hand across the hinges of the man's jaw, making outcry impossible.

They lay without moving, then, both breathing hard. Johnny brought his gun up and aimed it at the man.

"One sound," he said, "one sound and a gunshot won't make any difference. One sound out of you and I'll blow the eyes out of your head. Understand?"

The man's eyes flickered from the gun to Driscoll's face and back again. Tension ran out of his body. Driscoll wormed away, keeping the gun slanted at the man's face, and looked cautiously down the slope. The searchers had not seen the brief appearance of the upper half of a man's body on the crest of the ridge. Gesturing at the far lip of the pothole, Driscoll spoke grimly.

"We've got a long way to go and we've got to go slow. Start moving, mister—!"

The man started to move, crawling out the far side of the pothole. Driscoll followed closely, making the gun in his hand a constant threat. There was something savage in this crowding of an injured man not in full possession of his faculties which went against Driscoll's grain. But he had to get him into the temporary cavalry headquarters at the foot of Bear Valley in shape to talk. And by whatever means necessary.

It was a tortuous crawl. The man ahead suffered from his wound and from the merciless heat of the sun. He lingered in each patch of shade, glancing furtively, angrily back. Johnny's gun was always ready. In the first quarter of a mile the man looked often back toward the crest of the ridge. Driscoll did not waste any effort doing that. The methodical searchers on the far slope would be two hours or more in reaching the crest. There was no use looking for them until then. The one necessary precaution was to keep low and move slowly, in an irregular pattern, so that if a lookout with a glass was stationed at one flank or the other of the ridge they were quitting, chances of being seen would be at a minimum.

AN HOUR passed. Half of another. Driscoll's tongue felt thick. A man on his belly breathed a great deal of the dry dust under him. And a man prone on the ground absorbed a punishing amount of heat from the rocks and sand over which he worked himself. The man ahead, pausing more and more often to glance back at Driscoll's gun and the ridge slowly receding behind them, was beginning to leave a faint trail of blood again. Driscoll swore softly. His objective in the long crawl was a shallow coulee, well brushed, evidently the course of a winter creek. He thought that when he reached this, they could move upright in its shelter and that, if necessary, he could carry his companion. But it was dangerous to do so before. If the wagoner could hold up a little longer. . . .

However, the fellow came up suddenly on the end of his string. Wildness brightened his eyes. He twisted half around. And for the first time since he roused, he spoke—a flat, whanging rush of desperate sound.

"You can't do it, you damned fool!" he shouted hoarsely. "You can't do it! They'll track us. They'll find us. I'm through crawling my guts out on these rocks!"

He eased, then suddenly flung himself. Savage fury was in him. A wild strength which made use of even his wounded shoulder. He stabbed clawing fingers at Driscoll's face. He hooked the gun, forcing

it aside, seeming suddenly to realize that Driscoll could not risk a shot here after increasing their chance of escape with their long crawl. He reached repeatedly, in the twisting, thrashing handful of seconds in which they struggled, for his own gun, hanging at Driscoll's left side. A cat with its tail on fire could have been no more frantic. Driscoll slid his thumb under the hammer of the drawn gun, so that it could not be fired.

Driscoll brought his knees up in swift succession, dealing crushing blows to the man's diaphragm. Then, freeing his left hand, he fired its hard fist downward against the line of the man's jaw in two explosive, jarring blows.

The man lay with his mouth open, his tongue in the sand, breathing heavily. Driscoll rolled aside, rose to his knees and tossed the two guns, one after the other, off into the brush. He followed these with his service knife, the two belts, with the powder flasks and shot-pouches attached to them. This man might give him trouble again, when he roused. But if there were no weapons over which to struggle, it would not be serious trouble.

Bending, Driscoll hoisted the inert form to his shoulder. He did not look back at the ridge top. His eyes were on the coulee ahead. He started forward at a swinging half-trot. He could not make great time. He would have to stop for rest often, perhaps to dig for water with only a hope to drive him. He might chew sawgrass, lacerating mouth and lips for the taste in the fibrous stuff. But he could hide a limp man, he could hide himself, and it was not an impossible distance to the foot of Bear Valley. A day—a day and a half—even at a slow pace afoot.

When his companion roused, he might be rational enough to face facts. If he was not, he could be beaten into quietness again. And in three days or four, a full cavalry company out of the Bear Valley headquarters would be on the vast expanse of the Humboldt, riding hard and fast. They would cut for a trail from the burned wagons over the ridge. But if that had been erased by the shifting winds of the sink, they would still know where they were going.

Johnny Driscoll could hide himself on

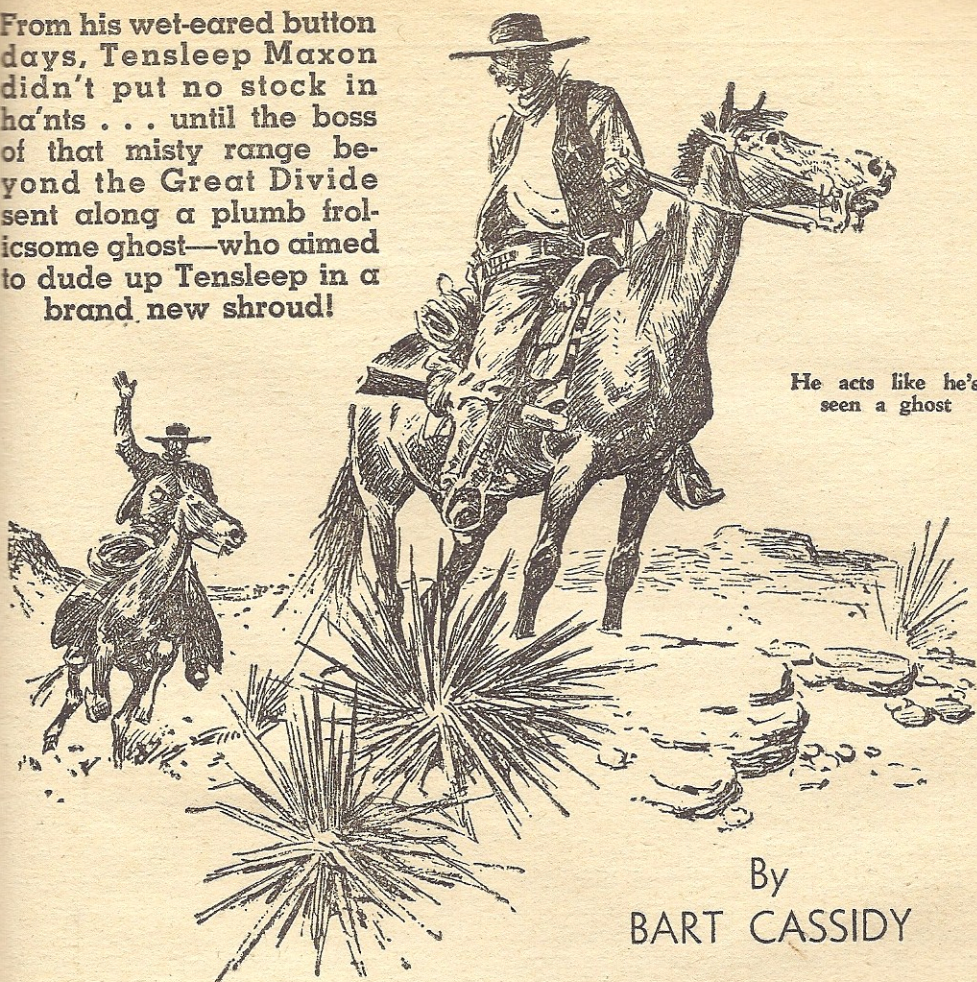
the sink. He could travel across it afoot. And he knew how to employ the savagery of the sink for his own purposes. This man on his back would know real terror. He would know the starkness of the sink itself, a mercilessness which went beyond the deviltry any man could produce. He would not be able to keep his jaws clamped shut and his eyes guardedly opaque.

BEFORE they were in to headquarters, this man would be babbling, screaming of men and women shot down helplessly among their wagons—of pack trains of goods surreptitiously crossing the Sierras—of a hideout on the distant, circling hills which fringed the Humboldt. Johnny Driscoll would see to that. Johnny Driscoll would see he cracked, perhaps permanently, as he had done for an instant here on the down-slope of this ridge. And the disbursing officer at headquarters would hear the details of the size and implacability of the raiding operations he had sent one man onto the sink to check. He would hear how a single Army man had interrupted a raiding attack against a wagon camp and escaped with a hostage. He would hear of Captain Driscoll's one mistake—the assumption that a man wounded in such a raid had to be a wagon man.

This the disbursing officer and the whole headquarters encampment and the breadth of the great, empty sink between would hear, shouted in fear and terror in the queer articulation of Mack Hayden's impaired speech. And there would be a post legend rise about Johnny Driscoll which would not be quite fully deserved—that he was a man who always brought in the enemy against which he was dispatched, even if it had to be on his back.

At the edge of the coulee, Captain Driscoll glanced back at the crest of the ridge. It was empty of movement. The wide strip of country across which he had crawled, driving an unwilling man ahead of him, was empty. The searchers on the far side had not reached the summit. So he was clear. He slid down the side of the dry, shallow, brushed waterway and turned up it toward the distant Sierras, swinging along with Mack Hayden's weight light across his shoulders. . . .

From his wet-eared button days, Tensleep Maxon didn't put no stock in ha'nts . . . until the boss of that misty range beyond the Great Divide sent along a plumb frolicsome ghost—who aimed to dude up Tensleep in a brand new shroud!



He acts like he's
seen a ghost

By
BART CASSIDY

TENSLEEP'S BOOTHILL REUNION

SPRING is in the air. Young men are turnin' lightly to love an' older ones to the comin' election. It's open season on patronage an' politicians are out gunnin'. The governor of New Mexico—Honorable Rodrigo Sandoval—has issued his list of fugitives an' ordered all badge-toters to do their sworn duty. The name—Tensleep Maxon is way up to'rds the head of that list an' I'm steppin' light along dim trails, makin' mighty sure

I don't bust no statutes on my way westward to'rds the Arizona line.

Having coyotied all the way from Las Vegas, I'm most mortal sick of brush, fed-up with sheepherders' handouts, hungry for a thick, juicy steak an' cravin' good bourbon. Hassan hawss is lank as a jackrabbit an' sheddin' worn-out shoes. It all adds up to me takin' a risk an' ridin' into Lordsburg town, the Hidalgo County seat of government.

The town proves to be full uh people. An' the people are mostly full of booze. Both of which facts suit me fine. A stranger is easily lost in a crowd an' when folks are loaded, their perceptions grow dull. I get Hassan on the oats, treat myself to a bath, haircut, shave an' some new clothes. A few drinks and a good meal make me some scornful of Don Rodrigo's list of fugitives. There's vaudeville on at the Opera House but they're sold out. So, havin' nothing better to do, I foller the crowd to McNulty's Hall to hear the current crop of election promises.

Most campaign meetings are a joke, an' this one follers the usual pattern. Town, county an' territorial candidates wave the flag, quote Lincoln, Jefferson an' Jackson an' swear by the people, for the people an' at the people. It's a circus until grizzled Jake Drackert gets up, grins bashful an' allows he's been sheriff for eight years an' wants another term 'cause he needs the money. It's so frank an' unusual it gets the big cheer an' deserves it. Then the principal speaker takes the stand, so calm, serious an' strong he starts goosepimples along my spine. Or is it that there's something so tormentingly familiar about him?

I wrap my memory around him, but it's no use. I can't come up with the answer. Ripton Sloan! Never heard the name. An' I sure don't know the man. But mebbys so as a boy—that's it! The boy! The Fargo Kid! My mind spins back across the years. Buffalo town. Powder River. Hole-in-the-Wall. Quiet, commanding Butch Cassidy. Sullen, dangerous Kid Curry. Swaggering Sundance. Friendly Merino. The mercurial Fargo Kid.

I remember when Butch fetched Fargo to the Hole. He an' Long Henry found the Kid beside the tracks, near Malta, smashed up but begging a gun to kill the railroad bull who tossed him off a speeding freight. Admiring that spirit, Butch broke his rule against fooling with kids under eighteen. Fargo was fourteen, I'd say, gaunt, pinch-faced an' plumb without fear.

Fargo rode to Chihuahua with the Bunch that year an' when I next saw him, six months later, he'd filled out an' growed to 'rds the sky. He looked all man an'

Butch, strugglin' to hold him back, was only makin' a rebel out of him. Miffed at being left behind that time the Bunch hit the Flyer, out of Dodson, the Kid an' a few others organized their own raid—something forbidden by Cassidy. They hit the bank at Casper an' done pretty fair. Lacking relays—Butch's secret of success—they founded their ponies an' were overtaken at Kaycee, just outside the Hole, an' safety.

It was short an' bitter, that Battle of Murdock's Saloon. After sievin' Tip Murdock's Place, the posse charged in an' finished it. When the smoke lifted, two outlaws lay dead, two begged for mercy an' the raging Kid struggled to continue the lost battle. The two were hung from Murdock's rafters. The boy, because of his youth an' spunk, split the sympathies of the posse. A vote was taken. Half believed that nits breed lice. Half took the view that admirable fightin' qualities, misdirected, could be turned into channels for good. They compromised by givin' him a real bad quirtin' an' turnin' him loose.

Fargo wasn't the only survivor. One of the two seemingly dead men must have been playin' possum. When the posse departed, leavin' that mess on Tip Murdock's hands, one of the dead men stirred. With one broke arm, one busted leg, a bleedin' neck wound an' a buckshot-blasted face, he began draggin' himself to the door. Murdock let him go, figuring somebody else could bury him. But that tough hombre got outside, climbed a pony an' rode away. Lots uh guts, that Lash Garlan who couldn't play square with Butch.

NOW, after all these years, I find Fargo, listen to him speak of his Sante Fe law practice an' his qualifications for congressman. Tellin' it, he puts out that unseen force that moves men to vote for him in spite of hell. The Kid's come a long ways. When he finishes, folks rush to shake his hand an' offer support. An' I'm right with 'em. I liked the Kid long ago. I like him better now. Hearin' him makes me regret I didn't settle down an' make something of myself.

They're trampin' one another gettin' to him when Sheriff Drackert calls a

"Take it easy, folks. You're forgettin' Mister Sloan's rode a fur piece today, an' he's got more of the same to-morrow. An' the day after that. He'll shake hands, if he loses an arm, but you better excuse him." They fall back, grumblin' a little, an' Drackert gets him outside. Still hopin' to smoke a cigarette an' swap yarns with the Kid, I foller them down to Drackert's house, where the family's waitin' supper for the honored guest.

Missus Drackert's a buxom, handsome woman, full of laughter an' kindness. Her daughter, Lisa, is like her, blonde, beautiful an' bubblin' over. They make it plain that Sloan's no stranger here. With Drackert beamin' as he looks on, his wife kisses the Kid affectionate, then turns him over to Lisa, whose blue eyes are full of love. I wonder how they'd feel if they knew what I knew.

Dislikin' eavesdroppin', I retire to a dump of trees. When Sloan departs, I'll make myself known to him. But he's in no hurry, bein' more in love than tired. After supper, him an' Lisa come to the garden bench, talkin' soft, laughin', happy. Later, I hear their voices rise in anger. There's a sound like she's slapped his face, an' strangled sobbin'. I rouse up, listenin'. Only silence. I move to'rds the bench. Somewhere a pony busts into high motion, slantin' away. Then I can see; there's nobody on the bench. But there is a dark, silent shape on the ground.

I dart to Sloan's side, kneel. He's out cold, blood oozin' from his scalp. What a wallop that Liza must pack. He's been slugged with something hard, a gun maybe. But his heart's strong an' I'm about to shoulder him to a medico when Missus Drackert calls from the house, "Better say goodnight, Lisa. Ripton's got that long ride tomorrow."

I call back, "Come here please, Missus Drackert."

"Why—what's wrong?" She comes quickly, sees me kneelin' there, gasps, "Rip—is Lisa—"

"Sloan, ma'am." How can I explain my eavesdroppin'? "He's hurt!"

She screams, "Oh, Papa!" and whirls to the house. The door slams.

Drackert lumbers up, growling. "What's wrong here?" An' when I tell him: "Where's Lisa?"

"Not in the house, Sheriff?"

"House? 'Course not. She was out here with Rip. What the hell is this? Sa-ay! Where do you fit into this? Who are you, anyway?" He thumbs a match an' swears. "Godfrey! Tensleep Max-on!" His gun prods my belly. "Don't know where Lisa is, eh? Just happened along in my backyard, I suppose. Come with me. My jail's good for tricky memories. Ma, cover Rip till Doc gets here. March, Hawss-thief!"

Them are plumb dejected steps of mine. Drackert will never believe why I'm in Lordsburg, an' in his yard when Lisa disappeared. Why should he? It's not bad as jails go, but I can't rest. I'm worried most about the Fargo Kid. Havin' lifted himself by his bootstraps, as the feller said, he's about to step into high places. I'm scairt this business, whatever it is, may spotlight a forgotten outlaw whelp an' ruin the career of a rising young statesman. Politics is funny that way. Little things make a man an' little things break him.

SHERIFF'S down early next morning with my breakfast. He's dour, grim-lipped. "For your info," he grouches, "my gal was kidnapped. Rip Sloan says you've no connection with the man who clubbed him an' taken her. Dunno how he knows but his word's good."

"Who kidnapped her, Sheriff?"

He's watchin' my eyes as he says, "Borego LeGore! Know him?"

I know the name. The Goat, as he's called along the Trail, rods a petty larceny outfit specializin' in slow elk, small mine safes, lonely travelers, an' unguarded saloons an' stores. Slim pickins', with the law waitin' always with guns, telephones an' fast horses. More a nuisance than menace, Borego's a master at blottin' trail. They've trapped him many times, only to have him slip away. He's high on the governor's list of men to be jailed—for political reasons. Like me . . . ha, ha, ha!

"I've heard of him," I confess. "Allus laughin' at his slipperiness without admirin' his deeds. What makes you think it's Borego?"

"A note." His eyes fill an' I understand. Borego's veins run snake blood.

"Ransom, Sheriff?"

"Ten thousand, in three days. I ain't got so much."

"What sheffs have, except crooks or lucky bounty-hunters? I'm worth a tenth of it, Sheriff, but not in three days." Can't help jabbin' him, knowin' he'll hold me for the governor. "Borego must surely know you can't raise that much, don't he?"

He sets, pullin' his jaw, starin' far away. "I—I gotta talk," he apologizes. "with wife dyin' uh grief, an' daughter . . . aw, hell. Borego's out to ruin me. He holes in the rimrocks back uh Quaking Asp Lake. I staked out there last year an' missed him but nabbed one of his riders. Lost a deputy when Borego gunned through us."

He sighs deep. "We tried the rene-gade, convicted him despite Borego's warning. Night before the hanging, Borego hit the jail but I beat him off. An hour later, a note slid under my door, warnin' if I held the hang party I'd pay plenty. Borego meant it!"

He goes out, a broken, comfortless man. I pity him, 'cause if I've got Borego right, he'll torment Drackert terrible, taxing heavy for the man he lost. But there's nothin' I can do, considerin' what I'm already up against. I'm thinkin' mighty morose when the Kid—Ripton Sloane—comes into the jailhouse. He's a sight. His eyes are bloodshot, black an' blue like somebody hit him there instead of on the head. He's bandaged from the brows up. His lips droop mournful at the corners.

He halts in the doorway, peering into the cell gloom. Then, without a word, he moves to the bars, sticks his hand through an' finds mine. "A long time, pardner."

"Too long, Fargo."

"You were found kneeling beside me, Tensleep. How did it happen?"

"I missed you in the Hall, Kid. Followed you to Drackert's an' was waitin'—"

"You wouldn't possibly be one of Borego's men?"

"You think," I rap, "that one of the old Bunch would play that game?"

He snorts. "I swore you didn't belong, Tensleep, even while knowing Borego was one of our saddlemates in the old days."

"No!"

"Yes. Recall the winter Butch arranged

for us to room with Missus Maloney and go to school in Glasgow? You took him up. I went to Chihuahua with Butch. Next summer I pulled that fool bank play, in Casper . . ."

"I know the story, Kid."

"You'll remember that two lived—me and Lash Garlan, now called Borego Le-Gore."

"Garlan? Cripes. He always was a snake, Kid. Butch knew how to fix his kind."

"So do I, Tensleep. And I will."

That sounds like the Fargo Kid, but I can't see it. "You've forgot plenty, Kid. Reckon you're up to it? Do you dare risk your campaign?"

"To hell with that! It's not my career but the girl I love, Tensleep. Borego's ruthless, desperate. He demands money from me, money and more money. He was badly stove up at Kaycee. He can't work. He suffers tortures on raids that don't pay like once. He knows I buried my share of the Casper loot, but don't know where. He won't believe I notified the insurance company long ago, so they could reclaim it. I'd borrow to pay Borego off except I know he'd double-cross me. That leaves me only one move."

"Alone?"

"A mounted band in there would sign Lisa's death warrant."

"There? Where, Kid?"

HIS eyes glow. "Remember Butch speaking of Stone Corral? We stayed there, coming and going, on that Mexico trip." Unconsciously, he's beginning to drawl. "A tight little valley hemmed by rimrocks an' drainin' over a waterfall where Butch hired a Mex stonecarver to cut stone steps. Steps you walk a pony up, under a shower of spray. Yes, I'll find Borego an' present my bill."

"Neither uh which," I point out, "necessarily saves Lisa. You'll need a gun to cover your get-away."

"If I thought that, Tensleep, I'd take Drackert. He's the law an' he's hurt."

"You dassent take him, Kid, unless you're willing he should learn your past. You dassent take anybody but me. Spring me outa here. I've raised no hell hereabouts an' Drackert only wants me so he can further the governor's campaign."

How 'bout it? Take me along, Kid."

Temptation's workin' in him. He fights it back. "No, thanks, Tensleep. I'll go it alone. But as for springing you. . ." He turns to Drackert's desk, riffling through a ring of keys and trying one in my cell door. "Jake Drackert's hell for keeping his oath, fella. No man can influence him against his judgment. Aw, hell! I ain't got time, Tensleep. Sorry." He strides out, slammin' the door. "See you in hell, fella." *The keyring's swinging there on my door!*

Wow! I'm on my knees in an eyewink, arms between the bars, tryin' keys, hopin'. I try 'em all an' hope is about used up when the last key opens it. Whee-ew! I stand up, weak-kneed, wet with sweat, breathin like a foundered quarter-horse. I study the main drag, through the window. Sun's high, hot crowdin' noon. Folks have hunted shade, lunch or a cool drink. Street's almost deserted an', until night, I'll never have a better chance. Can't wait till night an' hope to help a pard. I open the door, step into the revealin' sunglare.

Jittery an' pessimistical, I cut back to the alley an' ease in the rear of the feed barn. I squeeze in beside Hassan an' his glad nicker fetches the hostler. I pay my bill an' saddle up, the barn man eyein' me sorta funny. "When'd our next congressman leave town?" I ask, casual.

"Ten minutes ago, mebby. His next speech is at Silver City, they tell me."

"I know. Which way'd he ride?"

"Which way? Out the Tyrone-Silver road. Why you askin'?"

"Just curious. How far out that road would you go, if you were ridin' to Quakin' Asp Lake?"

It stiffens him. His voice is suddenly low, hard. "Quakin' Asp? That's a queer question, mister. Just what's your business around Quaking Asp?"

I jerk the latigo tight an' look at him, startled. His face is drawn an' puckered, savage, an' his eyes are black pinpoints of suspicion. "That," I answer, half amused, "happens to be none of your business, hostler."

His gun swipes all the humor from my face an' the hole in the end of it looks like a railroad tunnel. "My too-smart-for-his-britches friend," he purrs, "it happens to be nothin' less than my business. For

your information, Sloan won't make that speech tonight—or ever. He won't be congressman. If you want his hide, there's another who wants it worse. If you're a dick, usin' him as bait to trap somebody, that'll be all the worse for you. Lift your hands an' march into the office. I'm tyin' you up an' holdin' you for a friend."

"Borego?"

"Smart guessin'. Get into that office, quiet an' easy, or I'll shoot you down for tryin' to rob this barn. Move!"

He's got as bad as eye as I've ever looked at, this Borego spy. From his words, I know somebody's tailin' the Kid, figgerin' likely to capture him an' take him where Borego can try sterner means of whittlin' money out of him. An', unless I'm willin' to go all out with this renegade gun monkey, I'll wind up with the same hot poker at my feet. "All right," I sigh, resigned, an' half turn. Then I'm whirlin' back. It catches him with his gun lowerin', a mite off guard. I grab his gun wrist. His gun blares, the bullet singin' past my knee an' plowin' into the dirt. I have myself against him, hard, as my gun tilts over the holster lip. The report's muffled against his body an' the slug likely cuts his spine in two. He sags like old rags an' I let him fall. In ten seconds I'm forkin' Hassan's middle an' roarin' out the back. Ridin' low an' to hell with them who try to stop me.

THE enormity of my job hits me smack in the face before I'm two mile outa town. I haven't the slightest idea where I'm goin'. Sloan will be askin' everything his pony's got if he makes Silver City before he's due to speak. I can overtake him whether or not he decides to detour for a go at Borego, but will he have turned off before I catch him? It's all a confused maze of ifs, an' not too many of 'em favorin' Missus Maxon's little boy.

I give Hassan his head an' he's full of run. An' my eyes never leave the trail ahead, whenever I can see it. That item of care pays off. I'm mebbyso fifteen mile out when I see the rider lopin' ahead. At first glimpse I know it ain't Sloan. Therefore it must be the Borego man sent out to put the drop on him. I get as close as I dare an', seein' my chance, put Hassan around a bald-top hill, an' fast. I dip into a gully

an' light off, climbin' a couple rods to squat beside the trail. When my rider comes flashin' up, I step out. "Haul up, brother, or I'll ride you to glory on a .45 slug!"

He rears his horse high, plungin' to a stop. His eyes, wide as saucers, are on me an' he acts like he's seein' a ghost. "Judas Priest!" he yelps. "Are you twins or have you busted up my jail?" It's Jake Drackert.

"I can't tell a lie, Sheriff," I grin. "I walked out of your pretty bastille. What you doin' out this-away?"

"Huntin' skunks, Tensleep. You?"

"I'm out here to see a gent about a goat. If I didn't interrupt your train uh thinkin', I'd admire most mortal to ride along with you—without further ado, as the feller said. This gent I aimed to see is buildin' up miles an' closin' in on a friend uh mine."

"Was closin' in," he says, gnawin' off a chaw of twist. "I closed in on him an' he's restin' in pieces uh rope, back yonder a fur piece uh trail. That friend uh yours now, I reckon we both know where to find him in Silver City, no?"

"No!" I bark, divin' down for Hassan. "An' quit stallin', Drackert. Sloan ain't goin' to Silver City an' if he ain't goin' to hell we gotta overtake him before he turns off." I hit the saddle an' come plungin' up beside him. "If you was goin' to Quakin' Asp Lake, Sheriff, where would you leave this road?"

"Where I've left it a thousand or a hundred times," he snaps. "Chasin' that damned Borego. So-o-o! That's it. I knowed there was something fishy about Rip gettin' hit over the head last night. He's tied up with Borego somehow, ain't he? I can't figger."

"You quit figgerin'," I warn him. "You'll bust a jugular. Come on."

We don't really overtake him. By the sheerest luck, the sheriff points him out to me. "Yonder," he says, as we come racin' down into a long valley, "rides some gent to Borego's hideout. Wisht I was close enough to foller him. Seems crazy, but up in them rimrocks a feller can't."

"Here's two fellers that got to, Drackert," I tell him. "That gent you're pointin' to is the K—er—Rip Sloan."

He's dubious but admits he's near-

sighted an' seems willin' enough to let me lead out. That's the trouble with an old gent. He can't forget his failures. We soon lose sight of that rider but find where he's scaled the first rim, crossed a malapai mesa an' dipped down into a rugged canyon. There's quite a flow in the bottom an', with Drackert augerin, our man could have gone down as easily as up, an' leavin' no tracks either way, I head up, hopin presently to bump a waterfall in the face. An' bump into it we do, sooner than expected.

"Blind canyon!" snorts the sheriff, disgusted. "When you've hunted Borego like I have, Tensleep, you'll know you're licked no matter what you try. Oh, I can take disappointments, an' have, but with Lisa up here somewheres, an—" He chokes.

"Wait!" I grin at him, dismount an' start searchin' the foot of that waterfall. It ain't hard to find, once you know what you're looking for. The foot of them stairs is under a lacy spray on the left of the main falls. Looks like an undercut cliff, only it ain't natural. I step under the shower an' there they are, leadin' upward under the body of the falls. About four foot wide, narrow of tread an' long of riser. All haired over with slimy green moss. May have been fine in Butch's day, but not for Hassan. I'll take it afoot, an' do. Drackert follers close behind, nervous as a squirrel, mutterin' over an' over, "No wonder I couldn't find it. What do they expect of a man?"

BUT that ain't the whole answer. The hoofmarks of Sloan's animal are plain in the moss. He'd dared it, though I can't see why. If he has to make a fast get-away, he can't do it here. That's one thing. Another is that Borego ain't been usin' this. He's got another entrance, if a man could stumble on it. And it's probably gun guarded too.

The stairs lead us into a slot, close to the edge of the falls. Not knowin' if it's rods or miles, me an' the sheriff start hikin' along the creek bank, where Sloan's horse tracks are still fillin' with water. They lead into a small draw, over a low hump an' so to a low rim, brush-screened an' lookin' into a pretty little oval, grassed, tree shaded an' watered. A string of cabins are tucked under the north rim an' horses

are friskin' in a small, crazy-fenced pasture.

The scene, pretty as it is, I only half see. For a tied pony whinnies close by an' flashing through the trees at the foot of the talus is Rip Sloan. Running straight up, unswerving, as serious as when addressing an audience, he's wading deliberate and unhurried toward those drowsing cabins. It's shootin' time an' I start down the slope. Behind me, the sheriff bawls, "No, Rip, stay back! Take cover until we reach—"

His voice rolls across the quiet vale, echoing from the cliffs. Rip's head half turns in surprise, then he's sprintin' at the nearest house, hellity tilt, his gun palmed. It's a bad break an' I'm tellin' Drackert so as I hit the flat an' start runnin'. Whatever chance we mighta had seems gone now.

Bullets sing, but not to me or to Jake Drackert, lumberin' behind. Shootin's at Sloan, who's chargin' their guns, crazy. Drackert's crackin' caps, bellerin' for Rip to take cover. Me, I'm sizin' up the enemy an' I run—seven in sight; now only six an' me tryin' to make it five.

Our bullets press them renegades back into the first two cabins, upsettin' their aim at Sloan. Now they're inside, triggerin'. The Kid staggers, catches his balance an' stumbles on, hunched an' hard hit.

A gun's belchin' lead from the third cabin now an' the Kid heads there, reelin' like a drunk. My fire's drawin' answers, one scorchin' my shoulder, another rappin' my leg. It's thick. Swervin', I dodge like a whitetail buck, reachin' the blind side of cabin one an' pausin' to reload. A dozen rods back, Drackert is sinkin' into the grass. Cripes! In one minute it's me against the field.

But Drackert's not finished. His carbine pops slugs into cabins one an' two an' it seems we're thinkin' alike—that Borego's in cabin three with Lisa. The thought sends me gallopin' along the windowless backs of the cabins. A bullet screams at me as I cross between cabins. Another kicks dirt in front of me. Then I'm behind cabin three, unharmed mostly.

Protected by the rock chimney, I take another breather, listenin'. The heavy boom of the sheriff's Winchester. Cracklin' pistol fire of the men scared to rush

him. Glass crashing down. Gunfire shuddering cabin three. "Not yet, Lash!" The Kid's voice is weak. "You'll never live to kill me."

"Think not, Fargo?" A brutal laugh. "Try this liver pill, Kid."

A gunshot. Clump of a falling body. Borego's belly laughter. Lisa's wild weeping. I'm so sorry for Sloan I ache all over. Yet he's thrown his life an' his leadership away. It's thoughts of Lisa in Borego's hands that sends me to the front, my cutter six-full an' ready. I can't see a thing through the yawning window with the slashed-out pane. But in I dive, a slug brushin' me, gunflame half blindin' me.

I land on neck an' shoulders, roll an' find my knees. Spottin' my target, I go limp, scairt to shoot. If I'd met him at a bar, I'd never have known Lash Garlan. He must weigh three hundred. His neck's crooked like he's listenin'. One leg's gimpy an' a crippled arm holds strugglin' Lisa against him. The Kid's lyin' shapeless at his feet an' from the drop it looks like I soon will be.

I HIT him an arcing dive, shoulder on. He sees me comin', slams Lisa back against the wall an' clubs at me with his sixgun. Fortunate, he only glances off my shoulder. I bear him back an' over, pressin' close so he can't brain me, beatin' at him where his third double chin meets his chest whiskers. He hammers at me with the clubbed gun an', seein' he can't get at me, drops the piece an' snakes out a knife from somewhere. The knife glitters as he raises it. . .

I hear the gunshot through a mighty roaring in my ears. An' all at once I'm smothered by a ton of blubber. Somehow I manage to roll Borego off me, knowing by the feel of him that he's dead. An' there, layin' almost as he was, is the Fargo Kid, a go-to-hell grin on his lips, his fingers wrapped around the butt of the gun I shied along the floor.

"Thanks for that one, Kid," I gulp. "I came out lucky. How about you?"

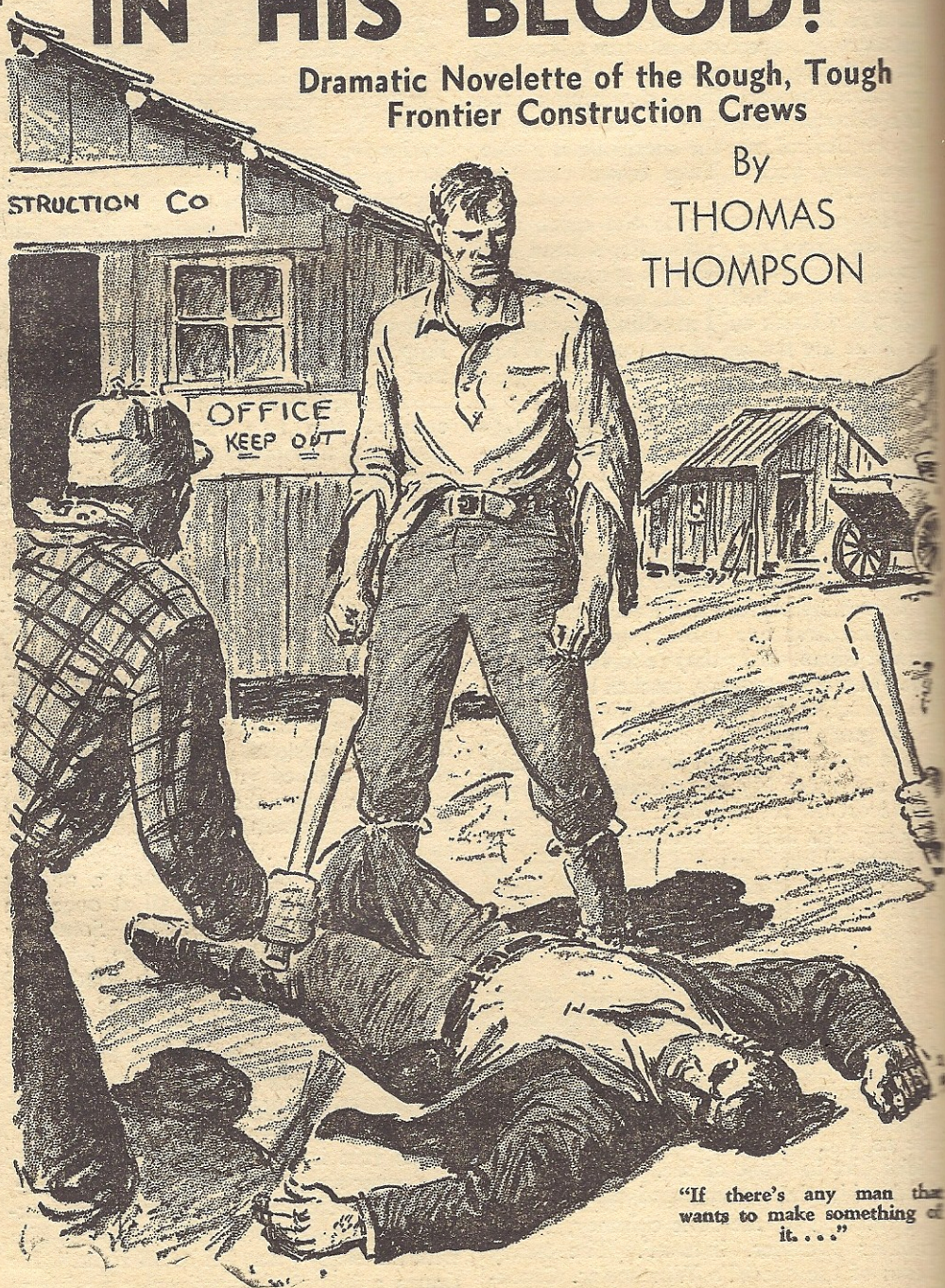
His grin is sickly, but it's a grin. "It was never meant that Lash should kill me, Tensleep. He'd never have hurt me except I lost my count stick and jumped him with an empty gun. I'll be all right." He draws a long breath an' color begins to

(Please turn to page 98)

FIGHTING IRON IN HIS BLOOD!

Dramatic Novelette of the Rough, Tough
Frontier Construction Crews

By
THOMAS
THOMPSON



"If there's any man that
wants to make something of
it..."

What was the ghastly lesson Lin Carey learned, when the grinning boss of that exiled legion, packing death in each rock-hard fist, kicked wide the gates of a white-hot hell. . . Which tenderfoot snobs like Carey thought was fired only for outcasts who no longer were called men?



CHAPTER ONE

Beating for the Bellyacher

HE WAS tall, heavy-boned, well put together, but he was paunchy around the middle and, for his age, too fleshy generally; his was the unhealthy bloat of soft living. It made him look old for his twenty-six years. He wore an expensive hand-tailored suit. The ruffle front shirt that had once been immaculately white was now a dingy gray. His face had the strained, puffed look of a man who has been on a prolonged drunk; his clothes looked as if he had slept in

them for a week. Both signs were entirely correct.

Used to a daily bath, and a daily shave by a private barber, he felt now as if he were crawling with vermin, having been away from both luxuries too long. He was sore and bruised from the hundred-mile trip in the springless wagon and from a half dozen fist fights in which he had gotten the worst of the bargain. His mouth was dry and parched, his eyes gravelly from lack of sleep and his belly burned like fire, crying for the drink he felt he had to have.

He stood now in front of a blueprint-cluttered desk made of planks laid across saw horses and he leaned toward a battered-faced, hulking brute of a man who sat there. For the twentieth time he said, "Damn it, Mr. Bovee, I tell you I'm Lin Carey!"

The hulking man behind the makeshift desk got up and his piggish eyes glittered with malicious satisfaction. He spoke with a mock softness and understanding and he said, "And your dad is B. J. Carey, and puttin' in this dam is his job, and me and Bull Gantry are just workin' for your dad, and if I don't send you back to San Francisco you'll raise hell." His right arm swung back and his open palm slapped Lin Carey alongside the head, knocking him off his feet, spilling him across the room.

The big man stood there then, his fists balled, his voice a bellow. He said, "And I'm Mig Bovee, damn yuh, boss of this job! You been here two days now and you've done nothin' but bellyache. You signed on with the rest of that waterfront scum and you work the same as they do!"

Lin Carey had taken all he could hold. He got to one knee, stayed that way a few seconds, then, bunching his legs, he threw his weight against the plank and sawhorse desk. Papers and blueprints spilled in every direction. Taking advantage of the surprise, Lin swung with all his weight and his fist cracked hard against Bovee's jaw.

The big construction boss stood there and a trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. Lin swung again, driving his fist against the man's belly. It was like hitting the butt end of a log. Mig Bovee spat out a mouthful of blood and said, "So you want to play some

more? Boy, I got just what you're lookin' for!"

Bovee started swinging then. Not hard punches, but short, chopping blows with no more than a third of his strength in them. At the end of each blow he had a way of twisting his fist and it seemed to grind patches of skin from Lin's face. Lin fought back and it felt as if he were striking at sofa pillows with a feather duster. One eye was full of blood now and his nose felt as if it was broken. His breath started howling in his lungs and his arms became heavier and heavier until he couldn't lift them to fight back.

He gave way, backing up until he was against the wall. And Mig Bovee followed him, still hitting those light, tearing blows. Lin's knees started to go out from under him. Bovee reached out with his left hand, grabbed a handful of blood-splattered shirt, held his target erect.

Bovee started slapping, first one side of the face, then the other. Slow, swinging, merciful darkness closed in around Carey. He felt no more pain. Only the swaying, killing jar of Mig Bovee's fists.

HE HAD the impression of being lifted, being carried through space. The earth exploded around him and he knew he was lying in the foot-deep dust in front of the construction office. He tried to roll over, to pull fresh air into his lungs, but he couldn't make it. The blood and dirt clogged his nostrils, choked him. He became sick.

He heard the sharp jangle of belled harness, the crunch of wagon wheels, and someone was picking him up again and a voice he recognized as belonging to the man called Shanty the Mick said, "You'll never learn, will yez?" Lin didn't try to answer. He couldn't. He let Shanty the Mick put him on the wagon seat.

It was the end of the shift for Shanty. A big, red-headed, ham-handed, shaggy, thick-thinking man bigger than Mig Bovee. He had been a powder monkey for the Central Pacific and before that had sunk pilings and hauled dirt that had made more San Francisco where there had been mud flats. He was a strawboss now, and had been with Bull Gantry for twelve years. He was Irish, he was tough. He wore a pick and shovel like a badge of honor and he had a heart as big as a wash-

tub. He had decided that the drunken young pup who called himself Lin Carey was crazier than a loon.

He tooled his six-mule team into the big corral, yelled for the man there to unharness the beasts, then picking Lin Carey lightly off the seat of the wagon he tossed him over his shoulder and carried him up the hill toward the bunkhouse. There he got a bucket of water and tore a good-sized, half-clean square from the roller towel that hung above the wash bench.

He tossed Lin on a filthy, rag-blanketed bunk, jerked off the full-tied stock with its horseshoe pin, ripped open the once elegant shirt and started slapping Lin in the face with the water-soaked piece of toweling. More to himself than to the unconscious man he said, "I'm gettin' a bit tired o' this."

And in time Lin Carey opened his eyes. He tried his best to grin, but his face, swollen and cut and bruised beyond all recognition, wouldn't work. Through puffed and split lips he said, "Thanks, Shanty. What happened this time? Did you come in and stop it?"

Shanty the Mick wrung the blood out of the wet towel. He said, "This time I found you layin' in the dust where he'd thrown you. Will you get sense in your head now?"

"But damn it, it's the truth!" Lin said. "I told you I got sick and fed up with a party on Nob Hill and I went down on the coast to have some fun for myself. I got in a fight and somebody must have rolled me."

"And it wasn't a bad fight," Shanty said. "I was there."

"Look, Shanty," Lin said hopefully. "You believe me, don't you?"

The big Irishman wiped thoughtfully at a wicked cut above Lin's left eye. He said, "Lad, I believe what I see. The fancy clothes, with that I'll agree. But there's plenty of dandies on the Barbary Coast with fancy clothes. Some have ladies supporting them, some are lucky with gambling. Maybe you're one or the other or both, how should I know?"

"But I tell you, Shanty, if they'd send a telegram to B. J.—"

"A telegram is it now?" the big mick said, arching his bushy red brows. "Have you taken a look at the country we're in?"

You think they'll be building a telegraph line in for you?"

"But damn it, Shanty—"

"Now look, boy," the Irishman said, his voice losing a lot of its patience. "I was with you when you signed the papers to come to work on this job. You were drunk, yes, but not that drunk. Nobody forced you to sign. It was full of big talk you were—how you were tired of the easy life and being a parasite bug, I think it was you called it. Now look me in the eye, lad. If you were the son of B. J. Carey, the biggest construction man in California, would you be doin' a thing like that, talkin' like that?"

Lin thought that over a long time. He said then, "Yes, that's probably exactly what I'd be doing. But I wouldn't expect anybody to believe me." He looked at the Irishman and again tried that impossible grin. He said, "All right, Shanty. I'm licked. But just for the hell of it, call me Lin, will you? I have to have a name you know."

CHAPTER TWO

It's a Long Way From Golden Hill

UNTIL now Lin Carey had decided that nothing could be more painful than a beating at the hands of Mig Bovee. A week later he discovered he had been wrong even in that supposition. Twelve hours a day on a pick and shovel to a man who had never done anything more laborious than lifting a scuttle of coal to an ornate grate could originate unbelievable pain.

Huge blisters that broke, blistered again, broke and became infected puffed his hands to twice their size, and each morning it was impossible to move his fingers. His shoulders felt as if he had been hammered across the back with a plank and the boots he purchased at the company store for twenty-five dollars, to be deducted from his wages, tore huge patches of skin from his feet. His stomach felt as if he had been repeatedly kicked there by a mule. It was only the scant encouragement of Shanty the Mick that kept him going at all. The big man would look at him, grin and say, "You'll limber up to it one day."

Whether he would or wouldn't made little difference to Lin Carey. He lived now for the day when another wagon train would come in and he would somehow make his escape and get back to San Francisco. He had long ago given up trying to convince anyone of his identity.

He paid little attention to the job at hand. He knew vaguely that they were building a dam to store a water supply for some of the small towns in the valley at the base of the mountains. He had known that even before he came here, for it was impossible to live around B. J. Carey and not know something of what was going on.

B. J. had got his start in the Comstock on drainage tunnels under Sutro himself. A hard-hitting, hulking, bull of a man, B. J. had long ago decided against working for wages. So he stole half of Sutro's crew and branched out on his own. There were a few short-cuts to wealth on B. J.'s back trail, but it was the day in San Francisco when the mere possession of wealth could blot out a lot of memories of the niceties of its acquisition.

So B. J. had prospered, and now the Carey mansion, as gaudy as the rest, stood in majestic splendor on the hill alongside Huntington, Flood and Stanford. Less ornate than the Crocker home, not so feudally impressive as Mark Hopkins', it was nevertheless a meeting place of importance on the Golden Hill.

Lin put down his pick, straightened and pressed his hands against the small of his back. The sun glared against his face and all around him half-starved and ill clad men grumbled away at their work. There was a stench about them. It was a far cry from the place he had been raised with marble under his feet and an imported tapestry hanging around his ears. The voice of Mig Bovee bellowed from the top of the dam. "Get back to work, you!" He knew whom Bovee meant. He was getting used to it.

So this was how money was made—with short rations and prohibitive enforced buying and slave labor. He had sat in on meetings where talk of millions rolled through thick lips around heavy cigars; he had found little to do but listen and yawn. He thought of his own room at home and then of the vermin infested

bunkhouse where the men slept at night, too tired to complain.

He remembered the night B. J. had said, "Hell boy, you're growned up now. Go on out and shake a leg and have some fun. I never had a chance when I was your age. I was always too knee deep in muck, tryin' to earn a plate of beans. Take advantage of it." At the time it made sense, so Lin Carey did exactly that.

Big, robust, a part of his father about him, Lin developed a fabulous capacity for Pisco Punch and high living in an era when money could buy anything. What he knew about his dad's construction business was a mere bit that anyone could have discovered by picking up the daily newspaper. A lot of the work was sub-contracted, such as this job here. Sub-contracted to Bull Gantry, who was coming up fast and making a name in his own right. Help was scarce, and most construction bosses had labor solicitors hanging around the water front and the Barbary Coast, signing on crews. It wasn't much different than shanghai activities of a few years back. By the time a man sobered up he was a couple of hundred miles away, deep back in the hills or down in the middle of the San Joaquin. His chances to get back to San Francisco were pretty slim.

THE fact that Lin Carey was here was no more amazing than several other escapades in which he found himself, but always before money and his name had gotten him out of his scrapes. This time he had no money and his name was a bit too fantastic to accept.

So he swung his pick and he gouged the rocky earth with his shovel and he waited for the wagon train that came in once a month, hauling the supplies that came up the river to Napa and were freighted from there. There'd be newspapers on that wagon train and they'd be full of stories of his disappearance.

He liked to think of what he would do when that happened and he decided that he'd break the back of the Bull Gantry Construction Company and if necessary he'd hire a couple of thugs to beat hell out of Mig Bovee. The man with the wheelbarrow said, "You gonna load this thing or ain't yuh?" Lin turned to his

shovel, saying nothing. His mind went blank.

The nights in the bunkhouse were the worst. It was the scum and the half-human derelicts he found there. He tried to keep away from them. Jaxon, that wild-eyed fanatic of a man who every night gave a two hour unsolicited lecture on Henry George's Progress and Poverty and the single tax system. And Benecke, a brute-faced man with a scar that ran from the corner of his left eye straight across his nose to the right side of his chin. He was part of the Pick Handle Brigade that preceded Denis Kearney's sandlot days. He remembered only the worst of what Kearney had tried to put across. He bragged openly that he had killed a dozen Chinamen and his life's ambition was to dynamite the Mark Hopkins residence on Nob Hill.

There were others, too, from down-and-out tattooed sailors to men who had owned brothels on the Barbary Coast and had been pushed out by the political machine. Lin had no common ground with any of them and he hated them all. The increasingly putrid meals nauseated him, but in time he ate because there was nothing else to fill the emptiness in his belly, but rather than this giving him a kindred touch with the men it drove him further from them.

Shanty the Mick, being a foreman, had a small house of his own and his daughter was with him to do the cooking. Most of the men talked about her a lot and openly expressed their desires, but the conversation usually stopped when someone would remind, "You ever so much as look at that girl Shanty would split your head open with a pick. What the hell do they care if some of us get killed off? Who's gonna say it was murder?" Lin seldom listened. He had never seen the girl and he didn't want to. He wanted to get back to San Francisco. Then it happened.

They had been putting in timbers to shore up an earth fill and a high scaffolding had been built for the workers. Lin had watched them a dozen times, clinging there on that spider-web of wood, bracing themselves against the wind that always blew up the canyon. It made him sick and dizzy to watch them.

And now when it happened he didn't

believe it. It was something like a recurring nightmare, terrifyingly vivid at first, dulled with too much repetition. He heard the cracking of timbers, saw the bellying out of the long, poorly-braced uprights. Then it gave way and it seemed to give way slowly and the bodies fell slowly too, end over end. And the wailing, unbelievable sound was the fear-crazed cry of men about to die. It floated up and lay heavily over the sudden silence.

He was running then, just as everyone else was running, toward the bottom of the rock-strewn canyon, down near the base of the dam. And he saw them lying there, six things that had been men a few seconds before. They were broken and twisted beyond all semblance of recognition and what had been faces were now chewed masses of raw flesh. A half dozen times he caught himself thinking that if he were one of those things he would look no different.

The voice of Mig Bovee. "What the hell do you think this is, a circus? Get on back to work."

And Shanty the Mick. "Just a minute, Mr. Bovee. I told you five times that scaffolding wasn't safe. None of my men goes back to work until you quit cuttin' corners with men's lives."

For a second Bovee stood there, his shoulders bunched, his arms swinging at his side. Then he lashed out and his fist caught Shanty on the side of the head.

But he was fighting a man now who was born to this stuff. The big Irishman rolled with the blow, swung from the ground and caught the superintendent flush on the point of the chin. Bovee went over backwards, hard, but he wasn't out. He rose to his knees, his coat flew back and his hand came up with a six-shooter. His thumb hooked the hammer. He said, "Get back to work." The gun swung to cover the entire crew.

They stood there, slack-jawed, staring at the dead and broken bodies, staring at the gun in Bovee's hand. Then Shanty the Mick nodded his head and they went back up the wall of the canyon, back to their jobs. Lin Carey couldn't forget the things in the canyon. They had been men. He had paid no attention to them when they were alive. They were horribly real now that they were dead.

CHAPTER THREE

Man With a Whip

AND from then on it seemed that every move was designed to make the men quit or rebel. Hours were increased and the food became worse. Mig Bovee horse-whipped a man he caught sneaking a rest and a smoke when he should have been working. Word came from Bull Gantry, that mythical man they never saw, that from here on, due to a shortage, tobacco would be a dollar a sack. Figuring it all up most of the men found that their wages and their bill at the store would come out nearly even. "The hell with it," an ex-sailor said. "It's no different than goin' to sea. They're takin' us down the line, sure, but who the hell you gonna squawk to? Get out when we can, I say, and keep our mouths shut. Start yappin' and you'll be blackballed all up and down the coast. Don't forget B. J. Carey is behind this job."

Lin started to say something, cut himself short. And the next morning they had beans and side pork for breakfast.

For a while they sat there at the long table, staring at the food. And then one man threw his plate over his shoulder, onto the floor. Mig Bovee appeared as if at a signal. He stood in the doorway, filling it with his bulk. His coat was pulled back and the pistol was in his waist band. He had a blacksnake whip coiled in his hand. He said, "Something wrong?"

The man who had thrown away his plate stood up slowly. He said, "What the hell's the idea, Bovee? The beans are half cooked and the pork is full of worms."

"A long time between supplies," Bovee said.

"A hell of a long time," the complainer agreed. "And too far away for anybody to check up on what you're doing. Rotten timbers in your bulkheads and six men killed on a scaffold half built. A spring rain and your dam will go down the canyon. You can fool the rest of these boys, maybe, but you made a mistake when you shanghaied me. I've worked construction all my life and I know what you and Gantry and B. J. Carey are up to."

"You had your say?" Bovee said softly.

"Not until I beat in your face," the

construction stiff said, and began moving.

Every man was on his feet now. The big construction worker pushed his way around the table and started toward Mig Bovee, pulling off his coat as he went. He was half way to the door when the whip snaked out and cut a bloody 'V' on his left cheek. Lin felt the muscles tighten in the pit of his stomach.

Bovee jerked back the whip and the construction stiff moved in. The whip lashed out again, snapping like the tongue of a snake. It cut the big man across the eyes and dropped down to entangle his arms. He fell back, blood streaming down his face. Lin said, "For God's sake do something!" There was not a sound from the other men. They stood there, paralyzed. Bovee, his face twisted with rage, swung the loaded butt of the whip and caught the construction worker across the back of the neck. The tightness in Lin's stomach turned to sickness and then he threw himself into the fight.

He did not remember picking up the chair. He only remembered swinging it, seeing it splinter across Bovee's head. Bovee shook, like a tree might shake when it feels the ax. He dropped the whip and his huge fist came ripping up, catching Lin on the side of the head.

The blow staggered him, but Lin didn't go down, and he remembered thinking how much less this blow hurt although he was sure Bovee had put everything he had into it. He rushed back in, caught Mig off guard and hammered his fist into Bovee's mouth. He could tell by the quick change of expression that he had hurt the big man seriously.

BUT there was little of the normal man in Mig Bovee. It was said that in a blast that had killed six men Mig Bovee had pawed his way out of the dirt and rock, blood-smeared and ripped to-ribbons but still on his feet. He wiped at the blood that was on his mouth now and he seemed to swell in size. With a wild, unnatural bellow he threw himself at Carey. Carey hit him again, and again he knew his blow had hurt.

It had hurt—like the feathered dart hurts the charging bull. Mig Bovee's fist raised and came down like a hammer, the force of it paralyzing Lin's shoulder. Lin

twisted away from the pain, drove his fist into Bovee's belly, but he knew now that he had lost his chance. Bovee was on him, killing mad. Out of the tail of his eye Lin saw the big construction stiff getting to his feet. The man had a knife in his hand.

He wasn't sure then how it happened. Bovee hit him and he clinched instead of going down. He tried to work his fists from in close. Then he was thrown half way across the room and all that was there was the roar of the gun and the sting of powdersmoke and the big construction stiff was going down, slow, bending at the knees, and then he was there on the floor and there was blood and Mig Bovee held the smoking gun. Bovee stuffed the still smoking gun into his waist band. He said, "Self-defense, and I'll kill the man who says it wasn't!"

They stood there, the entire crew, their faces white, and then one by one they started to sit down at the long table. Bovee called over his shoulder and two of his henchmen came in and picked up the body of the dead man. The man called Benecke said, "In the old days we'd have got a gang with pick handles and taken care of Bull Gantry and Mig Bovee and B. J. Carey."

Lin Carey said nothing, nor did he eat his breakfast. He sat there and stared at his plate and the quick brutality of what he had seen sickened him. But beyond that it had done something more. It had frightened him. And it was that fact that shook him and upset him beyond all reason. Without moving his head he glanced around the table at the men who were sitting there silently, grim-faced, poised. They were afraid, too. They were no different than Lin Carey; above that he was no different than they.

He glanced at his hands and his knuckles were torn and he told himself that at least he had tried. But there was small satisfaction in that. It was a man making excuses; not a man taking pride in doing the thing he knew was right. For a month now he had sat back and worried about himself and every man here had done the same and there was the mistake. He saw Benecke and he thought of the pick handle brigade and of Denis Kearney.

Denis Kearney had been only a name.

A wild-eyed radical who made speeches in sand lots. A man who roared against capitalists and Chinese labor and bellowed for revolution and a workingman's party. It was a name of which they made puns and jokes there on the Golden Hill. But now suddenly the name meant something else.

It wasn't Kearney's theories. He knew those were distorted and wrong. Theory had nothing to do with the case. The man undoubtedly was a fanatic, and his scheme was to put control into the hands of a mob of incompetents who would wreck the country within a week with their bungling. Men like Benecke there, who knew nothing beyond breaking a skull with a pick handle. But there was more to it than that; the thing behind it all; the man.

Kearney was an organizer. He had thought of someone besides himself and his own comforts. He had been able to get a following who would do as he said. He was a leader and regardless of his crack-pot ravings he was not a coward. Lin got up from the table and went outside. He wondered if *he* was a coward.

He fumbled in his pocket for the tobacco and papers that cost a dollar at the company store and he made himself a cigarette. He still felt weak and trembling inside.

And the crew went to work like so many sheep that morning; went to work white-faced and silent. At six high spots around the rim of the canyon Mig Bovee's faithfuls stood with rifles and watched the men toil away in the heat and the dirt. Near noon Shanty the Mick passed the word for them to move their equipment back, and they pressed themselves against the far wall of the canyon and stood there, so many tools. A blast went off and half a hill came down. The Mick then, his voice telling nothing of his emotions. "All right, boys. Back at it. She'll be loose now and easy to handle." Lin Carey went to work with his shovel. The blisters on his hands had turned to calluses and the pain was no longer in the muscles across his shoulders. He could feel those muscles ripple against his shirt and he remembered that he had not gone down under Bovee's blows. It brought him a quick physical satisfaction but not a men-

tal satisfaction. He dug with the shovel and he was a sheep, a tool, like the rest of the men here in the canyon.

THAT night the talk in the bunkhouse sickened him. Talk of how they should blow up the dam, hang Bull Gantry and Mig Bovee to a limb. Yes, and Shanty the Mick, too. He was one of them. Burn down the office and the company store and kill every damn mule and every man who ever worked for Bull Gantry. Lin kept thinking of Denis Kearney and his pick handle brigade.

And that is what these men were doing, swinging verbal pick handles. It was not dangerous in itself, but the thinking behind it was. Why kill Shanty the Mick? Had he done anything wrong? And why burn and kill mules, and pillage? Fanatic thinking of waterfront scum. Tomorrow morning they'd eat their half-cooked beans and their wormy pork and they'd rush to their job and work twice as hard and say "yes sir" to Mig Bovee.

Or would they? Lin got to thinking of what was seething if it were bottled and capped and directed. Benecke? He might do it. But suppose another man—suppose Lin Carey. . . He threw down the cigarette in disgust. The hell with them. A couple of more days at the most and the wagons would be here. He had fought his own fight; let them fight theirs. And he remembered the words of the man now dead: "Start yappin' and you'll be blackballed all up and down the coast." There was the big tool of Bull Gantry and Mig Bovee. Every man for himself and every man afraid to talk.

A crew like this was a potential, and nothing more. A blasting dynamic potential. A powder keg without a fuse. He went outside to get away from the noise and the smoke, and the sky was heavy tonight, level with the rim of the canyon, and the stars were everywhere, prodding into the darkness. The breeze was sweet with a hint of pine and on the slopes the red-barked madrones were grotesque with their clutching branches and the nonsense of the stream was garrulous on the floor of the canyon.

He started walking, not knowing for sure where he was going, and he found himself in time at the shack of Shanty the

Mick. He hesitated, surprised he was here. Then he shrugged and knocked on the door. The voice of the Irishman belated an invitation before Lin had a chance to knock a second time.

He pushed open the door and went inside and tossed his hat on a chair. It wasn't until then he remembered that Shanty had a daughter.

The sign of it was all around the room. A batten and board shack with a pine floor and handmade furniture. But red bandanna handkerchiefs had been made into ruffled valances for the windows and one corner of the room was partitioned off with a burlap hanging and there was something feminine about the way the sacking hung. There was a lean-to on the far end of the shack that must have been the kitchen and from that came the sound of a stove lid being slapped down and then the rattle of dishes. A girl's voice said, "Who is it, dad?"

"One of the boys," her dad called back. "Don't be pokin' your pretty nose into things."

"Try and stop me," the girl said, and she came to the door and stood there, wiping her hands on a flour sack dish towel.

CHAPTER FOUR

Princess in Calico

SHE WAS small and not really pretty, but there was a naturalness and pertness about her that made her striking. A turned up nose and eyes the smoky blue of late afternoon; creamy skin, like the froth on the pool at the foot of the waterfall below the coffer dam. Hair as black as a moonless night.

Shanty said, "Don't stare so, lad. Your eyes are buggin' like a tromped-on frog. My daughter Terry," he introduced them. "A hard one to handle and a bad one to know."

The girl gave Lin a careful appraisal, tilting her head, moving around to see him better, and there was a lurking devil in her blue eyes. She said, "You're the young drunk dad has been telling me about, aren't you? He didn't describe you well. You're sober and you haven't got a pot belly."

"She's frank about things," Shanty explained.

Lin squirmed uneasily and his hands felt like a pair of soggy blankets. In San Francisco he was considered quite a figure with the women. In San Francisco women hid their faces behind half opened fans and giggled. This girl showed no intention of doing either.

"What is it you've come about, boy?" Shanty asked.

"A silly question," the girl said. "A man has been murdered, hasn't he? Did you think that in the entire crew there wouldn't be one with guts enough to want to do something about it? There always is."

"Why don't you stay in the kitchen, girl?" Shanty asked quickly. Lin noticed gray worry lines forking from the man's blue eyes and cutting the corners of his ample mouth.

She said, "Why don't I? Because I'm tired of seeing you eat your heart out over it, that's why." She sat down abruptly, leaning back in the chair, her feet wide spread on the floor. She pressed the palms of her hands together and chopped her hands between her knees, pulling the skirt tight around her legs. She had the sort of figure a man usually sees only on a calendar. She said, "Go on, Mr. Lin, tell him. He needs somebody to back up his own thinking."

She was taking a lot for granted and she wasn't entirely correct in her supposition. True, Lin had planned on talking to Shanty about the killing; he had planned it because the shock of it was still raw against his nerves and he was full of it. Perhaps he would have complained about the food and the treatment, he didn't know. But he had come here mostly because he needed someone to talk to and subconsciously he had turned to Shanty, the one man who had come closest to treating him like a fellow human being. He had no intentions of setting himself up as a spokesman for the crew, but now, looking at the girl, he almost wished he were not going to let her down. He said awkwardly, "Men can only stand so much."

The girl said hotly, "Do you think it's easy for dad, then? Sure, he's been with Bull Gantry for twelve years, and he has a good job, but his heart is with his men,

just as it has always been. It's not the first crew Gantry has shanghaied and it's not the first time dad has been in on it. But always before they've been fed and paid and treated right and some of them have stayed on. I want you to know that, Mr. Lin. Dad is too modest to tell you."

"Terry, keep out of this."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. Put the blame on this Mig Bovee, where it belongs. It's him cuts the corners and sets up death trap scaffolding. It's him ordering in dirt fills that won't hold back a trickle. Let the crew blow up for once. It's what is needed. Just don't let them lose their heads, Mr. Lin. Men like that go crazy when they lose their heads, and if dad would tell you the truth he'd tell you it's the only reason he hasn't started something himself!"

SHANTY the Mick was on his feet, bellowing his daughter to silence, but the look on his face left no doubt that Terry had been telling the truth. There was some sort of conspiracy here to wreck this job and Shanty, with a doglike loyalty to his firm, was unable to cope with it. Lin felt some of the fire of this girl get under his hide and start itching him. He said, "What's your opinion, Shanty?"

The big Irishman didn't have a chance to answer. There was a feverish pounding on the door. Shanty yelled, "Don't knock it down, you blatherskite! Push it open!"

It was Leland, the man from the company store. He went into a fit of maudlin slobbers when he saw Lin Carey. He said, "Thank God, Mr. Carey, I've found you. I've looked all over the camp for you!" He ran forward quickly, took Lin's right hand in both of his and actually started brushing dirt from Lin's work clothes. He said, "The wagons just come in from Napa. They've got the San Francisco papers with them. Your picture and everything. Mr. Carey, sir, how can we apologize? Come along now with me quickly. Mr. Gantry will be furious if I keep him waiting another minute."

Lin heard Shanty's pipe drop from his teeth, saw the wide, startled disbelief in Terry's eyes. He couldn't resist a parting remark in her direction. He said, "I haven't been drunk in over a month, Miss Terry, and the pot belly I worked off with

a pick and shovel under your father's supervision."

The storekeeper was running back and forth like an anxious dog. Lin tipped his hat casually and followed the man out into the dark.

In the short distance between Shanty's cabin and the long house where Bull Gantry had his office, Lin Carey forgot the entire evening. There was only one thing in his mind now and that kept singing there, over and over. The wagons were here and his identity was established. No more half-cooked beans and wormy pork; no more beatings at the hands of Mig Bovee and back-breaking days on a pick and shovel. There'd be hell to pay now and he'd make them eat out of his hand for every hour he had spent here. He got to thinking about what a tale it would make back in San Francisco. They'd talk about it on cocktail row for the next year. Stuck off on a construction job with a bunch of waterfront scum. He caught himself excluding Shanty and his daughter from that classification. The storekeeper opened the door and stepped aside, letting Lin into the office. It was the first time he had ever seen Bull Gantry.

He didn't know what it was he expected to see, but whatever it was this man didn't fit the picture. He was small, wiry, his hair iron gray, his eyes deep brown. But it was not his physical appearance that was so striking. It was the nervousness of the man, the completely whipped dejection about him. He ran a shaking hand over his forehead and said, "Now I've seen everything. Sit down, Mr. Carey."

There was a two-week-old San Francisco paper on his desk and from it's front page a picture of Lin stared up. The caption said, *MILLIONAIRE PLAYBOY MISSING. FOUL PLAY FEARED.*

Bull Gantry pointed at it, said, "Why didn't you come to me, Mr. Carey?"

A sneering grin curled one corner of Lin's mouth. He had them on the run now. Let them squirm. He said, "There's a gent called Mig Bovee between you and the men, Mr. Gantry."

Gantry said, "Yes." He got up, rubbing his hands together. He said, "Can I fix you a drink? Good Lord, man, we've got to talk this thing out."

Gantry was half way through his drink

before Lin realized he had refused for himself. He said, "Tell me, Gantry, do you always run your jobs like this?"

"I don't understand, Carey."

He understood, right enough. He was scared. Lin said, "Those six men killed on that scaffold. That was as much murder as the man Bovee killed in the bunk-house."

Gantry said, "I just heard about it. I'm sick, Carey. Sick as hell. I haven't been able to oversee things myself the way I should." He stopped pacing, grasped Lin by the shirt front and said, "Believe me, Carey, if you'll just not mention all this to your dad—if you'll just take my apology . . . I know I can't offer you money—you could buy and sell my entire outfit. But I'll make this job right, I promise you."

Out of it all Gantry had told the truth once, the way Lin saw it. He was sick, there was no doubt about that. It was the sickness of fear and worry.

Lin said, "How are you going to go about it?"

Gantry seemed to choke over the ray of hope, eagerly. "The wagons brought up an entire new crew. This bunch is so dissatisfied now they'll never work out. We'll send them back to San Francisco."

"With no blackball against them?"

"No blackball, I swear it! I'll pay them off and you can stand here and watch me pay them if you want."

"If they've got any pay coming, after what they've been soaked for clothes and tobacco."

"I've straightened that out already. That was Bovee's idea. They'll have pay coming."

"All right, Gantry," Lin said smugly. "I've nothing against you personally. It was all a mistake and I'm willing to forget it." He offered his hand, then added, "Mig Bovee is a different thing. I'll have a reception committee waiting for him the first time he hits San Francisco." He turned and left the office abruptly, leaving a pitifully grateful sick man behind him.

THE SIGHT of Bull Gantry crawling to him had done something for Lin Carey. He felt whole once again and already he was picturing the party he'd throw when he got back to San Francisco. He'd really give the newspapers something

to talk about this time. As for Mig Bovee, he could hire a couple of thugs with good billies to take care of that situation. He felt the new muscles in his right arm and cockily thought perhaps he'd take a bit of a hand in it himself. As for the men, what the hell? They'd come out with more money than they usually had and they'd spend it and wind up shanghaied on a ship or another construction job. There was nothing to be done about people like that.

He thought of what the girl had said about the way the job was being handled and he put that aside, too. Maybe that's the way construction jobs were done, how did he know? His dad had made a few million dollars out of it and Lin had been allowed to spend his share of it. Why be a fool and stick a knife in the goose that laid the golden egg? The lights of San Francisco were not too far off and Lin Carey felt good. He practically bumped into the girl before he noticed her.

She stood there in the dust of the road, her hands on her hips, her eyes wide and bright. She said, "You didn't waste much time, did you, Lin Carey? How low can a man get?"

He said, "Wait a minute, cutie. What—"

"Cutie, is it?" she said. "And it was cute of you to get me to talk my fool head off for you, wasn't it? Now you know where dad stands and after twelve years you'll have him blackballed. You filthy swine with your filthy money. It's no wonder Denis Kearney and the likes are getting a following!"

He said, "Look, sister. I don't know what you're talking about. If it's the men you're worrying about, you can quit. They'll be paid and hauled back home. You're getting a new crew."

"Sure they're being paid," she said viciously. "Fifty dollars each. And what will they be charged for riding back to Napa on one of those wagons? Fifty dollars each, that's what! Mighty clever of you and your thieving dad and Bull Gantry and his Mig Bovee! But did you have to have Bovee split my dad's head open? The one man—"

Her words spilled on and on, bitter, nearly hysterical. He reached out and took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Listen, you spitfire" he said. "Do you

think I came here spying? Did I take those beatings from Bovee for the fun of it?"

She didn't answer. Instead she jerked out of his grasp and slapped him hard across the mouth.

And then he didn't know how it happened or why. He grabbed her again and he held her in his arms and he kissed her, full on the lips. And it wasn't just a kiss. All the fire and life of her was in her lips and a turmoil to which he hadn't admitted was in his. He let her go and she backed away, her eyes still wide, and the look in her eyes might have been hate and it might have been fear. Or it might have been surprise.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Last Trail Out

HE WATCHED her go and he shrugged it off and told himself the whole thing was more spice for his escapade, nothing more. And yet there was something wrong with his thinking and he knew it. He felt shaky inside, unclean. He kept thinking that what she had said about Shanty getting his head split open was merely a figure of speech, her way of talking. He wanted to find out for sure and at the same time he was afraid to see for fear it might be literally so. On the heels of that thought he asked himself what difference it made. Shanty was well capable of taking care of himself and so was his daughter. It was over; a bad dream; a laugh.

He went back to the bunkhouse to get the overcoat he had worn when he came here. It had cost a hundred and seventy five dollars. It could be cleaned and used for driving and knocking around.

He found the men in good spirits, stumbling over one another in their haste to get their handful of possessions together and get out of here. He heard them talking about being paid off and knew that Bull Gantry hadn't lied to him on that score.

He went to his own bunk and the men moved away from him. Word of his identity had spread fast. He passed a couple of remarks that were supposed to have been funny and they fell flat on their face. Benecke, the pick handle advocate, hawked

his throat and spat close to Lin's feet. It might have been an accident.

Once there had been a relationship of necessity between himself and all of them; it had never been openly expressed, but it had been there. Now there was nothing. He was apart, a man from a different world. He picked up the overcoat, wadded it into a ball and thrust it under his arm. He thought, The hell with them, and went back outside and walked down to where the wagons were unloading.

Mig Bovee himself was supervising the job. Bull Gantry was nowhere in sight. No one, not even Bovee, paid any attention to him. The new crew was over at the store signing up and the old crew was coming down from the bunkhouse, keeping back, looking expectantly and longingly at the wagons.

A buckboard came down the hill from the direction of Shanty's cabin. It was piled high with a quickly-thrown-together collection of household goods and personal belongings. Beside the driver on the seat Terry sat with her arm around her father. He was hunched over, leaning close to her, and his red-thatched head was completely encircled with bandages. Lin felt a quick surge of emotion, started forward, saw Mig Bovee and his teamsters standing there and changed his mind.

He looked at the girl without wanting to and he saw that her eyes were alive with fire and that she was looking straight at him. He felt a slow flush crawl up his cheeks.

The buckboard pulled up by the wagons and the driver stepped off the seat and said to Mig Bovee, "Here they are. I picked up their junk, too."

Bovee looked at the girl, a wide, arrogant grin on his face. He said, "Maybe the next time you won't be so high and mighty with your betters." Bovee turned his head and for the first time Lin noticed the deep red scratches across one cheek. Scratches like finger nails might make. He couldn't tell why that gave him such a sudden lift.

The girl said, "Will someone help me with Shanty?"

Lin hurried over to the side of the buckboard. She looked down at him and there was a sneer on her lips. She said, "Not you, pig." Somebody shoved him

and Benecke stepped in and helped lift Shanty down to the ground.

The big foreman was weak on his legs, weaving. He had a glazed, bewildered look in his eyes. His lips were battered and there were ugly bruises on his cheek; a mouse forming under his left eye. Lin thought savagely, Somebody held his arms or Bovee could never have beaten him like that.

Bovee had moved around to the back of the buckboard and was shoving roughly at the accumulation piled there. He jerked at a trunk and pots and pans scattered. Some of them fell off into the dust. He nodded his head toward the trunk and said, "What's this?"

The girl said, "It's mine."

Bovee said, "I asked you what the hell's in it?"

She said, "None of your damn business."

BOVEE gave a yank on the trunk, jerking it off the wagon bed. It fell to the ground, lighting on its end. The lid flew open. Some pictures dropped out. A couple of plaster statues such as might be won at a carnival. The red bandanna curtains she had had at the windows. Bovee kicked at the trunk. He said, "We're not haulin' all this junk all the way back to Napa. What else you got here?"

He dug into the boxes and crates, jerking them out, spilling the contents. Lin felt a livid fire running through his veins, but he stood there, doing nothing. Then Terry moved.

She leaned over the back of the seat and her right hand went down into the rubble Bovee was making and came up with an iron skillet. Before Bovee could move she had whanged him over the head with the heavy implement.

There was a roar of laughter from all the men and in that laughter the entire tone of things seemed to change. Bovee made a wild grab for Terry, catching her by the arm, half jerking her off the seat. Lin moved in fast, his fist cocked. He said, "Get your hands off her, Bovee!"

Bovee dropped back, his arms swinging at his side, but before he had a chance to fight a half dozen men had stepped in front of him. Jaxon, the single tax man, said, "Lay off, Bovee. You had it coming

to you, and you damn' well know it!"

Bovee was smart enough to back down, but as he did Lin got a good look at his face and at what was in the man's eyes. Terry and Shanty would pay for this little scene and they'd pay hard and the men would pay for laughing. It was Bovee's way of thinking and it was written all over his face. He stood back and there was a smile of sadistic pleasure on his lips. He said, "All right, you that are going back to San Francisco, line up."

The men hesitated, then formed a ragged line. Lin stood back and he knew that Terry was watching him closely. Bovee said, "Ain't you goin' with us, Mr. Carey?" He put an undue accent on the Mister.

Lin said, "I'll be around when you're ready to leave."

The girl said flatly, "I'd bet on that."

He turned his back on her and walked across the street to the store, pushed by the clerk and entered Bull Gantry's office. Gantry was sitting behind his desk, both hands in front of him, and he was staring straight ahead, like a man in a trance. Lin said, "Gantry, I made up my mind too fast. There's a few provisions I'll make in exchange for forgetting things."

Gantry didn't answer. He didn't move. It gave Lin a creepy feeling, making him want to shake the man to see if he was alive. He said lamely, "I don't know what your fight is with Shanty but there'll be no blackballing, understand? That's one provision. And this business of charging the men fifty dollars for hauling them back to Napa. That's out too."

Gantry didn't move. He stared straight ahead. He said softly, "Sit down, Carey. I want to tell you something. I want to tell you while I'm still alive to tell you."

There was a cold clamminess on Lin Carey's back as he took the chair and met the blank stare of the construction boss. Lin said, "You're sick, Gantry. I'll get the camp doctor."

Gantry shook his head. "I'm not sick. Not that way. I'm ruined, that's all. Wiped out. And by the time you can do anything about it I'll be dead. But I want to tell you so you'll know the truth and so your dad will know the truth. We worked together a long time, me and your dad. He's all right, Lin. Believe that. He never

pulled a crooked job like this in his life."

Lin started to interrupt, but Gantry stopped him. "I got to gambling, Lin," the construction boss said. "Maybe I hit a crooked game, maybe I didn't. I'm not making excuses. I tried to stall 'em. But they knew it wouldn't work. If I gave them the profits off this job I wouldn't have enough money to take another one. They told me to cut corners on the job—shanghai crews, keep 'em for a month, lay 'em off and charge 'em full wages to haul 'em back. I refused to do it. So they sent Mig Bovee to see I behave myself. I haven't been outside this building for two months, Lin. I tried it once and Mig beat me up until I was in bed for a week. That's what I want you to tell your dad, because I'll never have a chance to tell him myself. I've taken all I'll take now."

The little man got up from behind the desk and he looked smaller even than Lin had remembered him and he thought of the name they had given him—Bull—and he saw how it might have been in the old days. The tenacious set of the jaw, the hard glitter in the eyes. And somehow they reminded him of Terry's eyes and the quivering went out of his belly. For the first time then the muscle hardness across Lin's belly, the new strength in his arms, seemed to mean something. The door opened and as it did the muttered rumble of men came through and Mig Bovee was standing there. Bovee said, "A damn pretty speech, Gantry, but that's as far as it's gonna go." He looked at Lin and he said, "As for you, Carey, the papers say you're missing. Nobody will care much if you stay that way."

They saw his hand move toward his belt and when it came up it was holding the six-shooter.

CHAPTER SIX

Tenderfoot Fighting Man

NOW for the first time the real thing that had been stirring inside Lin Carey came to life. The beatings he had taken at the hands of Mig Bovee, the six men falling to their death from a jerry-built scaffolding, the murder of the construction stiff who had guts enough to try to back up his convictions. The bewildered

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whipped disbelief in the eyes of Shanty The Mick and the hot defiance in the face of Terry.

He threw himself headlong, trying to butt his head into Bovee's middle, and as he did both hands locked around the wrist of Bovee's gun hand. The weapon exploded harmlessly and lead ripped into the ceiling and Bovee's knee came up and caught Lin in the pit of the stomach.

He felt a momentary dark swirling sickness and then there was a quick movement behind him and a shattering crash as Bull Gantry smashed a heavy water pitcher against Mig Bovee's head.

Bovee fell back, and gulping air into his empty lungs Lin twisted, forced the big man's arm back, got it behind Mig's shoulders and started pushing up. His face was against Bovee's face and he could feel the perspiration start on the big man's forehead and bead across his lips. He twisted and pushed with every ounce of strength that was in him until it seemed that Bovee's arm would break. And then the fist opened and the pistol dropped. Lin struck at it with his foot, kicked it out of the way, and freeing his left hand he smashed Bovee in the mouth.

Mig broke away from Lin's grip and he swung his right fist, a wild, tearing blow with the strength of a giant behind it. But he didn't have a chance to find his target and his arm, half paralyzed from the wrenching Lin had given it, was not the lethal weapon it should have been. Lin rolled with the blow and felt the skin rip from his temple, but he didn't go down. He chopped in again, a left hook, then a right, and he saw Bovee's head rock back on his thick neck. Lin hammered in another blow and he knew he had shattered the bones in his left hand, felt the pain of it scream up his arm.

Bull Gantry dove low and caught Bovee around the legs, knocking him off balance. And in that second Lin Carey hit again and Bovee was down—then up.

There was a bellowing roar of rage that sounded like the scream of a wounded animal and Mig raised his right fist and brought it down like a hammer against the side of Bull Gantry's head. He caught Gantry by the throat then and beat the man's head against the floor, three times

FIGHTING IRON IN HIS BLOOD!

before Lin could smash Bovee in the face and break his grip.

Gantry lay there without moving and Bovee's fist caught Lin flat in the face, stunning him, blinding him, and he felt the blood spray from his nostrils. Lin tried for Bovee's throat, failed, and instinct told him he was fighting for his life now. He swung his knee sharply and caught Bovee under the chin. He could hear the shattering grind of teeth.

Bovee rolled on the floor, got to his feet and came charging in, head down, his feet flailing. Lin caught him around the knees with both arms and Bovee spilled to the floor on his face. Lin scrambled to his feet, got back out of range, waited long enough to draw his sleeve across his eyes, wiping away the blood and the haze.

Bovee was up now, coming back, that bull-like charge, headlong. Lin laced his hands together, waited, and when Bovee was close enough he chopped down hard across the back of the big man's neck. The pain in his left hand sickened him. He brought his knee up again and felt Bovee's teeth cut into his kneecap.

Bovee was dazed. He moved in a circle, trying to find his target. Lin threw all his weight behind his right fist and caught the big man a solid blow behind the ear. Mig's legs started to give and for a second his hands dropped and hung at his side, hung low, nearly touching the floor. Lin swung his right again, catching Bovee just below the Adam's apple.

He had him at his mercy now, Lin knew. Grasping Bovee's shirt front with his ruined left hand Lin started lashing with his right. And now it was not for himself he was fighting but for those men who had lived thirty days of hell; for that ruined little man there on the floor, the man who had once been a big man. And for a girl who had faith in her father.

THERE was no sound in the room except for the soft, squishing tear of flesh as Lin's fist thudded against Mig Bovee's mashed and bleeding face. Then the room began to sway and Lin was dizzy and sick and he released his grip. Bovee fell to the floor.

He needed air then. Lots of air. Space. He staggered through the door, across

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the storeroom and outside into the dust of the street. A milling, snarling mob of men met him. A mob of men led by Benecke. Benecke of the Denis Kearney Pick Handle Brigade.

They had shovels and axes and picks and two of them had somehow fashioned a crude torch. He heard Benecke say, "There's one of them now! Get him!"

Lin looked beyond them and saw Shanty the Mick, still sagging on his feet, the head bandage stained now with new blood. There was a rope around his neck and one of the wagon tongues had been raised and propped up with a saw horse. The mob surged forward, and Lin retreated back through the door.

He had seen Terry standing there by her father, her face stark white, her eyes wide. And he saw how it must have been. Bovee had told these men they would pay their entire wages for the ride back to Napa. And out of that crowd there had come a leader to rebel against the injustice, and that leader had been Terry.

But she had failed to see the one thing her father had feared about men like these. Singly, each man was an individual, a human being, and treated as such he was a useful unit in the whole of things. But under the wrong leadership they would fail to think and they would know only destruction and bloodshed.

They came to the front of the building and Lin heard them ripping off the door, smashing out the windows, and one man yelled, "Let's burn it down!" He backed into the office and Mig Bovee was lying there on the floor.

It took all the strength Lin possessed to get Mig Bovee to his feet. Then he draped the big man's arm around his neck and carried him, dragging him along. And he came to the wrecked front door and stood there that way and for a second the mob stopped.

This was Lin Carey's second, Lin knew. It was a second that would never be repeated, never again in a lifetime. He worked free of Bovee's unconscious body, pushed with all his strength. Bovee twisted, turned awkwardly and fell there in the dust. Lin shouted, his voice hoarse. "There's the man you're after! I've whipped him for you. Gantry had nothing

FIGHTING IRON IN HIS BLOOD!

to do with the way things have been run and Shanty the Mick was the one man who tried to help us. If there's any man of you doesn't believe that and wants to make something of it come on up here and meet me!"

Benecke roared, "Idle rich! Robber from Nob Hill! Get him!"

The command fell flat. In the back of the crowd two men turned and walked away, and it was all that was needed to start it. Someone said, "Let's listen to what he has to say." Someone else walked over and took the rope from the neck of Shanty the Mick.

Lin got off by himself then, staying away from them, and he sat down on a rock and held his face in his hands for a long time.

He felt her hand on the back of his neck then and it was cool and firm and it felt like it belonged there. She said, "Why did you do it, Lin?"

He couldn't change completely. He couldn't be another man all at once. He didn't want to be. There was some of the old Lin Carey that was wrong and there was some of the old Lin Carey that was right, and the right part he wanted to keep. The devilishness and the carefreeness. He said, "Because I'm madly in love with you."

She said, "You're crazy as a loon."

He said, "Do you like crazy people?"

It was supposed to be another joke—funny. Yet he found with a sudden panic that it was going to make a difference to him how she answered that question.

She let her hand steal up the back of his neck. She said, "How crazy?"

He stood up suddenly and looked at her and a whole multitude of feelings ran through him. He said, "Crazy enough to try to figure out some way of pulling Bull Gantry out of the mess he's in and crazy enough to blow out this dam and start over again and do the job right and supervise the job myself and have your dad in charge of the whole thing."

He ran out of breath and she put her hand against his lips. She smiled at him and there was a lot of the devil back in her eyes. She said, "You're crazy enough for me, Lin Carey."

THE END

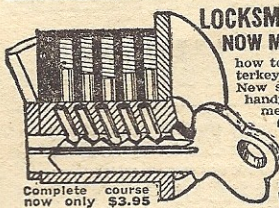
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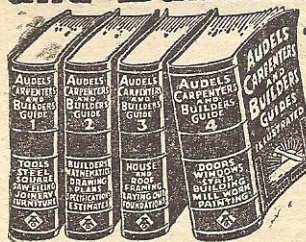
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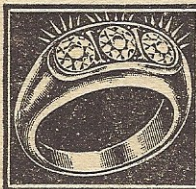
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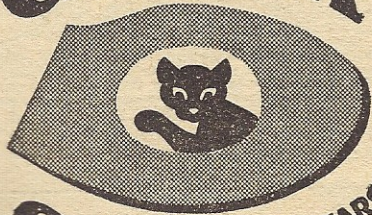
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SOLE OUT-WEARS LEATHER!

DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 79)

show again in his cheeks. His eyes rove around. Lisa's sitting where she slid down the wall after Borego slammed her. Her head is on her arms an' it's like she's sleepin'. The Kid's eyes lose their pain. "Lisa," he says, sharp.

She lifts her head, startled, like she's just woke up. "Rip!" she cries, glad but unbelievin'. She looks at me as I rise up. She looks at the pile of flesh that was Borego LeGore. Then, sobbing, she scrambles over to Rip an' snuggles into his arms, kissing his hurts away.

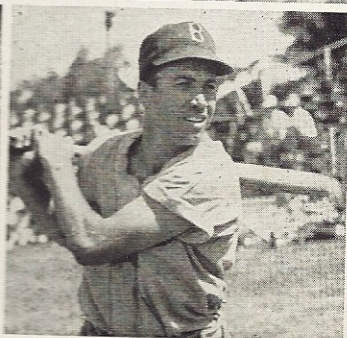
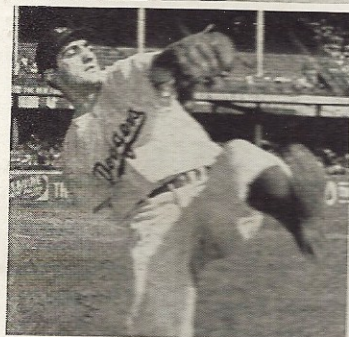
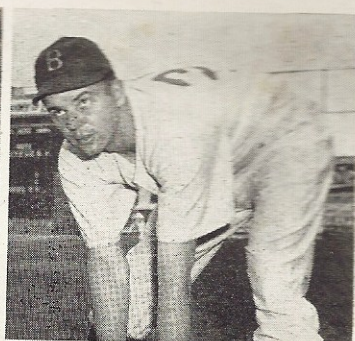
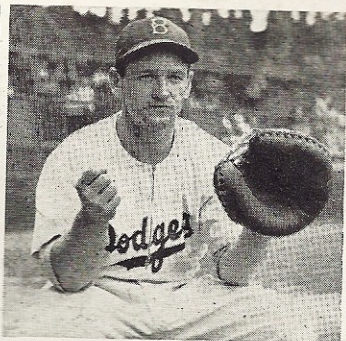
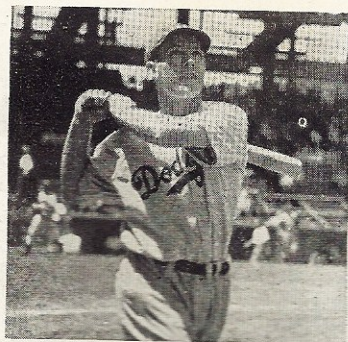
Outside, the firing is drawing away. I take up my gun, from where the Kid has laid it on the floor, an' walk out, still shaky from my narrow squeak. The renegades have quit the cabins an' hit for the corrals, speeded on by Jake Drackert's spaced shots. Even as I look, they fork their ponies, spur into a boxed canyon an' disappear. An' the sheriff bounces up an' runs limpin' to cabin one. A minute later he's in cabin two an' presently he's stumpin' up, grumbling an' mean-tempered.

"Pie-eyed loco eater," he barks, an' there's tears in his eyes as he cusses. Then he drops his voice, sorta wistful. "Ain't seen anything of Lisa, have yuh?"

"Feller's got her inside," I say, non-chalant. "One tough hombre that I don't want no truck with. 'Course, if you want to tackle him. . . ."

He don't let me finish. He clutches his gun, sets his jaw an' barges in. In a moment he backs out, his face red. "It's on me," he sputters. "An old fool drownin' reason by running' off at the head. I'll buy you a drink when we git to town, Ten-sleep."

Lisa calls to him an' he goes back in. An' that's my cue to hit for Butch Cassidy's stone stairs under the waterfall. It ain't but forty miles to the Arizona line an' the sooner I cover it the less embarrassment for all concerned. It'll be good to get out of politics again, but when I return to New Mexico—after the last speech is made an' the last ballot voted—I aim to entice the new congressman away from his beautiful wife an' drool a batch of chin slobber about the good old days. . . .



TOP (L. TO R.): PETE REISER, BRUCE EDWARDS, EDDIE MIKSIS
BOTTOM (L. TO R.): RALPH BRANCA, DUKE SNIDER, CLYDE KING

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