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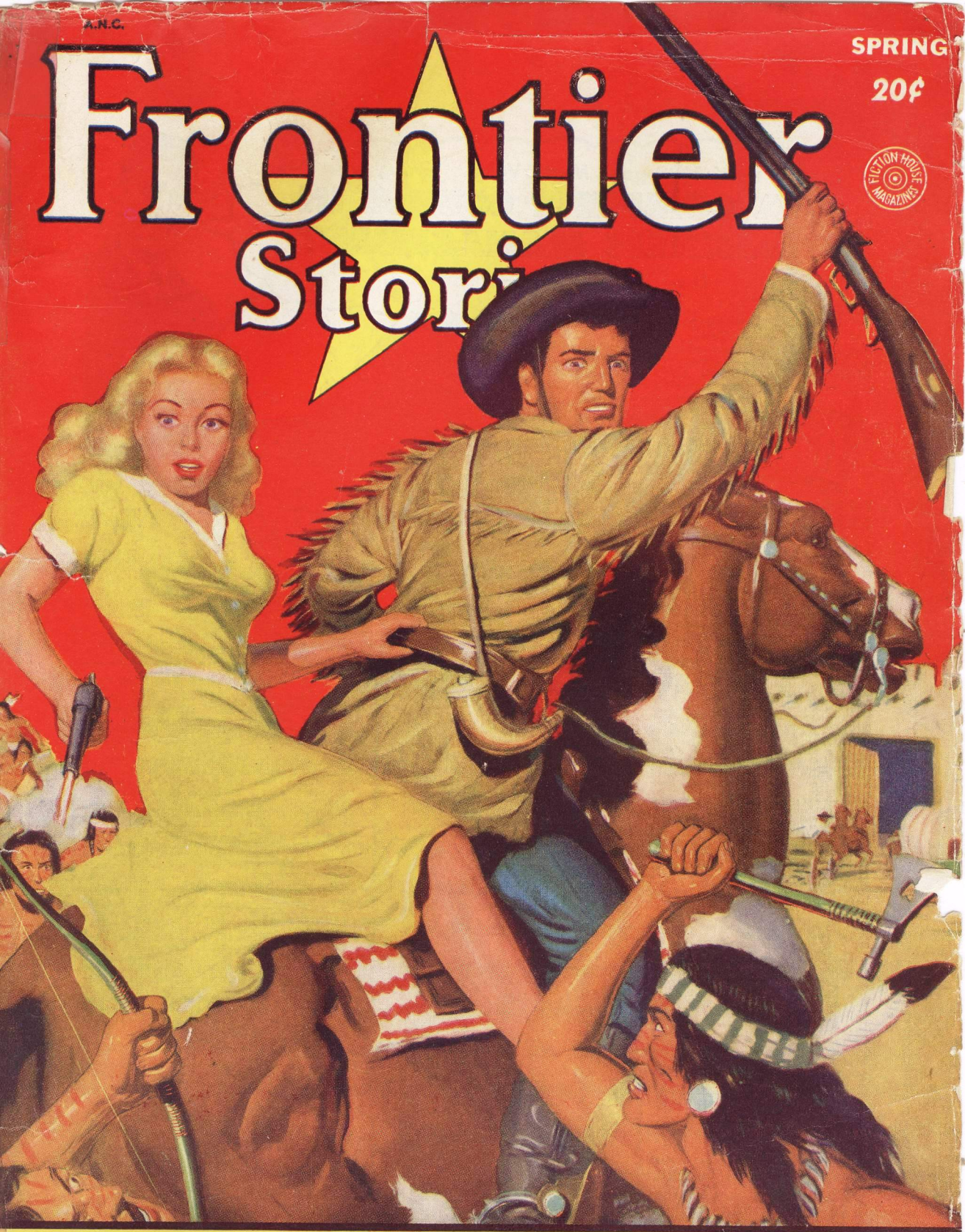

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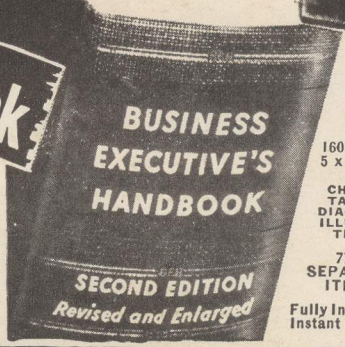

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Six Gripping Stories and Articles

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ROLL ON, GREENHORNS, ROLL ON!

By DEAN OWEN

Furtive eyes gleamed at that line of creaking Conestogas, at their great wheels sinking under precious loads, the rich goods, the hidden guns, the white squaws . . . and tongues licked at thin, cruel lips with the thought of the flaming dawn ahead . . .

A DEAD MAN HE WAS SUPposed to be, for the word had gone out along the trails that Captain Gil Beacham would never again take a wagon train out of Missouri. He was buried in Central America, so they said, and by now the flesh should have rotted from his bones under the weight of soil tamped hard with rifle butts and soldado boots. An unmarked grave, for such is the fate of a revolutionary.

But the story was wrong; he was very much alive. However the prison of El Cortez had left its mark on him in these ten months since the others had returned to the States and left him to die.

It was to seek an accounting with those who had betrayed him that set his feet once again on the St. Louis waterfront. He swung down from the St. Marie that had brought him up from New Orleans, seeing the old familiar confusion with his Texas eyes and finding no joy in his return. A gambler, he might have been, or

Blacky got one shot away and then Gil tripped the trigger.

perhaps one of those bright young men the government was sending to the Natchez country to supervise Reconstruction. The pistol beneath his box coat made no perceptible bulge.

A man was passing out handbills and Gil found one shoved into his fist. HORT KELLRADEN'S YUMA COMPANY INVITES YOUR PARTICIPATION IN A GREAT LAND PROMOTION—

Gil Beacham read no further and crumpled the handbill. "Kellraden won't reap the fruits of his efforts this time," he said aloud. "Not if he's dead."

The man passing out the handbills gave him a sharp glance. Gil pushed on through the press of ladies in plumed hats and the gentlemen who held their arms. He longed for the clean sweep of the Texas plains. But first there was a score to settle so that the black murder could be purged from his heart.

In other years he would have walked to his destination but now he signalled a cab out of the confusion of drays and carriages. The cabby, a waspish little man, maneuvered his carriage out of line with a practiced skill, defeating the aims of his competitors.

Gil gave the address of a first class hotel, for, though he was low in funds, Hort Kellraden would soon be paying the bills.

The carriage, he noted after a moment, was parallelling the river, cutting through a dark alley between warehouses that gave off their odors of spice and roasted coffee. The sound of hoofbeats in the carriage wake caused him to look around.

Through the rear window he saw two mounted men swing into the alley behind him. A vein that angled across his high forehead, filled as anger rushed the blood to his face. His finely chiseled features tightened.

He cocked his gun and held it in his lap. By nature a friendly man, prison had put the mark of bitterness in him, chilling his warm eyes. Tall and spare, flat in the hips, he was a man to command attention. Before, he had been a dreamer with his visions of helping the downtrodden. Now he was interested in only one man—himself. There was a new impatience in him as if he had lost valuable years and intended to make them up quickly.

Hort Kellraden is losing no time, he thought, as he studied the horsemen; roughly dressed men such as could be hired to do quick and silent murder on the St. Louis waterfront.

This was an old familiar story, so he gauged his chances with a cool detachment. The cabby, he decided, could be discounted. That left the pair on horseback.

And a man with both feet on the ground, Gil had learned long ago, always has the advantage when it comes to rapid and accurate fire.

Abruptly the coach slowed to negotiate a sharp turn into a refuse-littered slot between two brick buildings. Here was where they intended to trap him, he knew. He swung down into the dust, letting momentum carry him a dozen yards. The pair of horsemen reined up, surprise on their rough faces.

One of them, he saw, wore a red beard, and it was this man who recovered the quicker and died first. He swung his horse aside, snapping up his gun, but Gil Beacham shot him in the face. The man tumbled loosely into a rubbish pile.

His companion wheeled and went spurring back the way he had come; a short dark man with a scar across his chin. The dead mans' horse bolted up the alley with flying stirrups.

The carriage had braked to a halt. The driver turned a white face on Gil and lifted his hands.

"It wasn't me!" he cried. "They paid me a gold eagle to get you. That's all I know."

The man, Gil reasoned, probably spoke the truth. But he did not put down his gun until the carriage had rumbled away. Redbeard lay where he had fallen. Shot through the jaw, the heavy slug had angled upward. He was not a pretty sight.

Nothing in his pockets to give a clue to the purchaser of this St. Louis brand of sudden death.

But he knew the answer—Hort Kellraden.

Nervous and on edge at this attempt to kill him, he caught the sound of new dan-

ger and straightened, holding his gun on a girl who had suddenly appeared from a doorway. Her face, he saw was bone white. She might have been pretty had it not been for the sheer terror in her brown eyes. She ran a shaking hand through her mass of soft hair that had in it the burnt orange of autumn leaves.

"You killed him," she said in a low, tremulous voice.

Gil lowered his gun. "It was me or him, ma'am."

She wore a black waist edged in white that revealed the deep cleft of her bosom. Small slippered feet showed daintily beneath the full sweep of her dark belled skirt.

She swayed and he stepped forward to put a steadying hand on her shoulder. She drew away, staring in horror at the dead man. Then she whirled and disappeared into the doorway where she had come. He heard the clatter of a bolt shooting home. He listened to her frantic running steps in the big building.

Over the door he saw a sign: RIVER PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDIO. Obviously a rear entrance. He left the spot quickly for already a few stragglers were approaching to learn the reason for the gunshots.

THERE was the pick of good horses in St. Louis and he put a deposit on a deep-chested bay, corn-fed and tough and ready for the grueling miles that would lie ahead once Hort Kellraden had been faced and the business done with. Other purchases included a .45 and a shell belt. In the hotel room he discarded his finery and donned a wool shirt and heavy black pants and boots. A session at cards in New Orleans had given him enough for river passage and a few clothes. When he had left the prison of El Cortez he had been ragged and unkempt, but he had never lost courage.

In the mirror when he shaved he saw a face he did not know. Blackened from the sun, it was, in sharp contrast to the fresh scar on one cheek. There were other scars such as those across his back and on his right temple at the edge of his thick hair, streaked corn yellow by the sun. But these scars were from the weighted whip and the club. The deep unseen scars were in the soul, burned there by the glowing eyes of a woman. Her smile of betrayal was a constant thing in his mind.

From the vest pocket of his discarded suit, he took a small slip of woman's hair, tied with a black ribbon. In the light there was still red gold in it. Then he untied the ribbon and let the hairs fall separately out the window to vanish in the wind.

Three years before he had asked Marcy Madden for a lock of her hair. Right here in St. Louis, it was, before they had all sailed for the great adventure in Honduras, Hort Kellraden, Marcy Madden and Gil; taking up where William Walker and his filibuster had ended so disasterously in '60. Full of vision and hope for the downtrodden, it had been a momentous voyage. But Gil Beacham reckoned without the treachery of his companions and the conniving of one General Gomez who would sell out his own people.

General Gomez had been stood up against a wall and shot by the very government he sought to depose; the same fate suffered by William Walker. But when Marcy Madden and Hort Kellraden fled the county, it was Gil who paid for their treachery; long months in a waterfront prison, expecting every day to be his last. Then the companionship of Rafael Menendez who brought books and fruit to Gil's cell. And in time Menendez was able to arrange for a rowboat to get him to a ship in the harbor. And then New Orleans and now St. Louis, with vengeance riding in his soul like a malignant growth.

II

AN HOUR LATER HE WAS climbing the outside stairs of a dingy waterfront building bearing the legend in two foot letters:

YUMA COMPANY,
HORT KELLRADEN, PRES.

A bookkeeper, bent over a ledger, peered at him out of steel-rimmed spec-

tacles, but Gil brushed past him to an inner office. Hort Kellraden's bulk rose quickly from a rolltop desk. He extended a slim, white hand, which to Gil's surprise was not holding a gun.

"Gil!" he cried in his well-modulated voice, "it's good to see you back from the living dead."

"You could have attended my funeral tomorrow—if you'd been lucky. Two of your boys tried to kill me. One of them won't try again."

A man gasped behind him and Gil spun, his gun cocked and ready. The man had risen off a bench where he had been sitting unnoticed in a corner of the big office. There was a great show of guns at his thick middle, but he made no move toward them now.

All bone and muscle, this man, but in another ten years, if he lived that long, he would go to beef and his neck would thicken below his jowls. A bull now, but a young bull, with a hair-spring temper that showed in his yellow eyes.

"You seem surprise," Gil said curtly. "Were they friends of yours?"

The man wiped a heavy forearm across his mouth as if this would give him time to think.

Kellraden's eyes, black as ebony, had steel lights in them. "This is my right hand man, Gil," he said by way of introduction. "Saul Trippler."

When the two men made no effort to shake hands, Kellraden jerked his close-clipped black hair at the door. Only when Saul Trippler had swaggered out of the office did Gil holster his gun.

"Trippler doesn't have your brains, Gil," Kellraden said, and filled two shot glasses from a decanter. "But he has bull courage and is one of the best I've seen with a gun. I hope you two get along."

Gil smiled secretly and drank his whisky. "You're assuming," he said, his hot Texas eyes on Kellraden's face, "that I'm going to work for you."

Kellraden showed his surprise. "Why else would you return to St. Louis?"

"To collect what you owe me—and maybe kill you."

Hort Kellraden's fair skin darkened. He had not changed much, Gil noted. He must be forty or over. He still wore his black hair clipped short. His cheekbones were rather high. Two grooves ran to his thin straight mouth. He was two inches over six feet, which made him shade Gil by an inch. His dark clothes showed the mark of a good tailor.

"I'm broke, Gil," he said and spread his strong tapered fingers. "I'm finished in St. Louis. Yuma is my next stop. And there's a place for you — a good place." He went on to explain that he had learned Gil was seen in New Orleans, and refused to send out a wagon train bound for Yuma until Gil could get here. "Saul Trippler was going to take the train out. It'll be your job now."

Gil gave that a thoughtful study, watching Kellraden's face. As always when disturbed, Kellraden flipped a silver dollar.

Kellraden told his story well, glib and persuasive as ever. Fourteen wagons had been sold to merchants going to Yuma. "The Colorado is navigable. I'm staking my life that it will be the St. Louis of the future. Our greatest inland port."

He tossed a chamois bag of coins on the desk. "A down payment, Gil. Stay with me this time and you'll be rich."

Gil's mouth tightened as he turned his own plans over in his mind. He had one of two courses, join up with Kellraden again or kill him. There was such a thing, he decided finally, as beating a man at his own game. When he had decided upon his course of action he asked just enough questions so Kellraden could not guess his intentions. "Why did you throw me to the dogs when your filibuster went sour?"

"They told me you had been shot along with General Gomez."

Gil put just the right touch of venom in his voice when he said, "Did you leave me behind because you wanted Marcy Madden for yourself?"

It was the first time the name of the woman who had been uppermost in their thoughts had been mentioned. By a supreme effort of will, Kellraden controlled the workings of his white face. "I took Marcy to Honduras because with her beauty she was a political asset. She had a way with men. You fell in love with her and now you're blaming me——"

GIL rose quickly to his feet, his own plans momentarily forgotten in his rush of anger. "You couldn't stand it because she favored me. It didn't matter that she smiled on General Gomez to get him on our side. But when she wanted to quit all that and go with me you were furious."

Kellraden clenched his silver coin. "Why deny I was jealous? You're the only man who ever had the guts to stand up to me and I admire you. But forget about Marcy Madden. She's sunk lower than you could imagine."

"Where is she?"

Kellraden waved a hand toward the west and said, "She's out there someplace, riding the trails with her charm and her beauty and her guitar. You'll find her wherever men camp or at some trailtown saloon."

"I still think you and Marcy turned me over to the federal troops."

"I wrote you to leave, Gil."

"I never got the letter."

"Then it was Marcy and Marcy alone who double-crossed you. General Gomez sold us down the river and she saw a chance to share his power, but she had to get rid of you. But, like all women down through history who have played both sides of the fence, she lost when Gomez was killed by his own people."

"I think you're lying, Kellraden."

Kellraden's black eyes were shot with steel lights. He touched the butt of the big silver-mounted gun beneath his coat. That gun had fooled many men. It was the short-barreled revolver Kellraden wore under his right armpit which had killed those men who kept their eyes too long on the silver-mounted gun. He was equally adept with his right or left hand when it came to shooting.

Gil said, "I remember your tricks. Don't pull that short gun on me, or I'll kill you."

Kellraden stared hard for a moment, then poured himself a drink. "Any other man I'd shoot for calling me a liar," he said, watching the younger man. Then his straight mouth broke into a smile. "You always were the visionary, Gil. That's why I liked you. You were going to set men free, but I was only in it for the money."

"I've learned," Gil said stiffly, "that vision counts for nothing in this world. It's the gold, and I intend to get my share. I've already wasted too much time."

There was no denying that Kellraden had the faculty of attracting money. Not that he ever kept much, because he spent it lavishly upon himself.

They had a drink on their new association and Gil felt a moment of revulsion when his hand touched Kellraden's to bind the bargain. He could not help thinking of the lives this man's greed had taken in the past, and the men who would die in the future. He reminded himself that this trip would end in disaster for Kellraden, and sweet revenge for him.

"There are fourteen wagons going to Yuma," Kellraden said, spreading a map on the desk. "Twelve of them I have sold to merchants going into business there."

"And the other two?"

Kellraden's eyes sharpened. "Guns and ammunition." When he saw the question in Gil's eyes, he continued, "They've been in storage here since the war. A little money—and the proper connections—"

Gil tried to keep his thoughts from showing as they discussed the plans. "Take the southern trail to El Paso," Kellraden said, pointing to the map. I'll meet you at Salter's Camp around the first week in September."

Gil said, without looking up, "And what happens to these merchants?"

For a long moment Kellraden was silent. "The Indians have been blamed for less than this," he said finally. "I need those wagons."

"And being associated with you makes me just as much a murderer."

"What are a few lives in exchange for an empire?" Kellraden asked. "Besides, I thought you had changed, that it was only the gold that counted now."

Gil Beacham forced a grin. "When do I leave?"

THAT evening Gil looked up Major Cleve Hammond, who had just returned from Indian Territory. The crisp, efficient officer shook hands with Gil.

"I'm glad to see you back, Captain Beacham."

"You can forget the Captain," Gil said with a tight smile. "The war is over."

"You could have returned to the service. Many Confederate officers are now wearing the blue——"

But Gil shook his head. He didn't tell the major that he had some debts to repay in his own way.

"You have a fine reputation, Beacham," the major said. "I'm glad to see you back in the business of escorting emigrants to the West." He coughed. "I understand —er—Hort Kellraden is sponsoring this train."

"He only sold the wagons, Major. Nothing more. It's my train now." He gave the officer a glance. "If you'd like to check the wagons—"

"That won't be necessary, Beacham. Your word is good enough for me. If you say there is no contraband—"

Gil had not said so, but he shrugged and grinned. The major seemed satisfied.

It rankled Gil, as he made his way from the major's headquarters, to think that Kellraden was using his reputation to get a wagon train out of St. Louis without causing undue suspicion. If those rifles and ammunition were ever discovered by the Army— He shivered at the thought.

The Indians were comparatively peaceful, the major had said, which was good news.

That night Kellraden told Saul Trippler that Gil was to be in command of the wagon.

"You'll take his orders," he said flatly.

Trippler's yellow eyes swung to Gil, standing beside the desk in Kellraden's office. "Suits me," he said gruffly and left them to swagger out the door, his big guns bumping against his thighs.

"I'll remember not to turn my back on him," Gil said.

Kellraden smiled. "Don't worry about Trippler."

"Somebody paid to have me murdered my first day back in St. Louis. It might have been Trippler because he didn't like the idea of me taking his job. Or it might have been you."

"If I ever want to kill you," Kellraden said pointedly, "I won't have to hire it done."

III

THE NEXT MORNING GIL looked over the fourteen wagons with Saul Trippler. The wagons were good, the oxen sturdy. He issued his orders to the assemblage, telling them each wagon must have at least one saddle horse. That was in case some of the wagons broke up so there wouldn't be an added weight on those still rolling. Under cover of darkness he had looked over the two wagons carrying the rifles and ammunition. The stuff was well-hidden in crates stenciled CHINAWARE.

"There will be no women and children on this trip," Gil told the men. "We're traveling fast and light."

Saul Trippler put his amused yellow eyes on Gil. "You're kind of hard on 'em, ain't you?"

"You'll have enough to do without worrying about my decisions," Gil snapped. Then he singled out a tall, gaunt New Englander named Thomas Rocklin, and drew him aside.

"You can't make the trip," Gil told him flatly. "They tell me your son is ill."

Rocklin raised an agonized face. "It might be fatal to wait. The—the boy is going where the warm sun will do him good."

"If the boy gets sicker on the way? What then?"

Rocklin seized Gil's arm. His eyes were feverish bright and two spots of color appeared on either cheek. "I promise he won't be a bother." He coaxed Gil to his wagon, throwing aside the flaps. "I've fixed a bed for him. He won't even come outside the wagon."

Beyond the bed Gil saw a big forty-five pound camera and several boxes of glass negatives.

"I'm a photographer," Rocklin explained quickly. "I'll take a picture of you free if you'll let me make the trip." He fumbled a stack of photographs out of a wooden box. "These are some of the latest I've done in St. Louis."

Gil turned a disinterested eye on the flash of faces in various poses. Suddenly a pain shot through him and it seemed as if his heart had stopped beating. He reached for one of the photographs with a trembling hand. A full-breasted, handsome woman. In the picture you couldn't tell that her hair was like bronze in sunlight and that her eyes were a cool sea green. Or that her lips had been against your own, even as she was planning treachery.

Rocklin noticed the tight set of Gil's features and said, "She's a singer. I took it at my studio down near the river front. A beauty, if I ever saw one. Do you know her?"

"Where did she go?" Gil snapped.

Rocklin shrugged. "Out West someplace. Go ahead and take the picture. You're welcome to it."

Gil stared at the lovely face, hearing again her voice and how she'd say with a laugh when some drunk tried to paw her, "You're rich, Mister. You're rich and handsome and I love you. But leave me alone."

He tore the picture into small pieces and threw them to the ground.

There was hurt in Rocklin's eyes. Gil tried to make his voice gruff when he said, "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

When he started away, Rocklin caught his arm. "You'll reconsider? Can I go with you?"

Gil nodded and stumbled away, troubled that he had allowed Marcy Madden's picture to upset him; angered that he had gone against his better judgement and allowed Rocklin to make the trip with a sick boy. Gil cursed, wondering if he was still soft beneath the hard veneer he had spread on the surface.

This was a hard and dangerous game he was playing and he couldn't afford to be tied down with anyone like Rocklin. And yet there had been such a pleading in the man's eyes——

THE first two weeks passed uneventfully. No one gave him any trouble and the men seemed congenial enough around the evening campfires. He was glad to be on the trail once again.

"If everything goes as peaceful as this," he told Trippler over an evening meal, "we won't have much to worry about."

Saul Trippler said, "Never can tell what kind of trouble might pop up." He wiped a heavy forearm across his face to hide a grin.

Gil gave him a sharp glance, but made no reply. This wasn't the time for a showdown—not yet.

They were a strange trio who handled the two wagons carrying the rifles and ammunition. Lee Fangler, dark and small, spelled the other two at the driving job. Joe Burdick was tall with galluses hooked to his fancy pants. He wore a stained white shirt. He had a shifty eye which roved occasionally in the direction of Gil Beacham.

Dick Allgate, the other member of the trio, was a tall man run to fat who wore bib overalls and kept a rifle on the wagon seat beside him. They might be trying to look inconspicuous but their eyes were a dead giveaway. In the years past Gil had ridden beside too many men with hard eyes like that.

Even though he tried to forget it, Marcy Madden's face haunted him constantly. Once he turned his horse in beside the Rocklin wagon, intending to ask if there was another copy of the picture he had destroyed. At the last moment he lost his nerve. Instead he inquired after the health of the ill son.

"He—he'll be all right," Rocklin said and gave a nervous glance behind him at the closed wagon flaps.

Gil noticed this, but was too preoccupied with thoughts of Marcy Madden to give it a place in his mind. Later, however, he remembered.

He moved to the head of the train where Saul Trippler bulked in the saddle of a roan.

"You seem right interested in Rocklin," Trippler said. "Too bad he'll never live to reach Yuma, ain't it?"

Gil choked off the sharp retort that had been building in him. "That's your part of the deal," he said. "Yours and Kellraden's." He swung his horse away and felt cold sweat between his shoulder

blades.

This was not going to be very easy, he told himself. Suddenly he wondered if he were being a fool, risking lives needlessly in his desire to repay Kellraden for his treachery in Honduras.

EACH night Thomas Rocklin cooked supper and carried a plate to his wagon and passed it between the flaps. After observing the old man's devotion to a sick boy, Gil resolved more than ever that Rocklin would make the trip in safety. That meant that his own desperate plan had to work.

It was two weeks later that they ran across the wagon at Sansone Creek. It was mired hub deep in the mud. Gil got his own wagons across, however, hurrying them along so they wouldn't bog down, for this stalled wagon was smaller than anything he had in the train. But all his wagons made it, and he rode back to look over the strange outfit, Saul Trippler at his side.

There were two of them. They said their names were Denver Pardee and Sam Rist. Fat and perspiring and bald, Rist wore his right arm in a sling.

Denver Pardee said, "Be obliged if you'll give us a hand."

Gil had already decided on yonder creek bank as a camp ground, so he got a team of oxen and finally managed to get the small vehicle rolling. Even then it threatened to bog down again in midstream. Only the lunge of shoulders at the tall gate and wheels, kept it moving.

Tinware, which seemed to fill the small canvas-topped wagon, clattered noisily and frightened some of the horses.

When they were in camp Pardee explained they were peddlers going West. Gil gave them a careful scrutiny, deciding a man could pretend to be anything he wanted.

"We hear from the talk that you're goin' to Yuma," Pardee said. There was too much red in the whites of his dark eyes to suit Gil. His hair, a rust color, hung almost to his shoulders. There was something unclean about the man. In his hands he held the biggest shotgun Gil had ever seen. The twin barrels were a good two inches wide at the muzzle. Packed with nails and buckshot, it could cut a horse in two. Pardee said, "We'd like to join your train."

Gil shook his head, staring thoughtfully at the muddy hubs of the small wagon. "You're carrying too much of a load—whatever it is," Gil said pointedly.

Denver Pardee and his partner exchanged glances. "I'm willing to pay."

But Gil shook his head. They had come this far alone, let them shift for themselves. However, he did agree that they could string along to Cooley's Tent, a sod-walled, canvas-topped watering place a few miles up the creek.

Heat of the day still lay heavily over the camp that evening. Gil took first watch, sitting with his back to a willow, staring at the soft glow of campfires and listening to the idle talk. His brow felt feverish and he kept running fingers across that scar at his hairline, remembering the prison of El Cortez and how he had suffered all because he had been a man with ideals.

From here on out he would have to bluff his way through. Lee Fangler, Burdick and Dick Allgate were evidently men Kellraden had hurriedly picked for the job of driving the gun-laden wagons. Even Trippler did not seem to have known them before. But they would probably side with Trippler in the event of a showdown. Gil knew that none of the merchants could be depended upon if it came to gunplay. And yet some way they had to be convinced, for if they did not side with him, they would surely die, for that was Kellraden's plan.

When he heard footsteps approaching in the twilight, he was on his feet, rifle cocked and ready, a tall menacing shadow. When he saw it was Saul Trippler's swaggering figure, he relaxed.

"Rocklin's kid ain't as sick as the old man lets on," Trippler said. "I seen him sneak out of the wagon and go ridin' up creek."

Suddenly a lot of half-conceived thoughts began to form a definite patter in Gil's mind. He recalled the old man's suspicious actions, how the boy did not leave the wagon. And now to be well

enough to saddle a horse and ride—

They got their horses and followed a plain trail through the tangle of willows that bordered the creek. When they saw a horse picketed ahead, they circled to get downwind and dismounted. They crept forward through the brush, careful to make no noise.

Suddenly Trippler grabbed Gil's bicep and pointed with his free hand.

"Look there," he whispered.

Gil's eyes followed the pointing finger and saw an object bobbing up and down in the creek water, where a natural dam had deepened it to a glistening pool. In the sunset, the rippling waters were blood red. Gil remembered having passed this place that afternoon.

"It's the kid taking a bath," Gil said, but even as he spoke he saw a flash of white skin and long wet hair plastered to a small head.

Anger rose in Gil Beacham like a black cloud, and he swore under his breath. He said, "Damn Rocklin. It's a girl. He's got a daughter instead of a son."

IV

SAUL TRIPPLER'S VOICE thickened hoarsely. "You warned 'em there wasn't to be no women on the train. Rocklin broke the rule, so—" He started forward. Gil seized him roughly by the shoulder.

"Get back to camp, Trippler," he ordered.

Trippler's lips tightened, and he snarled, "You may be captain of this here train, but that ain't no sign I got to play second fiddle to your women—"

The blow was like the snap of kindling wood in the gloom. Saul Trippler spread his back on the thick grass on the creek bank. Instantly he bounded to his feet, looking like a maddened young bull. But when he charged it was straight into the muzzle of Gil's cocked gun. He pulled himself up in time.

Gil said, "Rocklin broke the rules, but I'll deal with him in my own way. Not with his daughter."

Trippler put an arm across his face and suddenly grinned, saying with a surprising lack of anger, "Reckon you know what you're doin'. There's more at stake than a skinny kid."

Trippler rode back to camp and Gil made a V of his thumbs against his hard white teeth and whistled at the girl. "Get into your clothes. You've got five minutes."

He turned his back and walked to her horse. Without giving her any too much time he angrily led the animal to the creek bank. She was just buttoning her man's shirt when he came up. At sight of him she brushed long wet strands of hair from her vivid face. She was not pretty, he decided, too long and lean, but the boy's levis fit her hips.

There was recognition in her deep brown eyes now and suddenly he knew her. Her chin began to tremble.

"I told dad he shouldn't travel with a murderer like you. But he wouldn't listen. I've watched you from the wagon——'

She looked very different from the day she had stood in a St. Louis alley, staring in terror at a dead man.

Gruffly, he said, "Why'd you come out here tonight?"

"I couldn't stand another day without a bath. I—I saw this place when we passed today."

His teeth bared in a tight grin. "You'll have a lot of days without baths. I ought to send you back to St. Louis—'

Anger left her brown eyes and her lips trembled. "I'll be no trouble."

"Trouble," he scoffed. "Every man in that train will have his eyes on you."

She caught his arm. "Please, don't send us back. It's my father who needs the sun. He insisted we do it this way. He believes there is great opportunity in Yuma. I—I was going to reveal my presence to you when we were so far out I knew you couldn't make us return to St. Louis."

He stared at her in anger, seeing her young face white and strained in the rushing darkness. In that moment he pulled her close, feeling her wet skin beneath her clothes, for she had not had time to dry. He found her lips, unyielding. She kicked his shins and struck him across the back. Then he flung her aside.

"That was small payment for the trou-

ble you'll cause me," he snapped. "From now on you're just another man. And if you want to stay with the train, you'll work like a man." His voice softened in spite of himself as he added, "Get back to camp and dry off before you really come down with the lung sickness."

But she spun away in anger and went riding furiously toward camp. Later that night when he passed the Rocklin wagon he heard the girl sobbing. He met Rocklin's gaunt red face. The man was uneasy.

"I should have told you," he said miserably. "It is I who must go West for my health—"

Springs of anger tightened another notch in Gil Beacham and he called the men together.

"We've got a girl in camp," he said. "She signed on as a man and she'll be treated as such.'" He met the mockery in Saul Trippler's yellow eyes and continued, "Every one of you keep his place with her, or he'll answer to me."

The girl must have heard him, for she stuck a tear-stained face out of the wagon. "I can take care of myself!" she cried! With no help from you!" Then she disappeared behind the wagon flaps.

THAT night as Gil lay in his blankets he cursed himself for listening to Rocklin's pleas that day back in St. Louis. His better judgement had told him not to let the man sign on. It would be bad enough with a sick boy, but now—a girl.

The next morning she wore a bright print calico dress. Her hair, brown with just enough burnt orange to give it life, was caught at the nape of her neck with a red ribbon. Her name was Julie, he learned from the drift of talk.

Gil said, "You can't do a man's work in those clothes. Get into your levis and shirt."

Color stung her cheeks. The men glared. Rocklin said, "You can't talk that way to my daughter."

"Work won't hurt her. And it'll teach her a few things in case we run into trouble. The rest of us may be busy with rifles when it comes time to gather wood and cook a meal."

Later that evening Saul Trippler said, "You've got the right idea in handlin' women. Treat 'em mean and they crawl to you. It sure works. With everybody but Marcy Madden."

Gil's eyes sharpened. "What do you know about Marcy Madden?"

"I hear she's hangin' around Cooley's Tent up ahead," he said mockingly.

Gil said coldly, "When you speak of Marcy Madden, wipe off that smile."

Trippler shrugged. "Sure, Beacham. I never figured to insult a—lady.

He turned away before Gil could answer.

Left alone with his dark and brooding thoughts, Gil watched Trippler's retreating figure. There, he decided, was a man who would die violently and soon without the chance to fulfill his destiny. Once too often he would tread into the deep and secret part of some man's life.

The news that Marcy Madden was up ahead was disquieting. Sooner or later, he had decided a long time ago, they would meet again. He was determined to give no sign that he cared for her.

When they came within sight of Cooley's Tent, Gil gave orders to camp a mile from the place.

"It's no use me telling you not to go there," he said to the men that evening. "You'll find cards and whiskey and most everything else you want at Cooley's Tent. But we're pulling out at daybreak. Any man not back gets left. Is that clear?"

Later, when the camp was half-deserted, Gil poured some coffee from a pot simmering at the edge of a fire. He looked up, conscious that someone had come to stand beside him.

Firelight played across the oval of Julie Rocklin's face, bringing out the soft lights in her hair. There was no discounting her charm even in levis and shirt.

"I thought you'd be going with the others to Cooley's Tent," she said.

"And why should I go there?"

He saw the deviltry in her brown eyes. "They tell me your old sweetheart is there. Are you afraid to see her?"

Silently he cursed Saul Trippler for spreading the story. He straightened and dumped his coffee in the campfire. Just

before he turned away he saw something in her eyes, perhaps regret that she had chided him.

It rankled him to know that Julie Rocklin had probably heard the story of Marcy Madden's treachery and how she had made a fool out of him.

In making his rounds he saw Denver Pardee on the seat of his wagon, scowling off into the thickening twilight toward Cooley's Tent. The big scattergun was across his knees. No matter what the hour might be, either he or Fat Sam Rist were always on guard.

Seeing the black anger on Pardee's dark face, Gil said, "Where's your partner?"

Pardee jerked his head toward the sounds of revelry carried on the warm night breeze from Cooley's Tent. "He better not come back drunk," Pardee snapped, then straightened on the wagon seat and eyed Gil as if he had said too much.

Gil strode away, wondering at the vehemence in Pardee's voice. It wasn't until later that he found out the reason.

He tried to concentrate on his plans. From here on out the going would be doubly dangerous. Even though the Army reported peaceful conditions there was no telling when Indians might strike. This, then, was his last chance for a fling before the long monotonous miles to Yuma. But he fought down the temptation.

"To hell with her," he said savagely and turned his back on Cooley's Tent, finding a certain satisfaction in his resolve not to see her.

BUT an hour later he had saddled and ridden to Cooley's Tent. There was a strange mixture of buffalo hunters, trappers and derelicts inside. From the thick press of men against a far wall he watched her move among the crowded tables, her guitar slung over a bare shoulder, the lights catching the bronze of her hair. Yes, he decided, she was still beautiful. There was a sudden empty feeling inside him and he had an urge to call out her name.

When her number was concluded and the applause had shaken the canvas roof, a drunk tried to put an arm around her waist. She stepped nimbly aside, giving him a flashing smile. "You're rich, Mister. You're rich and handsome and I love you. But leave me alone."

She patted his cheek and laughingly made her way toward the rear of the tent. It was as if the years had stopped and he was seeing her again for the first time in the St. Louis cafe before their ill-time adventure in Central America.

He turned to go, resolved that she should not know he was here, but at that moment he met Saul Trippler's insolent stare across the smoky length of the big room. To run now would prove to Trippler that he was afraid of seeing Marcy Madden. He elbowed his way to the bar where fat Sam Rist was buying drinks.

The man was staggering, his moon face flushed from the heat of the overhead lamps and the cheap whisky. His bandaged arm was hugged to his chest. He shoved a shiny gold piece across the bar.

"Have one with me, Beacham," he said thickly. "Sam Rist is goin' to buy you a drink."

Brad Cooley, wearing a plug hat on his bald head, worked his own bar. He grinned at Sam Rist and dropped the coin in a drawer. He was a large bony man with horse teeth which he constantly displayed in a wide grin.

Gil kept swinging his gaze toward the small door where he had seen Marcy Madden make her exit not so long ago. The liquor put an edge to his temper and a reckless energy began to stir in him.

A rider in dusty brush jacket and wearing Mexican spurs that rang on the hard-packed floor, entered Cooley's Tent. He announced he had just come from St. Louis. Men who longed for a touch of the civilization they had left behind, crowded around. Brad Cooley bought the man a drink.

"Ain't much news," the stranger admitted. "But mebby you ain't heard about the Emaline." That brought another drink and the rider began to elaborate. "She was run aground and her safe looted. There was eight of 'em in the gang. It was a bloody fight and the Emaline crew killed most of 'em. But two of 'em got away at least. One fella's wounded."

From behind the bar, Cooley said, "How much did they get?"

"Twenty thousand. It was fresh minted gold goin' south for the Reconstruction."

That set off a buzz of talk. More drinks were purchased for the bearer of this sensational news.

Gil felt a vague uneasiness and glanced at the drawer where Cooley had been dropping those new gold pieces Sam Rist had given him. When Gil turned to say something to Rist, he saw the man was missing. He got a glimpse of Rist sneaking out the front door.

Cooley said, "I'm glad the money was stole. I don't believe in the Rebs gettin' it. To hell with the Reconstruction. Let the Rebs starve."

There were a lot of men in the place wearing cast off Army blue so Cooley was reasonably sure of his ground.

Saul Trippler angled up to the bar. "Are you takin' that, Beacham? Seein' as how you're a Texas man?"

The big room hushed. Cooley put hairy hands on the bar. "I lost a brother at Cedar Mountain. The damn Rebs killed him."

Saul Trippler said insolently. "Maybe Beacham's outfit killed him."

Perhaps it was too much of his own cheap whisky or long pent-up bitterness. Anyway, the words brought Cooley's hand flashing up and a whisky bottle exploded against a tent pole by Gil's head.

THAT started it. A pack of maddened cattle could not have created more havoc. The few men from the wagon train, unused to violence, made an ineffectual attempt to side Gil.

There were enough Southern sympathizers in the crowd to keep Gil from going under in that first wave. Gil slugged out with his guns, feeling bone snap under the jar of the heavy barrels.

Men swirled around him. A blow behind the ear sent him dizzily to his knees. He rose abruptly and put an elbow across the bridge of a roman nose. Blood spurted and a man cried out in sudden pain. In one brief moment he caught a glimpse of a face through a break in the milling mob. It was a familiar face, somehow. The man lifted an arm and brought it down rapidly in a quick, snapping motion. Gil, standing momentarily alone, with his back to the bar, saw the flash of steel and he lurched aside. The knife cut him under the ribs and pinned his shirt to the bar top. He tore the shirt free and lunged for his assailant. But he had disappeared.

Somebody shot the lights out. Just before blackness covered the snarling pack, he saw the man again; a man with a scar on his chin that suddenly reminded Gil of a narrow St. Louis alley and mad flight when a redbeard dropped with his face shot off.

There was no finding him in the darkness. Gil moved away from the bar, fighting his way toward the door.

"Gil! Gil! Over here!"

A woman's voice was in his ear and a woman's frantic fingers were clutching at his torn shirt sleeve. He followed her blindly toward the rear of the room that seemed to tremble from the weight of bodies and stomp of boots.

He found himself outside where lamplight from a nearby wagon fell across Marcy Madden's face. She drew him to the wagon, getting bandages and arnica from a small box.

"You've been hurt, Gil."

He shivered when her fingers touched his skin. She held the thin cut open and sterilized it and then bound it up tightly.

"I didn't think you'd see me," he said above the noise of the dying fight inside.

She had been just coming through the door to do another song when the trouble started.

She caught his wrist when he turned away. "You don't understand me, Gil. You never did. But I'm not going to keep my looks forever. I want something before it's too late."

He jerked his head at the tent. "Is that the way you figure to get it, singing in a place like that?"

She stared at him, her red lips parted slightly, her face tilted up to him. "I have a feeling Gil, here"—she put her hand over her breast—"that we can be rich."

"With you it's always money—first."

She flinched, but did not turn away.

"That little fat man at the bar tonight was spending gold."

"What about it?"

Her voice lowered. "Newly-minted gold. He gave me two eagles."

His eyes narrowed. "You're thinking about the story you heard in there tonight."

"The Emaline was robbed. And one of them who got away was wounded. The stranger said so."

"You're loco," he said savagely.

"It's just possible the fat man has some of that stolen gold. And knows where the rest of it is."

He pulled free of her grasp and left her standing there beside her wagon, a faint enigmatic smile on her lips. She was still smiling when he got his horse and rode for camp.

V

HE ANGLED IN SLOWLY PAST the wagons. At the sound of angry voices, he reined up. It was Denver Pardee saying, "Don't leave camp again, you fool!"

Gil rode forward and at sight of him, Pardee and fat Sam Rist fell apart. Pardee carried the heavy shotgun under one arm. Fat Sam Rist had a welt on one cheek and Pardee's knuckles were skinned. Without comment Gil passed them and took up his post to wait for Saul Trippler.

A half hour later the man came riding into camp. Gil waited until he unsaddled his horse and had stopped by the cook fire to pour himself some coffee. When he headed for his blankets, Gil intercepted him.

The blood seemed to rise in Trippler's bull neck at sight of Gil. He said, "I looked for you back at the Tent—"

Gil halted, a tall, angular shadow. It would not have taken much for him to pull his guns and kill Trippler.

"What were you trying to do? Get me murdered? Was that your idea in starting the fight?"

Trippler lifted his shoulders slightly. "You and me ain't got much love for each other. I just hoped to see you get beat up. That's all."

"You're right on one score," Gil snapped. "You hate me, and I hate you."

Kellraden's secret crew.

Trippler wiped his mouth with his forearm. "That don't keep us from workin' together."

When he started to walk away, Gil said, "Somebody tried to knife me tonight. One

of the pair that almost fixed me for good in St. Louis."

Trippler scowled. "You don't think—"

Gil said, "I'll kill the man who's paying his way—when I find him. And I've got a hunch it'll be either you or Kellraden."

It was a bleary-eyed group that faced Gil the next morning at his call for assembly at the lead wagon. "Although they had partaken liberally of Cooley's rotgut, none of them had failed to show up.

In the hot prairie sunlight, Gil faced them. "From now on until we reach Yuma we'll have to be doubly careful. Keep rifles handy at all times." He watched Trippler and the trio driving the gun-laden wagons, out of his eye. "Our next stop will be Santa Fe."

Trippler spun on his heel, his guns swinging against his thighs. "We're not supposed to go through Santa Fe!" he cried. "We go through El Paso."

Gil said, "I'm giving the orders, Trippler."

The man stalked over to where Gil was standing. "What about Salter's Creek? That's where we're to meet Kellraden."

"He gave me other orders. He didn't want word to leak out. He told me not to announce the change in plans until we reached Cooley's Tent."

Trippler gave him a careful scrutiny with his yellow eyes, turning to see if the other men had overheard him. Satisfied they had not, he said, "You'd better be right about this, Beacham. Kellraden ain't goin' to like it none if you're figurin' on a game of your own."

The wagons began rolling. Gil swung in beside the Pardee-Rist wagon. Pardee was driving, the oversize scattergun on the seat.

"If you've decided to go with us, you go at your own risk," Gil warned him. "I won't be responsible for your wagon falling to pieces under that—load."

Pardee's eyes darkened and he laid a hand on his shotgun, but Gil had moved away.

Julie Rocklin rode her father's saddler that morning, and twice she tried to strike up a conversation with Gil, but he ignored her.

Joe Burdick, Lee Fangler and Dick Allgate took turns driving the two ammunition wagons. They were a taciturn trio and Gil noticed with relief that so far Trippler had had nothing to do with them. If it came to trouble, Gil believed he could muster enough merchants with steady nerves to command any situation. Denver Pardee's scattergun would be a persuasive weapon too if he decided it was better to stick with Gil than with Trippler.

JUST before the breakfast fires were doused the next morning, Denver Pardee said, "I'm a nervous man. Don't anybody make the mistake of prowlin' my wagon. I'd hate to kill a neighbor by mistake." He patted the barrels of his lethal oversize scattergun, giving Saul Trippler a careful scrutiny.

Color mounted Trippler's cheeks, but he made no reply to the obvious accusation. Later, when they were on the move again, Trippler swung in beside Gil's horse. Gil had halted his horse, staring at some flat indentations in the moist soil around a spring—moccasin prints.

"Fresh sign," Gil said, dismounting. "Kiowas. Maybe Comanches."

He gave the order to camp, but before any of the others could see the moccasin prints he carefully erased them with his boot toe. There was no use in alarming the men.

He felt a little shiver ripple his skin as he thought of Julie Rocklin and what could happen out here. Not only was there danger from Kellraden, there were other things. Again he cursed himself for a fool in letting Rocklin make the trip in the first place. If only the man had not shown him Marcy Madden's picture.

In the twilight Trippler's yellow eyes looked feverishly bright. "I've been doin' a lot of thinkin', Beacham," he said. "You don't trust me, and I don't trust you. But we could be sort of partners."

Gil gave him a suspicious glance. "What do you mean—partners?"

"That wagon of Pardee's," Trippler said, ignoring his question. "Remember how it was bogged down the first day we saw it? None of our wagons sank in the mud like that. That meant Pardee and

Rist were carryin' something mighty heavy. That fella in Cooley's Tent the other night got me to thinkin'."

Gil gave him a hard grin. "You found out Pardee and Rist are too tough to handle alone with that scattergun. So now you want me to help you."

Trippler shrugged. "Me and you got a chance to get that gold. Twenty thousand dollars. I've watched Pardee and Rist. One of 'em is always awake with that gun. They wouldn't be doin' that if they didn't have something valuable in that wagon."

The camp noises and the smell of food drifted around them. Beyond, Gil could see Julie's slender figure moving in the firelight.

"We could get that gold and sack it up and split it," Trippler said. "With ten thousand a piece, it would pay for a lot."

"We're working for Kellraden," Gil reminded him.

Trippler said, "I thought that after he done you in on that Honduras deal you'd be smart and think of yourself." Trippler snapped his fingers. "Kellraden don't give that for you."

They stared at each other for a moment, the stock bull-like Trippler and the tall, lithe train captain.

Trippler lowered his eyes and said, "With that kind of money you could get Marcy Madden to give you a smile again."

Gil seized Trippler by the shirt front so that buttons popped and fell to the ground. "Leave her out of this."

Through a mask of anger, Trippler said, "You'll have a hard time leavin' her out of anything!"

"Let's hear it all!" Gil snarled.

"Marcy Madden is here in this train—with her wagon. She's been here since last night. If you could've kept your eyes off that Rocklin gal you'd have seen her."

Gil released him. Trippler gathered the folds of his torn shirt and cursed. Gil jerked his head toward the camp.

"You go ahead. I'll follow."

"Afraid I'll shoot you in the back?"

"Just cautious, that's all. I've got a lot of things to do before I die."

Trippler said, "Does one of those things include Marcy Madden?"

Gil nodded. "I'm taking care of that right now."

"You shouldn't get mixed up with a woman like her. That's a lifetime job. And I got a hunch you won't have a very long life."

Gil said, "Just make sure that yours isn't shorter."

VI

HOW HE HAD FAILED TO SEE Marcy Madden's wagon, he did not know. Then he recalled he had not ridden the length of the train that day because he wanted to avoid Julie Rocklin. Marcy's driver was a sun-blackened little man named Tobe Donovan. He showed no particular pleasure at having joined the train. It was evident that news of the beautiful woman's presence in camp had spread among the men. They loitered near the tailgate of her wagon.

When at last she stepped out of the wagon, she was like an actress making a grand entrance. Fat Sam Rist took one hand, Saul Trippler the other. They swung her to the ground. When the weighted hem of her dark skirt had settled about her ankles, Marcy looked across the clearing at Gil. She came toward him slowly, holding her skirts away from the campfire.

"Hello, Gil," she said softly. "Surprised to see me?"

He glanced uneasily at the Pardee-Rist wagon, sensing why she had come. It was not because of him; it was because of gold.

In the waning sunlight he could see new fine lines about her eyes. She had lived fast and hard, believing whatever she got out of life had to come before her beauty faded. There was a frantic nervousness about her when alone, but in the company of others she had poise and dignity.

"I didn't ask you to join this train," he said, trying to sound gruff. "But as long as you did, you'll be treated like anyone else. There's another woman here. Both of you can do the camp chores and the cooking."

There was mockery in her green eyes when she said, "Yes, Master." She turned

on her heel and went to the campfire.

He stared after her, conscious of the snicker from the men. At first he had determined to make her leave the train. But sight of her again destroyed all his resolutions.

In spite of all she had done, he could not help feeling sorry for her.

Julie Rocklin's stiff figure caught his eye and he read the envy in her eyes, as if the light of Marcy Madden had eclipsed her own. She flung a glance at Gil and ran her hands down over her levis as if conscious of Marcy's finery and her own faded attire.

The next day, just before sundown he saw the figure of a lone horseman on a far ridge. Sunlight flashed on field glasses, so Gil knew it was no Indian. Some white man was studying the train. He spurred ahead of the wagon, trying to locate the stranger, finding nothing for his efforts but a smudge of hoof prints that led off into the barrancas. To attempt trailing at this late hour would only invite an ambush. He turned back to camp, a new uneasiness in him.

Marcy's indifference angered him; whenever he approached she always managed to engage in a spirited conversation with one of the men.

He tried to put her out of his mind by concentrating on his own problems. That mysterious horseman worried him. Had Saul Trippler gotten word to Kellraden? Kellraden even now was probably waiting at Salter's Creek to wipe out the train and make it look like a Comanche deed. He would have a long wait unless Trippler had managed to get a message out.

Trippler seemed to find a new insolence in the days that followed, as if he shared some amusing secret.

Denver Pardee, his face dark with anger, cornered Gil by the lead wagon at the night's camp ground.

"Somebody's slippin' whiskey to my partner." He patted the huge shotgun. "And last night he went to sleep when he was supposed to be guardin' the wagon. I'm givin' you warning, Beacham, somebody's goin' to get killed if I catch 'em around the wagon again—"

"Next time bury your gold. Don't haul it around." Gil turned on his heel and left Pardee standing there, cold suspicion in his eyes.

CLOUDS began to gather within the hour and by morning rain turned the grounds into a sloppy mud hole. Buttoned in his slicker and yelling above the storm, Gil got the wagons moving. Noon time found them barely four miles up the trail. It grew black as midnight and the wind howled and ripped canvas tops from two wagons. Lightning split the sky and frightened the Rocklin oxen. Julie, on the seat, was no match for the stubborn beasts. They suddenly broke off the trail and yanked the wagon toward a precipice.

Gil, seeing the danger, spurred his horse in pursuit. He saw Julie trying to swerve the animals. Her father tried to lend a hand but even his strength could not prevent the onrushing death.

"Hang on!" Gil shouted as he spurred and tried to swing the lead animals away from the cliff. The heavy wagon skidded on the slippery trail and one of the rear wheels went over the cliff edge.

Gil swung Julie off the seat into the crook of his arm. She clung to him frantically as his horse began to pitch, unaccustomed to the double load. By this time some of the other men had gotten the oxen straightened out.

There was a sudden quickening of Gil's heart beat as he felt Julie's wet hair against his cheek. He set her down gently.

She said soberly, watching him out of her brown eyes, "Thanks for saving us."

It took an hour before they got the Rocklin wagon back on the trail. The darkness thickened and Gil gave the order to camp. He went down the line, when the wagons were circled to see if everyone was accounted for. One wagon was missing, Pardee and Rist.

Before Gil could organize a searching party, the wagon rumbled in. Pardee explained they had gotten lost in the darkness.

Rist said, "Lucky we seen your campfire."

Saul Trippler, who had been unusually anxious to hit leather and search for the missing wagon, relaxed. Gil watched him

swagger away from the campfire, conscious that the man was smiling.

THE Pardee-Rist wagon didn't seem to be in bad shape as Gil expected. They had been traveling over rocky terrain and, with the weight of this wagon, its wheels could easily have been shattered against a boulder.

Gil pointed at a muddy shovel tied to the wagon. "Looks like you had to dig yourselves out again."

Rist hugged his bandaged arm and said, "The mud got us just over the ridge."

"That's what took us so long gettin' back," Pardee added hastily.

The more Gil studied Trippler, the more he was certain the man had some secret plan up his sleeve. He watched for signs of Trippler sharing the secret with the trio on the wagons carrying contraband guns. But Joe Burdick and his companions hardly spoke to Trippler at all.

If Julie resented the fact that Marcy Madden did no part of the cooking, she never mentioned it. Marcy wore a wide brimmed hat to keep the sun off her milk-white skin, and her hands were covered with elbow-length gloves.

The night following the storm fat Sam Rist made the mistake of putting his arm around Marcy's waist. They were standing beside the cook fire and it was obvious that Rist was drunk. A new impatience had been noticeable in the woman these past few days, and what she might ordinarily have termed a joke, now became an insult. She cracked Rist behind the ear with the flat of her hand.

The blow sent the fat man sprawling into the camp fire. Before he could be pulled out his skin and clothes were singed. He howled like a timber wolf with the trap jaws closing on a leg bone.

Denver Pardee helped carry his partner to the wagon. "You didn't have to throw him in the fire!" he snarled at the woman.

Marcy's eyes shot sparks. "Then tell him to keep away from me. That goes for the rest of you too!" Firelight washed over the derringer which suddenly appeared in her hand. "Next time I'll kill him."

Gil found her eyes across the clearing. He strode forward and took the gun out of her hand. "We won't have any killings in this camp."

He saw a vein at her white temple begin to throb. "Oh, Gil," she said in a whisper. "Why have you avoided me? You're driving me crazy."

He gave her a cold stare. "You're the one who's doing the avoiding."

When he started to turn away, she said for his ears alone, "After supper I'm going for a walk."

There was a retort on his lips, but it remained unspoken. He strode off into the gathering darkness.

VII

THEY GOT THE GREASE CAN and daubed it over Rist's face and hands. His broadcloth coat was his greatest concern when he saw the burned holes. "Damn Marcy Madden!" he cried, and would have got up out of his blankets had not Pardee shoved him back.

It was hard to fathom a woman like Marcy who would let a man paw her in a cheap saloon like Cooley's Tent and yet fly into a rage when a man tried to put his arm around her waist beside a campfire. Long ago Gil had given up trying to find a motive for Marcy Madden's actions.

This night when he saw her leave the camp, he did not follow. Half an hour later she returned, but she kept her angry eyes away from his face.

Gil began to count the days until they reached Santa Fe. If he could only get these wagons there then he could complete his plans. Thoughts of the gold that Pardee and Rist carried in their wagon were also in his mind. But that could wait.

It was two nights later when the wagons had been pulled into a tight circle that Gil stood at the camp edge, just out of the circle of firelight, staring off toward Santa Fe. A rustling sound caught his ear and he spun, stabbing a hand to his gun. Marcy Madden walked toward him out of the shadows.

"You wouldn't come to me," she said, biting her lip, "so I came to you."

How incongruous a picture she made out

here in the wilderness with her silken gown! When she turned her head to look at him, he caught the scent of her cologne water and his pulse quickened.

But he held himself in rigid control and she, seeming to sense his mood, said softly, "Can't you remember how things were with us—once?"

"That's over and done with," he snapped. "You traded me for General Gomez. And you even lost him when he was shot."

She walked toward a line of cottonwoods. He moved mechanically, hating himself, fighting back his primal instincts. Once he turned and glanced back toward camp, seeing Julie's figure momentarily against the firelight.

Marcy sat with her back against a cottonwood trunk. Moonlight fell across her clean strong profile.

"Those were reckless days, Gil," she said looking up at him, "and we were playing a reckless game. But the stakes were high and we might have succeeded."

Despite his inner caution, he dropped to his knees at her side. "You're a heartless wench. There's nothing you wouldn't do for money."

She laughed softly and took his hand in her own cool fingers. "And are you much different, Gil? You saw a chance to take a shipload of cannon and rifles to a tottering revolutionist. You planned to set yourself up as a major domo at the side of Hort Kellraden." She laughed again. "Don't talk to me about what people will do for gold."

He said, "It was wrong. I know it now. I thought Gomez was for his people. But they would have been slaves if Kellraden's plan had succeeded."

She pulled him close, her voice lowering. "You and I could do a lot together with money. "I'm asking you once more. We could——"

He pushed her aside, but she clung to him, saying, "They stole the gold. Why shouldn't we have it?"

He shook his head and pried her fingers loose from his wrist. At that instant a light step caused him to jump to his feet. He saw Julie running toward them, her figure outlined against the campfires.

At sight of them, she halted. "I—I saw you come this way alone."

He put his hands on her shoulders, feeling her tremble.

"What's the matter!"

"Sam Rist has been killed!"

GIL BEACHAM elbowed his way through the circle of men and dropped beside the fat body sprawled next to the Pardee wagon. The silver hilt of a short-bladed knife jutted from between Rist's shoulder blades.

"When I went to the cook fire to get supper, he was killed," Pardee said angrily. "Rist was drunk enough to let somebody slip up on him with that knife."

Trippler's insolent yellow eyes were on Gil's face. "That's Pardee's knife in his back," Trippler said.

"How do you know that?"

"I've seen him wear it enough."

Denver Pardee cursed. For the first time Gil noticed that his big scattergun was gone and that Tobe Donovan, Marcy's truculent little driver, held one of Pardee's arms. The tall Joe Burdick had forgotten about his wagons loaded with rifles and ammunition for the moment, to seize the other arm.

Pardee struggled. "They're tryin' to say I murdered Rist," he pouted. "Listen, Beacham! You better give me a chance to talk to you—"

Gil said, "Do you deny it's your knife?"

"Sure it's my knife!"

Saul Trippler laughed. "I s'pose you're goin' to say you lost it and somebody found it and stabbed Rist."

"That's exactly what happened!" Pardee cried.

"They been fightin', Beacham," Trippler said. "Plenty of us have heard 'em. Maybe even you."

Gil's face was impassive, but he was remembering the night he had returned from Cooley's Tent to hear Pardee's harsh words and see the welt on Rist's cheek from a hard thrown fist.

Rocklin turned his gaunt face on Gil. "There was bad blood between 'em, Beacham. I can swear to that."

Pardee was struggling, but finally gave it up. "That don't prove I killed him."

Saul Trippler said, dropping a hand to his gun, "A rope's what he needs. Beacham you're captain here. Send the women ahead and we'll get this over with."

Others in the crowd growled their approval. Gil cut it short with a lift of his hand. "We'll have a trial at the next camp. Tomorrow night. Tie Pardee's hands . . ."

The next morning Saul Trippler said he would drive the Pardee wagon, but Gil shook his head. They had Pardee roped to a saddle.

"Julie will drive the wagon," Gil said. "She ought to be learnin' real good in case she might have to take over when a man is shot." The girl glared at him, for she had not recovered from her anger and surprise at finding him with Marcy. He tossed her his gloves. "They'll be too big but the reins won't cut your hands."

Trippler gave Gil a cold stare and swung onto his horse. When he had ridden up to the front of the train, Gil cornered Marcy. "You got me out of camp so somebody could kill Rist," he accused her.

The corners of her full red mouth tightened and she lifted a hand as if to slap his face. He caught her wrist and she winced at the pain.

"Don't ever accuse me of a thing like that again," she told him. She lifted a hand to the back of his neck, her anger suddenly gone. He put an arm around her silken waist. He bent toward her and saw Julie watching, her cheeks flaming. Abruptly Gil stiffened, and Marcy, noticing the change, glared at Julie.

"That's twice she's interrupted us, Gil," Marcy said loudly.

Julie clenched her fists at her sides. "The first time it was important. A man was dead. This time it was a mistake. It won't ever happen again." She started for her wagon. Before she had taken three steps, she was running.

Marcy, smoothing her glossy hair, said, "It looks as if I have a rival, Gil. I believe the girl's in love with you."

All that day Gil wondered how he could solve this new problem. He had never counted on murder as a possibility during this dangerous journey. At least not the kind of a stealthy killing such as had happened. Sam Rist was dead and Saul Trippler was bent on seeing Pardee hanged. Gil had no intention of holding a trial. Somehow he would cut Pardee loose and give him a start with his wagon. Just how this was going to be accomplished he did not, at the moment, know.

In midday as he was riding toward the lead wagon, Julie called to him. He swung his horse in beside the Pardee wagon she was driving. Her cheeks, he noted, were unusually pale.

"Does Marcy Madden mean very much to you?" she asked suddenly.

Her impertinence angered him and he said, "I'm in love with no woman."

HE SAW her sudden quick breath. She said, "In that event it's my duty to tell you something." She bit her lip. "That Madden woman is vile—"

He scowled, saying, "Get on with your story."

"Last night it was you she was with," Julie said, avoiding his eyes. "Two nights ago I went for a walk."

"That was against orders," he said gruffly. "No one is supposed to leave camp—"

"I found Marcy Madden with another man. Down by the trees just as you and she were last night."

He felt his cheeks flame. "Who was the man?" She said she didn't know. Angered, he said, "How do you know it wasn't me?"

"You were at the camp."

Feeling himself unable to speak until he had regained control, he swung away from her wagon. It was strange, he reflected, that his old jealousy for Marcy Madden was still so potent. He began thinking about the other man. Who was he?

Unable to stand it no longer, he rode to Marcy's wagon where she was propped up with cushions in the bed. He avoided that taciturn Tobe Donovan on the driver's seat and beckoned to her. She crawled across the wagon bed to the tail gate.

In spite of his desire to keep all emotion out of his voice, he let a thread of anger creep in when he said, "Who were you making love to the other night?"

A faint frown appeared between the fine arch of her brows. Then sudden

anger leaped into her eyes. "That's woman's talk. It's that girl—Julie. She told you."

"Then it's true."

"It's a vicious lie. Let me face her. I'll prove it to you." She started to tell Donovan to stop the wagon. but Gil shook his head.

He turned away from the wagon, scowling. It angered him to think Julie had spoken the truth. And, yet, she was only a woman. Hadn't Marcy said Julie was in love with him? It might have been her jealousy which made her spread the lie.

When he passed her wagon, he said curtly, "Let's forget about the gossip. I'd appreciate it if you didn't let the story go any further."

"Gossip!" She looked around for something to throw. "You don't believe me—"

But he escaped her tirade by riding to the head of the train where Saul Trippler, a dusty hat aslant on his blond head, squinted at him against the sun.

"You'll find out that Pardee killed his partner," he said, with a great show of candor. "It's pretty obvious."

Gil did not glance his way when he said, "Is it so obvious? Or is it just what you want me to believe."

"You're wasting your time with a trial, Beacham." He rode close so that their stirrups touched. "This thing is gettin' too big for you. You better play it my way. I'll stake my life on Pardee bein' a murderer."

Gil flung at him, "If you'll gamble that way, you're life is cheap."

For a moment Trippler's mouth tightened, then he shrugged. "Maybe you think I killed Rist."

"It's a possibility."

"That'll take a lot of proving," Trippler said.

To cool his rising anger, Gil said, "I'm riding ahead to scout tonight's camp."

The trail took him through a fold in the hills where heat lay close to the ground. What he really wanted to do was get away by himself where he could think. If he brought this thing with Pardee to a head now, his plans for the rifles and ammunition might be upset. He wanted to get to Santa Fe before making his next move. Unless Trippler forced his hand.

Somehow, he couldn't tell why, he had the feeling that the presence of Pardee and Rist in the train had been no mere coincidence. In the background somewhere, he was certain, was the shadow of Hort Kellraden.

He came on to a waterhole and the remains of a camp. Fire ashes were still warm. On the ground were faint smudges —moccasin prints. He was dismounting to give the prints a close scrutiny when the first shot came. It made a spanging sound as it struck a rock near his elbow. He whirled over on his back, seeing a face in the brush on the hillside. It was a white face with a ragged beard. But the beard did not grow across a jagged scar on the chin.

Even as he whirled, Gil emptied his gun. The stranger who twice before had tried to kill him, got off two more rifle blasts. Gil did not hear the blast of the rifle on that final shot. His senses exploded the moment that deadly piece of lead struck his skull. As he fell forward to the pool edge, gun echoes thundered across the draw. A lone buzzard, startled off his course by the blast, dipped low to survey the sprawled figure beside the waterhole.

VIII

THERE WAS NO ACCOUNTING for the hours. Gil came awake slowly, conscious of the dull throb of his head; dried blood stiffened his neck. The ground beneath him was cold. It took him most of an hour to get enough strength to crawl to the pool. He lowered his head into the cold water. When he opened his eyes and drank, he saw starlight reflected from above.

No telling how long he had been here. The thin gash above his right ear had been close, only a fraction of an inch away from the vital brain that would have destroyed forever his body and left him here to rot.

Moonlight aided him to find his horse. Dragging reins had been snagged between two rocks. In the darkness he reloaded his gun with trembling fingers. Then he

mounted and rode back out the draw.

Twenty yards further on and his horse suddenly shied. It was only by supreme will power that Gil managed to keep his senses. The pain in his head was awful. The mount finally quieted and Gil dismounted, going back to a dark shape in the trail. Even without lighting a match he knew it was the man with the scar on his chin.

He fumbled through his pockets. The only thing that caught his eye was a soiled envelope addressed to Alex Trippler, General Delivery, St. Louis. In closing it said:

. . . I wish you and Saul would write to us and let us know how you are doing. Me and Pa pray for you both.

Mother

Gil felt a sudden wrench at his heart. Alex Trippler, brother of Saul. This explained a lot of things. And Alex had been taken care of, but not as his mother wished. He had two bullet holes in his chest. He had managed to get that final rifle shot away that nearly blew Gil's head off. Then he had tried to crawl down to his horse and died.

There was no shovel so Gil piled rocks on the body to keep off prowling animals. He mounted, feeling a new anger rise in him. Things between himself and Saul Trippler had gone too far. There was no backing out now.

Then he suddenly remembered the moccasin prints by the water hole and the fresh camp. Panic stung him as he thought of those helpless merchants. He put his horse to a gallop, but had to slow for the jolting set his head to aching again.

Anxiously he scanned the moon-swept sky for the tell-tale glow that would mark the site of burning wagons. And he thought of Julie. Strange, but in that moment, her face was before him and Marcy Madden was a thing buried deep to be forever gone.

He had moved further ahead of the train than he thought, for it took him over an hour to reach the spot where he had left is that afternoon. There was no sign of the wagons so he set out to follow the broad tracks they had left.

More than five miles further on, he halted on a rise to scan the country ahead. Arid, sandy hills rose on every side and in the distance he could see the silhouette of high mountains. Then his gaze lowered and he saw an object swinging in the night breeze from the end of a cottonwood limb.

His horse spooked again and he left it some distance away and crept forward afoot. He struck a sulphur match. Pardee's face, dark from his own blood, stared back at him. Gil felt sick at his stomach. He cut through the rope and the body fell to the ground. He unfastened the noose and stared down at the dead man, feeling his rage mount. This he knew without a doubt was more of Trippler's work.

IT WAS some time later that he saw the wagon camp. His long ride had weakened him and he longed to roll up in his blankets but there was no telling how conditions were since he had left. He tied his horse in a thicket, removed his boots and crept forward. What prompted him to head for Marcy's wagon first, he never knew. Two guards were out but one of them was dozing. Gil got past them easily, cursing Trippler's laxity.

There was no movement about the camp. Some distance from Marcy's wagon he could see Tobe Donovan rolled up in his blankets. As he approached the wagon he saw the stir of canvas and knew Marcy was awake.

He pulled aside the canvas flap. Afterwards, he supposed it was the fact that he was in his sock feet that fooled her; this made him shorter.

Her voice rushed at him out of the dark wagon in a tense whisper. "Saul. You shouldn't come here." He backed up a step. "Saul." A note of panic entered her voice. "That is you, Saul!" Then she was crawling toward the end gate, staring out at him, her hair in her eyes. He turned his head slightly so the glow of the dying campfire washed across his tense face.

He heard her gasp. Without a word, Gil turned on his heel and staggered to where his gear was stashed at the gate of Joe Burdick's wagon. Burdick and his two companions, Lee Fangler and Dick Allgate, raised up in their blankets to

watch him silently. He made his bed beyond the fire and sank down wearily.

He heard a gasp and saw Julie looking at him. In a moment she returned with a pan of water and clean cloth.

"You've been hurt," she said. "There's blood all over your face.

As she bandaged his head he got her to tell what had transpired. Right after Gil had gone on his ill-fated scouting trip, Trippler had halted the train saying Gil had left instructions to try Pardee. After a brief trial, Pardee was hanged.

"My—my father would have no part of it. Some of the others agreed that they should wait until your return. Trippler struck my father."

He took Julie's fingers in his hand when she had finished and tried to smile. Then she went across the campgrounds to her wagon, to return in a few moments with a plate of cold food. He ate ravenously. Strength began to return to him almost immediately.

It was only a few minutes after Julie had returned to her wagon that he saw Marcy Madden cross the campground, a cloak making her a bulky shadow in the gloom. After checking the loads in his gun, he followed.

It had been his intention to wait until he had a few hours sleep before the showdown with Saul Trippler. Apparently, it was going to be forced on him.

In the east the first gray streaks of dawn were pushing aside the dark sky. The camp was beginning to stir. He saw Marcy bend over Saul Trippler's sleeping form. The man jerked upright. They put their heads together and Gil knew she was telling him of Gil's return.

Julie's father came out of his bed beneath the wagon. He stood by the off wheel a moment, then suddenly he stiffened.

"Indians!" he cried.

Gil Beacham whirled at the alarm. Hoofbeats thundered in the early morning stillness. There were fully a dozen of them charging toward the saddle horses in the rope corral at the far end of the stirring up.

It was the party whose sign he had seen at the water hole. That much Gil was sure of. Forgotten now was everything but saving the horses. That first cry of Kocklin's brought every man to his feet.

Gil fired twice. An Indian swayed off the rump of his horse. The rest of the party, surprised in their attempt to run off the horses, began to circle and fire into the camp. Three of them managed to cut a few horses loose. Suddenly the whole party swerved and ran the captured horses toward the hills.

"Stay behind and watch for trouble!" Gil shouted at Rocklin. "It might be a trick to draw us off and leave the wagons unguarded!"

With five men he took off after the rustlers. The Indians had evidently just been through a battle, for their ponies soon gave out. Their leader, a tall buck in breech clout and faded Army shirt, gave the signal to run for it. They abandoned the horses and raced for their lives.

Gil made no attempt to give chase. By the time they got the horses rounded up and returned to camp it was full daylight.

THE first thing Gil saw as he neared the circle of wagons was Julie's slim figure outlined against the blaze of morning sun. She was smiling when he rode into camp.

"They've gone," she said gaily, "that Madden woman and Saul Trippler. And they took Pardee's wagon. You're rid of them. They're like bad pennies. They've brought you nothing but trouble."

He looked into her face, seeing the shining eyes, and knew that she was woman enough to be glad she was rid of a rival. But her eyes darkened when she saw his frown.

She laid a hand on his arm, saying, "I thought you'd be glad."

He tried to smile. "Perhaps when you learn the truth about me you'll feel differently."

Across the clearing Joe Burdick had thumbs hooked in his galluses watching Gil. The dark Lee Fangler flanked him. Dick Allgate sat on a wagon tongue, cradling a rifle.

Sight of the trio made Gil sharply aware of what he had to do.

Unobtrusively he called the merchants

together. He stared at their faces. Rocklin, who wanted Yuma for his health and his daughter's future. McAdams and Tibbils and Reed and all the rest who had put their trust in Hort Kellraden, little knowing that he planned to murder them and take their wagons and goods.

Seeing that Jake Burdick and the others were still by the ammunition laden wagons, Gil said, "You boys have rifles. I want you to cover me. We're going to have a bonfire."

Grimly silent he approached Burdick. Dick Allgate must have sensed what he had in mind from the tense set of Gil's features. He might have a paunch but he was still fast with a gun. He came up off the wagon tongue, a tall man in bib overalls.

When he started to line his rifle muzzle, Gil said, "Hold it, Allgate."

But Allgate had no intention of holding it. The small dark Lee Fangler had jumped aside. Joe Burdick was making a stab toward his belt.

Gil shot Allgate in the belly, watching him bend slowly to the ground. Fangler raised his hands. Burdick cursed, but he did not touch his gun.

"Kellraden won't like this!" Burdick cried.

"I never intended that he should," Gil said, and jerked his head at Rocklin and the merchants. They circled in back of the two men and got their weapons.

Gil said, "You might as well hear the rest of it." He eyed the merchants. Beyond the ammunition wagons he saw Julie and the color crept into his cheeks. "Kellraden never intended you to reach Yuma alive."

"What are you saying?" Rocklin cried.

Gil lifted a hand. "That's why I took this trail at Cooley's Tent instead of head-south to Salter's Camp where Kellraden would be waiting . . . Those wagons carry guns and ammunition. I know Kellraden's game. He's going to stir up trouble and try to steal land from Mexico."

"You been drawin' Kellraden's money," Rocklin said grimly.

Gil nodded. "For my own reasons. I had a plan of vengeance. Those guns were going to be sold in Santa Fe to a trader I know. That was to be my way of getting back at Kellraden. But, since we've been on the trail, things have happened." He found Julie's eyes across the clearing.

Rocklin, seeing the exchange of glances was thoughtful a moment. Then, as if understanding a lot of things unsaid, he straightened his shoulders. "What do you want us to do, Beacham?"

At Gil's direction they got the train moving, all except the two ammunition wagons. Burdick and Fangler had their hands tied and were under guard. When the train was a safe distance away, Gil piled brush under the two wagons and doused the canvas tops with kerosene. Then he threw in a match.

By the time he reached the train the pop of carbine shells could be heard as heat exploded the cartridges.

"Santa Fe can't be more than a week away," Gil said. "Rocklin, you're in charge."

Julie had come running up, her skirts flying. "Where are you going, Gil?"

"After Trippler."

She stepped back from his horse, her face very grave. "Does Marcy Madden still mean that much? After all she's done to you?"

An answer was on Gil's lips but he choked it off. Swinging his mount, he rode south.

IX

THEIR TRAIL WAS PLAIN TO follow, but he did not hurry. He could overtake them easily, for they were traveling with a heavily-loaded wagon. Marcy Madden, in her greed, had left her own wagon back with the train.

Gold, that's all she cared for. Behind her beautiful face was a scheming brain. What a pair she and Saul Trippler made. But Trippler, if he lived that long, would learn in time that Marcy Madden was fickle and could never save her smile for one man alone.

Sunlight beat on the rolling dry hills and squeezed the last drop of moisture from man and beast. That's why Gil did not hurry; no use in wearing out his horse. There would be time enough to

settle his score.

Regretfully he thought of Julie and how he had ridden out of the camp without saying good-by.

The tracks in the sandy soil suddenly widened and he knew what that meant. Drawing his gun, he came to a rise to stare down into a hollow. The wagon was tilted up, and the wheel, that had made that odd wobbling track in the dirt, was lying to one side.

There was a tight, clutching sensation in his stomach. They did not see him. Saul Trippler was using the barrel of his rifle to pry up the false bottom of the wagon bed. Tobe Donovan, Marcy's wasp-ish driver, stood impassively to one side, smoking a cigarette.

Marcy wore a red cloak. Dust lay thick over the cloak and over her hsoes.

"Hurry up, Saul," she was saying. "Let's get this over with."

He swore at her. "I'm doin' the best I can."

She stiffened, then patted him on the shoulder. "Let Tobe give you a hand."

Gil sat his horse, watching them a moment. He could see that Trippler's gun and belt lay on a rock. The man was doing his rifle no good using it as a crowbar.

That tight feeling persisted in Gil's stomach and he had a sudden reluctance to pursue this further. Let Marcy go with Trippler. Let them spend the gold—

A hoarse shout knocked any such ideas out of his mind. Donovan saw him and yelled a warning. Donovan's gun came up in a flash of hammered silver death. But the swing was not completed for Gil shot him in the chest and watched him break and fire the fancy gun uselessly into the ground.

At the first sound of trouble Trippler was springing to the rock where his gun lay. Gil sent a bullet skimming an inch above that gun belt. Trippler, about to reach for it, jerked back his hand.

Gil moved down on them and dismounted, careful to keep his gun on the blond Saul Trippler. He said, "I told you that you'd do anything for gold, Marcy. Even go with a man like Trippler."

Marcy's green eyes flamed, but she tried to force a smile. "Don't say that, Gil."

Trippler ran his tongue around his lips. "You're no better'n the rest of us," he said. "There's enough gold here for all of us."

Gil said, "You killed Sam Rist, and then you talked the men into hanging Pardee."

Trippler's face reddened. "We could have had it all, Beacham. Me and you. What're a couple like Rist and Pardee? They killed to get this gold."

"Shooting a man face to face is one thing, Saul," Gil said. "Knifing him or tricking him into a noose is something else again."

Trippler kept scanning the ridges. Sweat had broken out on his forehead.

"He's not coming," Gil said flatly.

Trippler swung around. "Who's not comin'?"

"Your brother." Gil tapped the bandage on his head. "He tried to kill me. The third try, once in St. Louis, once at Cooley's Tent and now this time. He's dead, Trippler. There was a letter on him from your mother. She prays for you every night, Trippler."

The man's lips tightened. He was breathing heavily. Only for a moment did he seem saddened. Then his bull courage returned. "All right, so I didn't want you takin' over the train. I heard you was comin' back to St. Louis and that Kellraden would make you the boss instead of me. I knew there was big things cookin' in Yuma. I wanted me to be top dog, not you."

"And you brought your brother along, keeping him out of sight, but handy. Waiting for the right time to 'bush me."

Trippler said, "I'm admittin' it all. I'm no good, you know it and I know it. But there's gold here."

Gil said mirthlessly, "Who get's Donovan's share?"

Trippler and Marcy both stared at the crumpled figure in the dust.

MARCY suddenly lifted her eyes to Gil's face. "Stop it, Gil. What's done is done. Give Saul his share. You and I can go to Mexico and live out our years. I'm sick of this life and the way I've had to live." Her shoulders began to jerk beneath her cloak.

Trippler stared at her. "You were goin' to Mexico with me," he said, rage in his voice. "Now it's Beacham again. Is it because he's got a gun in his hand, or is it because you've been in love with him all the time—"

Gil said, "Turn around, Trippler. Marcy, tie his wrists."

Trippler's cheeks paled. "What're you goin' to do with me?"

"I'm taking you back to the train. After the trial. I s'pose we'll hang you."

Trippler's eyes shone with hate and fear.

Marcy said, "What about me, Gil?" She lifted her hands toying with her bronze hair, so that the sleeves of her cloak fell back, exposing her round smooth arms.

Gil's breath caught in his throat as old memories probed deep. Savagely, he said, "You can live and get old and ugly so no man will ever glance your way. That will be punishment enough for a woman like you."

Trippler snarled like a trapped puma. "You can't let her get away! It was her idea! She got you out of camp so I could knife Rist—"

And suddenly he charged into Marcy Madden, knocking her to the ground so that her skirts flared up around white legs. Then Trippler was diving for the gun on the rock.

It would have been easy to put a bullet in Trippler, but Gil did not want it that way. Instead, he stepped forward quickly. He kicked Trippler in the shoulder as he swooped low for the gun. Trippler rolled on his back, his head striking a stone.

Marcy was brushing dust off her skirts. Gil told her to tie up the half-dazed Trippler. She took her sash to do this. Gil lifted Saul Trippler's gun and stuck it in his belt.

While Trippler lay on the ground and glared, Marcy said, "You didn't mean anything you said, Gil. You couldn't. Not after—" She gave him the full effect of her warm red lips in a tantalizing smile.

"The wagon's broken," she went on, as if he had already changed his mind. "I can't ride to Santa Fe in this—" She let her hands fall to her full skirts. She looked at Donovan huddled on the ground. "I don't like this, Gil, but it's the only way. I'm going to Santa Fe on a horse."

Gil said, "You've been used to most everything. You shouldn't be squeamish about this."

He made no offer to help her as she stripped Donovan down to his underwear, taking even his boots. She stepped behind a rock.

Gil inspected the job Marcy had done in tying Trippler's hands. There was no use in taking chances.

Trippler said out of the corner of his mouth, "You want me in good shape for the hanging. Is that it?"

Gil made no reply. In a few minutes Marcy stepped into the clearing. Donovan's clothes fit her loosely. She had torn out the piece of his shirt that had the bullet hole and the small circle of blood. A few pins had helped. A V of white skin showed through a rent in the shirt. She threw her dress and petticoats into the bed of the disabled wagon.

"Everything I own is back in my wagon at camp. But with this gold, you and I can buy anything we want."

"No, Marcy."

She threw back her head and smiled at him. "You're a liar, Gil. Nothing has changed between us."

She turned to the wagon bed and lifted up the board Trippler had been prying. She reached into an opening beneath the bed. He saw the puzzled frown on her face. She withdrew her hand. Her fingers clutched a large flat stone.

Marcy's breath caught in an agonized little gasp as she saw the stone. Then she was clawing into the false bottom of the wagon. She brought out another stone and another, letting them fall to the ground.

Then she staggered, to a rock and sat down, running her trembling hands across her face.

Gil said, "They buried it the night of the storm. That's the only explanation."

Marcy sobbed. "It's retribution, Gil. I've given up the only man I ever loved—for a pile of stones."

Saul Trippler was raging from the ground. "Pardee and Rist! They double-crossed me!"

"And they're laughing from their graves," said Gil.

For the moment he had his eyes off Marcy. When he looked again she was rummaging around in the wagon bed. He leaped across the clearing and tore Pardee's huge double-barreled shotgun out of her hands.

She sobbed, "I wasn't going to kill you, Gil. I—I—"

He shoved the shotgun back in the wagon. "Get your horse and ride out of here, Marcy. Before I change my mind."

She shook her reddish hair at him. "I'm going back and get my wagon. There's no gold and I don't intend to lose all my possessions."

"Go on to Santa Fe. I'll see that your wagon is left there."

Marcy laughed in his face, but there was a queer tightening of her mouth. "It's that girl—Julie. You don't want me around her. You're in love with her, aren't you, Gil?" When he made no reply, she turned to one of the horses and stiffened. "Drop your gun, Gil," she said. "You haven't got a chance. Kellraden has you covered."

GIL felt ice against his backbone as he turned and saw Hort Kellraden's heavy figure in the saddle of a dun horse. His close-cropped black hair was covered with a dusty hat. He still wore a fancy dark suit but the pants legs were stuffed into cowman's boots. He wore his heavy gun and carried a rifle. He smoked a cheroot. His eyes were shot with steel lights.

Kellraden turned to the four hard-faced men who rode with him. "This is what you get for trusting a friend. You give him a chance at the real money and he double-crosses you."

Gil stared at the rifles. "I only beat you at your own game . . . How'd you find me?"

"Indians tried to drive off our horses last night. We caught one of them and he spoke enough mission English to tell us about your train. He exchanged his life for that bit of information."

Gil smiled grimly. "And then, I suppose, you killed him. Just like you'd have killed me at Salter's Creek. There would have been little suspicion. I have a good reputation as a wagon train captain. When they found my body with those of the merchants they would surely believe it was redskins that had done it."

Kellraden flicked ashes off his cigar. "That's something you'll never know—now."

Saul Trippler had struggled to his feet, his face flaming. "Cut me loose. And get me a rope. I'm goin' to hang Beacham higher'n the moon."

Kellraden said,, "You'll hang with him, Trippler. Where's Pardee and Rist? This is their wagon."

Trippler's face turned waxen. Gil shot a look at Marcy Madden who stood rigidly beside the wagon. Gil said, "So Pardee and Rist were your boys, Kellraden. I might have known as much."

"And you've brought me the gold," Kellraden said. "I hired them to beach the Emaline and gut her safe. Most of the boys were killed, but I set Pardee and Rist on your trail and told them where to pick up your wagons. I wasn't waiting at Salter's Creek. I was just twenty miles south of Cooley's Tent. If you'd have followed orders you'd have been wiped out. I didn't want to give you a chance to prepare for Salter's Creek. When you didn't show up, I began hunting you. They told me at Cooley's Tent that you had taken this trail."

Marcy Madden said, "And what about me, Hort?"

"You and I'll be together," Kellraden said with a laugh. "Just like Honduras when we sold Beacham out and left him to rot."

Gil gave them both a hard smile. "So the truth at last."

Marcy had pleading in her eyes for the first time. "A man named Rafael Menendez helped you escape from prison, Gil."

He stared at her, nodding. "Menendez got me on board a ship—" He stiffened, feeling a great sickness in him. "I might have known it was no coincidence."

"I remembered him from Honduras," she said swiftly. "When I learned you were imprisoned I sent him money. He arranged the rest."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

She shrugged. "All I could think of

was the gold. That must be the reason, Gil."

Two of Kellraden's four men had dismounted. One was tall and angular with high cheek bones and a slit of a mouth. The other was bowlegged with sandy hair.

"Prop up the wagon tongue," Kellraden ordered. "We'll use that for a gallows instead of a tree."

Saul Trippler began to tremble. "For God's sake, Kellraden. Gimme a gun. Let me have a chance. Don't put a rope around my neck!"

Kellraden gave orders to the tall angular man whom he called Blacky. The shorter companion was Red. They threw Trippler to the ground and tied his ankles.

One of the other men had shoved a rifle muzzle in Gil's spine. Gil dropped his gun. The man kicked it into the brush.

Marcy Madden's lips were two bloodless lines across her face. "You can't hang them, Hort."

"Why not?"

"If you do, you'll never learn where the gold is buried."

Kellraden's dark eyes flamed and he wheeled his horse down the slant and leaped to the ground. He peered into the wagon bed, seeing the gaping hole and the flat stones.

"What happened to the gold?" Kellraden demanded.

GIL shrugged. "Pardee and Rist got suspicious when Trippler tried to get in their wagon one night. They buried it." He laughed. "If you didn't trust me, you should at least have told Trippler that you planned to rob the Emaline and send the money ahead to join our train. Things might have worked out a little better for you."

Kellraden, never taking his eyes from Gil's face, told Blacky to get one of the horses and tie a rope to the saddle horn. "Loop the other end around Beacham's ankle," he went on. "Maybe he'll be ready to talk after he gets dragged twenty yards or so through the brush. And I'll keep it up until there isn't an inch of skin left on him. Until he tells us where that gold is buried."

Gil felt ice against his spine. "You've got a little injun in you, Hort."

Kellraden said, "I ought to hang you by the heels over a slow fire. That's another injun trick. But I haven't time. There isn't much I wouldn't do to you, Gil."

Trying to keep his face calm, Gil began edging toward the Pardee-Rist wagon. "You'll feel a lot worse, Hort, when I tell you about the guns."

Kellraden's face darkened. "I'll get them as soon as I finish here. I'm going ahead with my little plan."

Gil took another step, sliding his boots over the ground. "Dick Allgate is dead. Burdick and Fangler are prisoners."

"And the guns?" Kellraden asked hoarsely.

"I burned them."

For a minute there was silence. Then Kellraden's lips began to tremble. "Why did you do it, you fool?"

Gil gave him a cold smile. "I saw what guns did to the people of Honduras. I didn't want to see the same thing happen in Mexico."

He moved another step, seeing the rage mount in Kellraden. Perhaps they were careless, thinking he had no chance with so many guns on him. In any event, Gil took two more steps. The wagon bed was at his elbow.

Saul Trippler's agonized eyes stared at him from the ground. The blond man seemed to be holding his breath, as if understanding Gil's plan and praying for success. Marcy Madden also divined the purpose of Gil's stealthy movement.

Kellraden turned his back and shouted at Blacky. "Get the rope like I told you!"

Marcy Madden suddenly flung herself on Kellraden, clinging to him in desperation.

"Gil! Gil!" she cried. "Now!"

Gil needed no urging. He scooped up Pardee's big shotgun from the wagon bed. Trippler was rolling across the ground, cutting one of the men down below the knees Blacky and the bowlegged man called Red threw up their guns. Blacky got one shot away and Gil felt the smash of the bullet against his thigh. Then he tripped one barrel of the big gun. The recoil and the powder

blast and scream of rusty metal came an instant later. He was slammed back against the wagon. The horses began to pitch and scream in fright.

He stared at the spot where Blacky and Red had been standing. There was nothing. That is, there was nothing you could recognize as having been living men but a moment before, just a pile of blood-soaked rags.

The other two men screamed in terror as Gil pointed the big gun their way. They threw up their hands, their faces ashen.

But Kellraden, fighting like a madman, tore himself from Marcy's grasp. He was on Gil, seizing the shotgun by the barrel. The sudden smash of his charge set the gun off. One of Kellraden's men, directly in the line of fire, wilted. The other flung one shot and raced for his horse and went spurring madly away.

Gil flung the useless weapon into Kellraden's face. His right leg gave way and he fell to his his knees. That was all that saved his life, for Kellraden had sidestepped the gun and fired. Gil snatched up a fallen rifle before Kellraden could trip the trigger again. He fired, catching Kellraden in the chest.

"That's for Honduras," Gil said weakly. He levered in another shell and shot the swaying bulk again. As Kellraden went down, Gil said, "That's for all the other people you intended to murder."

THE landscape seemed to tilt up suddenly and Gil sprawled. He dragged himself where Marcy Madden lay crumpled beside the wagon wheel. There was a widening red ring beneath her left breast. That last shot, flung by the man who had escaped, had done this. He had seen her go down, heard her whimper of pain.

Gently he brushed the dust out of her reddish hair. "Marcy," he said thickly.

She opened her eyes, those sea green eyes, and smiled at him. She was still smiling when she died. He felt sick inside. Then he heard a sound and looking up saw Saul Trippler had somehow got free of the sash that bound his wrists. He had cut his ankles loose. Now he stood erect, holding Hort Kellraden's pistol.

"Looks like I win after all, Beacham," he said.

And Gil just sat there on the hot ground, holding Marcy's head in his lap, knowing he could do nothing, that he would die here. Dimly he heard voices in the distance. Through a fog he saw Trippler spin and fire at something on the ridge. Then there was a gunshot and he saw Trippler fall to the ground and shudder.

Gil opened his eyes as Thomas Rocklin and the other merchants were there. Julie, wiping tears from her eyes, got a fire going and heated water from a canteen.

"We heard the shootin' and come ridin'," Rocklin explained. He looked at a blanket covered figure beneath the wagon. "I'm right sorry about Marcy Madden. I—"

Gil found his voice, unsteady as it was. "She always hated the thought of getting old and ugly. Maybe it was better this way."

Later, one of the men shouted that he had found what appeared to be a crude map scratched on the underside of the wagon bed.

Julie was bandaging Gil's thigh when he heard the news. "Maybe it's the map where the gold is buried," he said.

Rocklin gritted his teeth and straightened his back. "That gold has brought nothing but trouble," he said.

Gil said, "Let the Army dig for it. They can take it south to the Reconstruction. That's what it was intended for."

When they had returned to the wagon train, Gil had four long drinks of whisky. His head still buzzed but Julie's face was clear before him. "Do you reckon you could get your dad to take our picture when we get to Yuma?" he asked her.

Julie lowered her eyes. "This is hardly the time to talk about a wedding picture."

Gil showed his surprise. "Who said anything about a wedding?"

"You did. You just proposed to me. Didn't you?"

He blushed. "Why wait for Yuma? What's the matter with getting that picture in Santa Fe?"

She made no reply, but he could tell she was smiling.

Their hideously marked bodies came hurtling out of the forest.

TRAIL OF TREACHERY

Of the two of them — gaunt backwoods blacksmith and lissome girl — which was better fit to survive that bloody maelstrom of hate and superstition and lurking, red-skinned terror?

By CONRAD G. FEIGE

YOUNG CHAD WARING LIFTED the sledge hammer and swatted savagely at the Conestoga wagon wheel rim he was shrinking. The anvil

clanged, spark arced. Viciously Chad gave the foot lever of the bellows another push, then raised his head at the growing clamor from outside the stockade walls.

"Witches, witchcraft, devil's spirits. Fah!" he snorted, and slapped dark hair back from a sweaty brow.

Long Tom Turner, clad in buckskins and coonskin cap, elaborately peeled a finger nail with his hunting knife. Shrewdly he looked up at Chad from his seat on the wagon tongue.

"Hannah Milland is a comely wench, I must say," Long Tom drawled. "So Ezekiel Briggs says she hexed him, caused him to lose all his pigs?"

"'Twas Hannah's spit fire temper got the best of her," Chad stated, frowning as he stared at the ducking stool just outside the fort's massive gates. "He tried to kiss her and she slapped him. Ezekiel cursed her, something fierce I am told, and with every oath he uttered, Hannah stood up to him and called the wrath of the very devil himself about the man's shoulders."

"I have been long gone from the fort," the lanky scout said. "This Sarah Peabody? Some say Hannah put the sign on her, caused her to lose her voice for nearly a month."

"Sarah Peabody is a scold. 'Tis she as should be taking the stool. The woman's own wicked words wrapped themselves about her throat. Folks are forgetting the good things Hannah has done. The way she nursed Davey, the Clayton's little youngun, when he had the 'pox bad. And saving old Ned Halbourne's leg for him. Ezekiel and Sarah used the forked tongues of conniving snakes—made it look as if Hannah held daily communion with Satan!"

"Weren't there those that sided the girl?"

"They were in the minority. Hannah's very beauty worked against her. Jealousy played its part."

"It's all bad, especially at a time like this," Long Tom Turner declared, slipping his knife back into its cowhide sheath. "The woods here between Fort Baxter and Detroit are swarming with red-coats and scalp-hungry savages. I found a Wyandotte arrowhead scarce the strong pull of a bowstring from here."

"Of course, you warned Kelly Phillip?"

"I did, but he is excited as a rooster with its head cut off because of Hannah's trial. He finally agreed to post a constant guard in the blockhouses, and several men have ventured forth on scout duty."

"'Tis better than naught," Chad said, scowling. "Yet—even in Salem Village they outlawed the ducking stool, but here they revive it for excitement. I am wondering . . ."

"Speak on, friend."

"I'm thinking of Ezekiel Briggs," Chad said. "It seems that scoundrel played an overly strong part in the whole farce."

"Aye, a silver-tongued orator. I hear he played the emotions of the crowd well," Long Tom said, rising as the shouts and cries drew nearer. "Some, like yourself, are also wondering about the man, his rumored traffic of firearms with the redskins."

CHAD stared morosely at the blood red rays of the dying sun, the distant forest crouching about the stockade. He voiced his thoughts: "In the hubbub and confusion without, this would be an opportune time for the enemy to strike. The British are wily and American scalps at a bounty in Detroit. Let the redskins get wind of what is happening and even this strong fort could be attacked."

Long Tom nodded.

A group of children, the boys dressed in linsey-woolsey breeches, the girls all flounced out like French dolls, rushed past the open gate, heading for the ducking stool.

"Whelps of the wolf pack," Long Tom growled.

"They are the innocents," Chad said. "It is their elders who should know better."

Long Tom regarded Chad covertly, noting how the young smithy's hands were corded white. Love had a queer way of revealing itself. Now they could see the main crowd cutting across a freshly plowed field. Mostly it was comprised of women, but men were there, too. And in the lead, between the raw-boned form

of Sarah Peabody and another woman with stringy hair, walked Hannah Milland.

Chad Waring's eyes smouldered as he watched the girl. She held her head proudly erect. Her russet-red hair, evidently loosed in her first tussel with the screeching female horde, hung in luxurious folds about her shoulders. Defiance was registered in the outthrust of Hannah's firm chin, the angle of her tilted nose. Her shoulders were squared and the tight bodice of her dress revealed the smallness of her waist, the rounded outlines of her bosom.

Though he was too far away to make out, Chad knew that Hannah's green eyes were flashing with indignant anger.

"It isn't right," he declared suddenly. "They can't shame her like this." And angrily he slipped out of his greasy elk-hide apron.

Long Tom Turner placed a restraining hand on Chad's arm.

"Hannah will fare for herself," he said curtly. "Keep a sharp eye on the distant rim of the forest."

Chad looked closely at his friend, but Long Tom remained non-committal. He only shifted his powder horn slightly, let his puckered eyes narrow as he surveyed the distant fringe of oaks.

Chad tried to quiet his roused emotions, did as Long Tom suggested. The forest seemed serene, the leaves of the trees still with the spent breezes of the day, the underbrush unmoving. Somewhere a squirrel scolded in a beech. A jay replied in kind, appeared with a flutter of wings and flew away. A shrill cry drew Chad's eyes back to the mob. Shrieks and shouts and ribald laughter rose there. Chad tensed. Hannah Milland had shaken loose from her captors. Swiftly she ran to the ducking stool, then deliberately seated herself in the rude contrivance.

"Robbing them of every blessed second of pleasure she can," Chad grumbled in admiration. "Curse that droop-nosed fox Ezekiel Briggs. He is strapping her in. Would that I could get my hands on his scrawny neck."

"Hark," Long Tom hissed. "Did you hear that?"

"A turkey gobbler in the forest," Chad answered. "See—the gibbering fools are pushing the stool down the river's brink."

"Silence!" Long Tom snapped.

The scout's urgency caught Chad. Now, listening, he heard it. A faint gobbling far to the north, another call closer at hand. Yet the elms, the oaks, the beaches stood mutely, gave no warning of danger.

Slowly Long Tom Turner crotched his rifle to readiness.

"Hah, I saw the red devil that time!" he hissed abruptly. "Yonder, behind that blackberry bush, just out of gunshot range. Ring the warning triangle. I am off for the blockhouses." So saying, the frontiersman scrambled up the crude ladder leading to the stockade catwalk.

Chad had seen nothing, but he didn't question long Tom's words. Quickly he grasped up his sledge, lit out at a dead run for the center of the compound. There a solitary post stood, a huge iron triangle dangling from its cross beam.

Lurching up to the post, Chad viciously began flaying the angle iron. The instant din was terrific. Near the water's edge, the settlers whirled about. Even from here Chad could make out their white faces, their strained, questioning looks.

Suddenly a woman screamed—and pointed!

THE first redskin to spring from the concealment of the forest was a hideous nightmare, his face and body grotesquely daubed with red and yellow ocher. He came leaping across the open fields with the speed of a deer.

Pandemonium reigned down by the river. Women were yelling and screaming, grabbing up their young uns, lifting their skirts as they dashed for the stockade. The men, those who had guns, fired wildly at the red bodies hurtling out of the timber. Others took hold of their wives and children and ran.

Inside the fort, the few guards on duty hurriedly unlatched the heavy iron hooks that held the big gates open, humped themselves as they got the huge cross log ready to drop in place as soon as the last straggler should come in.

Then Chad Waring swore aloud!

Not a solitary soul had stopped to loosen Hannah Milland's bonds. The girl still sat high in the air on the anchored beam, the folds of her skirt whipping about her shapely legs. She made no outcry, but Chad could see her wriggling about, trying feverishly to free herself from the tie straps.

Chad cursed, dashed away from the reverberating triangle and forged headon through the mass of humanity flowing into the stockade. A man got in his way and the smithy bowled him over like a ten pin. Briefly Chad glimpsed that it was Ezekiel Briggs. A fierce joy surged over him—and instantly changed to horror!

The foremost Indian, loping over the plowed ground, had arrived at the bases of the ducking stool. The warrior let out a piercing war whoop and leaped for Hannah's suspended body. He fell short by several feet. Then long red arms raised to the beam and the savage began going hand over hand toward the girl. His brech-clouted form swung back and forth.

Chad saw the brass arm bands glitter dully in the rapidly fading light, made out the dull gleam of close shaven scalp lock. Then greedy fingers were plucking at Hannah's skirt. The girl's feet thrashed and a cry of rage pealed out as hard heels hit tender knuckles. Again Hannah stomped a slippered foot, and this time the buck's features contorted in fury as he loosed his hold and dropped earthward.

The warrior's face was a mask of hatred as he pulled the tomahawk from his waistband. Body awry, he held it far back for a fatal throw.

In mid-stride, Chad levered the heavy sledge hammer, let go with all his strength. Air whistled thinly. At the apex of the buck's swing, the sledge found its mark. Bone crunched sickeningly as the head buried deep into the Indian's back. The redskin twisted like a top, lit sprawling. There he lay, kicking and writhing and squealing in agony.

Chad rushed up to the ducking stool, threw the catch lever and lowered Hannah to the ground.

"The filthy red vermin," Hannah cried. "I'll teach him to grab at me."

"Hold still, wench," Chad grated, fumbling with the heavy iron buckle. "Your twistings help me none."

"Call me wench again and I'll scratch your eyes out."

"Mayhap it is too bad they didn't drench you at that," Chad replied. "Here, let me help you up."

"The stockade gates," Hannah cried in despair. "Look! They are pulling them shut."

Chad spun about, saw the gates close as the last settler scooted safely within. And already howling redskins were pelting up to the face of the great log fort. Inside the blockhouses muskets were popping like bottle corks. Indians screamed, fell clawing to the ground. Others gave shrill war whoops, lighted arrows and shot them flaming over the high walls.

"It is no matter," Chad cried. "Our retreat is cut off. The hungry horde is attacking only from the landward side. The river is our only hope. Can you swim?"

"Like a muskrat," Hannah answered. "Here come two of the red heathen after us now."

Chad retrieved his sledge hammer, gave Hannah his hand. "Come," he cried. "We have no time to lose." And stuffing the sledge into the belt of his linsey breeches, he pulled her after him.

Hannah caught her breath as she ran, eyed the move with quick disfavor. "That thing will drag you down to the very belly of the river itself," she called.

"It is the only weapon we have," Chad replied, glancing back. "Those two are nipping at our heels now. Swim under water. Come up for air only when necessary else a stray bullet might find you."

The roar of the fort's brass cannon drowned his last words. They hit the water running and splashing and leaping deeper. Then the main current grabbed them, swept them off their feet.

Instantly Chad felt the wisdom of Hannah's words. The sledge dragged him down, but, gulping a deep intake of air, he sank with it, then took powerful underwater breast strokes for the other side. His lungs were splitting, aching like fire bellows before he finally fought for surface. Half a notion possessed him to dis-

card the big hammer. What he saw when he bobbed to the surface changed his mind.

THE two Wyandottes had plunged headlong into the river. They were swimming on their sides paddling dog fashion with one hand, holding their muskets and powder horns aloft in the other. Suddenly it came over Chad that this pair would be as hard to shake as hounds hot on the scent of their prey.

Several hundred yards further downstream Chad and Hannah came up under the cover of over hanging willow branches. Breathing hard, Chad placed an arm about Hannah's slender waist. Curiously, even above danger, he was conscious of her warm body close to his. Through the leafy foliage they could see the two Indians out in the middle of the river. There, hampered by the guns they held aloft, the main current was sweeping them on downstream, around the bend.

"If they had only come ashore here," Hannah whispered hoarsely. "Then you could have cracked their skulls wide with your hammer."

"I am wondering," Chad said, as her fingers gripped his tightly, "Who is the most bloodthirsty? You or the savages?"

"Forgive me," Hannah said, suddenly contrite. "I am afraid I have been sore vexed this day."

Chad only pulled her closer. She was right, and it was hard for him to tell her how he really felt. He was only a smithy, built like an ox. Words came him ill.

"We'll go up river," he said some seconds later. "Down there is only wilderness, and those two. To the east lies Fort Pitt. We'll make that our destination. The Lord have thanks, the dark is beginning to favor us."

A pale sliver of moon was riding high when Chad and Hannah stopped by the edge of a clearing. In the center of this loomed the gloomy bulk of a settler's cabin.

"This is Boone's place," Chad informed. "I remember it from early last fall. Long Tom and I killed a bear close by. We stayed the night here."

They moved forward and Hannah shivered. "It seems deserted," she said.

"That is the queer thing of this whole affair," Chad mused. "No burning of outlying cabins, nothing to create a warning for Fort Baxter. Only the direct attack on the stockade itself."

"To me your thoughts are dense as mush," Hannah admitted. "I fail to follow you."

"I am thinking that shrewder brains than the Wyandottes' are behind it all. It smells like the long-arm planning of General Hamilton up in Detroit."

Hannah cast an apprehensive look at their back trail.

"Do you reckon we have shaken our pursuers?"

"I don't know," Chad said. "I am no woodsman. 'Tis said they cling tighter than a burr to a hound dog's tail."

"We are badly outfitted to continue in the wilderness," Hannah stated. "Perhaps if the Boones have left, we may find something of use."

"The idea strikes me," Chad said.

The cabin door was open when they came up. Cautiously Chad peered within. Dimly he made out the ghostly shapes of overturned chairs, scattered clothing and strewn implements of cooking. The door creaked protestingly on leather hinges as he pushed it fully open. He stepped inside, Hannah clinging leech-like to his side.

"They have fled," Chad said. "The booming of Fort Baxter's brass cannon must have warned them."

Again they heard the faint rumble of the fort's cannon far down river.

"They are having a pitched battle there," Hannah said, and worry edged her voice.

"The fort is sturdily made. It is best we get what stuff we need and go our way."

"Hah, a sack," Hannah cried. "Just the thing for us."

Together they began filling it with the leftover's of the Boone's hurried departure. A half of loaf of acorn bread, a wooden bowl full of buckeyes, several long strips of jerky, some wild rice, parched corn, a lone wild squash—and a small iron kettle in case they later dared make a fire.

"And here is flint and steel," Hannah gloated. "And even some swamp root tea—a regular cure all. And a small pair

of linsey breeches. Just what I most desire."

"It is desecration for a woman to wear man's trousers," Chad protested.

"Desecration of my scalp on some coo stick is worse," Hannah retorted. "My skirt snags in the brush and briars." And she went into a rear room to make the change.

CHAD seated himself morosely on a log stool before the cold fireplace. What a sharp tongue for such a beautiful wench. Yet the girl had pluck, and a mind deft as a chipper squirrel. And quick as the wit of her tongue, so were her sympathies.

"I fear," Chad grumbled to himself, "it is her common sense that overwhelms me."

Hannah pushed aside the flap, stepped back into the main room.

"You growl to yourself like a cantankerous bear just out of hibernation," she said. "How do I please your lordship?" And she curtsied in a mock bow.

Never before had Chad Waring realized how excitingly Hannah's body had been put together. All he could do was gape.

"It matters not what you think," Hannah said flippantly at last. "Perhaps I shall find favor in the eyes of some sachem. At least he will—"

Stark terror cut her words.

Chad turned, heard a piercing warwhoop, saw a black form blot the door. Instinctively he ducked at the glitter of a tomahawk flashing murderously at him. Air fanned his cheek thinly. Then he lunged forward as the tomahawk sparked fire on the stone chimney behind him.

Plummeting forward, Chad lowered his head, caught the brave square in the brisket. Air whooshed and the Indian went catapulting backwards. And even as the warrior went reeling, Chad saw the second redskin jump in with upraised hatchet. Quickly the smithy grasped a chair, flicked it around and caught the descending blade on the bottom, and continuing the movement, rammed the leg into the buck's stomach.

A blood-curdling death screech rang out.

Hannah's cry of warning roused Chad. Too late, he glimpsed the pantherish form of the first Indian, the flicker of descending steel. Pain, white hot and burning, racked his shoulder, sickened his stomach. Chad staggered, felt the blade being withdrawn. Sweating pain, he reached back, caught the Indian's wrist in a clamping grip.

Grimly Chad levered his fingers together. Bone began to crunch. Now Chad could smell the buck's foul breath brush past his ear. Fingers were clawing his cheek. Steadily the smithy levered the red wrist, then sank his teeth into greased flesh. With a howl the Indian dropped the knife and it clattered across the stone hearth. And even as the steel was clattering, Chad flipped the warrior over his head, flattened him on the hard-packed dirt floor.

"Cursed red devil. I'll be teaching you to knife a body in the back," Chad cried, and caught the madly scrambling Indian by the breech-clout strap, the back of the neck and hefted him high. One second Chad held him overhead kicking. The next he dashed the body against the stone fireplace. And as swiftly grasped the threshing redskin again, and this time slammed him forcefully into the heavy oak table.

There the warrior lay, legs slowly flexing straight.

Silently Hannah came to Chad's side.

"Sit down on this stool while I bandage your wound," she said softly. "There are clean linens in the cupboard."

Chad did her bidding, said: "They struck so fast I didn't even have time to use my sledge."

Hannah snorted. "As if you needed it," she said, and started tending his wound.

She was wrapping the last cloth around his shoulder when they heard shrill cries and whoops in the distance.

"The yapping of the main pack," Chad stated. "We have no time to lose."

"The Lord have mercy," Hannah said, knotting the bandage securely. "Look, they are firing the outlying cabins. The sky is blotched red with the glow of their flames."

Chad winced, picked up the sack of supplies and slung it over his shoulder. Once out in the night air, he shook his

head to clear the mists rising before his eyes. Hannah eyed him in concern. Beyond the clearing the clamorous cries were plain to be heard.

"We'll leave by the back way," Chad decided. "There the forest is nearest and densest. It will come them ill what they shall find here."

Black clouds were scudding beneath the moon when they stopped to rest in a thick clump of willow brush. Weakly Chad sat down on a fallen log. His back felt sticky, warm with blood. The landscape was unsteady before him. Hannah remained tensely standing, listening to the night calls that were on all sides of them save the river.

"They are drawing nearer," she said.

Chad studied the sky. "Soon the clouds will erase the moon," he said. "I'm thinking of the windfall where Long Tom and I bagged the bear. It is on a bluff over looking the river not far away. There is a great weariness in my legs. I would rest awhile."

An owl hooted to their left. Hannah moved uneasily. "Perhaps we had better move on," she suggested.

"I seem to have acquired the weakness of a newborn kitten," Chad said, standing up, weaving slightly. "I don't understand."

"The man is gone daft sure as sour apples," Hannah declared. "Barehanded he tackles two redskins, hefts them about with the ease of stuffed pillow cases, loses most of his life's blood, and then laments his loss of strength. Come, I shall carry the sack a ways."

SHE swung the bundle to her shoulder, started out. Chad followed her, marveling at the girl, the tenderness that had hidden her camouflaged words. The man who got her would be lucky indeed!

Several minutes later they were forging the dry creek bed of a ravine whose sides had been scarred by an ancient fire.

"This is the place," Chad said. "The burnt timber, I recall it now. Head for the river. The windfall is near at hand."

"The clouds have befriended us," Hannah said. "The cries of the Wyandottes are moving to the north."

Chad tripped over a vine, caught himself. "Good," he muttered. "We are almost there."

After that he had difficulty keeping up with Hannah. She had a habit of fading before him. Once she returned, took his hand, spoke gently. He couldn't understand her because of the ringing in his ears, but gathered a great comfort from the warmth of her fingers. He stumbled and she helped him erect. The darkness grew more dense, the clouds were thickening.

"In this blackness we shall lose them," he croaked.

Hannah didn't reply. Instead there came the shrill fox cry of a warrior almost on them. Chad whirled, felt Hannah loose his hand. Then panic gripped him when he turned to find she was nowhere about. He started running, crashed heedlessly through brush and brambles, calling her name. His feet became leaden. He must rest and doing so wearily, he heard a voice above him:

"The fever has broke, and I thank thee Father. You have given him back to me."

Chad opened raspy eyelids, looked up. Hannah's eyes in the dim light were misty with unshed tears. Vaguely he wondered about that, then became conscious of lying on a pallet of leaves, of a musty smell.

"I must have fallen again," he said. "The clouds are growing thinner.

Half laughing, half sobbing, Hannah said, "Three days he has been laying here, and now the man says he fell down."

"Three days?" Chad croaked incredulously.

"You led me here to the windfall with the unerring instinct of a homing bee," she informed. "All this time I have been dosing you with swamp root tea and broth made of jerky with rice added."

"But for the tea you had to make a fire. There was danger of discovery."

"I made it in the dead of night when men sleep the soundest. There was also danger of losing you, and I would fain have such a one as you around to protect me, to heave the redskins playfully about."

"What kind of a woman do I consort with to make so lightly of my miseries?" Chad said, smiling weakly despite himself. "Three days—I am wondering about the

fort?"

"The cannon ceased firing two suns gone already." Hannah said. "Yet the redskins are thicker hereabouts than fleas on a crow's breast."

Chad sat up, felt her arm go about his waist. "You have seen them?"

"They are banding in a small glade hardly a stone's throw from here," she said. "They seem to be making barges and gathering canoes by the river bank. Something is in the wind."

"Did you see any scalps?"

"The Lord have mercy, no! But there were redcoats there, too."

"It is easy to understand why the cannon have quit firing," Chad said. "Not long since, Kelly Phillip gave liberally of the fort's powder supplies to Clark and his men. There is talk that Clark intends to advance far west, to the Kaskaskia country and the mighty Mississippi to whip the red coats and redskins there."

"But the canoes in the glade?"

"Tonight I shall see what I can find out."

"Tonight, so help me Humphrey, you shall stay here and rest."

Chad supped slowly of the wild rice soup she handed him.

"My wound feels much better," he said. "Thanks to you and your care. Yet I have this duty to perform in behalf of the people at Fort Baxter. Soon as darkness falls, I will go."

"It shall be interesting," Hannah said, "to see which is the mightier. The female tongue or the male muscle."

The moon had grown since last he had seen it. Lying flat on his stomach, Chad surveyed the small winking red eyes that were fires in the glade below him. Hannah stirred beside him and a twig broke sharply. Against her pleading, Chad had left the windfall. At the last minute, angrily, Hannah had decided to accompany him. And neither had he been able to stay her.

"In case you should become giddy again," she said waspishly. "Then you will have my frail strength to lean on."

YONDER they could make out the dim forms of sleeping Indians, of quivers and bows and long rifles, the black outlines of canoes and wider objects that were rafts near the river. The smell of venison still cooking distended their nostrils. Intermixed with that was the dampness of the leaf-moulded ground.

Hannah jerked Chad's sleeve, whimpered. "That large wigwam is where the redcoats reside. The one almost directly below us."

Chad nodded, saw a red-jacketed figure emerge from the tent, stoop and heap more wood on the fire. Flames crackled, licked skyward, revealed the man's solemn features. He stared unseeingly at the blaze, hands folded behind his back.

"Thinking for him appears to be an effort," Hannah said.

"And for you," Chad replied, "holding your tongue is even more difficult."

Hannah turned on him, green eyes flashing. Chad stilled her rising outburst with a tight grip on the arm.

"Look," he rapped. "Are my eyes deceiving me?"

Involuntarily Hannah jerked up. "That slinky weasel, Ezekiel Briggs, coming out of the tent," she hissed as Chad pulled her down. "Let me get my hands on that prattler of witches, that two-faced, spindly-legged traitor."

Hannah's low spoken words held such fire that Chad was amazed. He looked at the soft line of her cheek in the starlight, the halo of her hair in filtered moonbeams. And then, abruptly, he drew her close and kissed her.

Hannah was speechless when he released her.

"For once, listen and obey," Chad said soberly. "I must use all my caution, get nearer and find what stirs. The devil's cauldron is boiling down there."

He left her then, wide-eyed and shaken, and began worming his way through the thick, brush-covered slope.

The moon had died and the sun was past it's zenith when Chad and Hannah halted in a dense thicket of young poplars growing beside the river. Here they commanded a sweeping view of the stream to the east. Their eyes were narrowed as they watched a dark blot on its bosom approaching them.

"Aye, it's a keelboat," Chad said at last. "Very large, with high breastworks and a

white sail. Perhaps the very one I overheard the British talking about last night. Evidently the scout from the stockade must have succeeded in getting through to Fort Pitt."

Worriedly Hannah looked at Chad. The smithy's complexion was deathly white. She knew his wound bothered him, was bleeding again. All night long, and this far into the day, they had traveled at a killing pace, stopping only long enough to quench their thirst at an occasional small creek. Chad had forged on uncomplainingly, had even carried her bodily across several of the deeper streams.

His recovery from the fever was incredible, bespoke the clean living of the man.

Hannah spoke, "Will they stop when we hail them? It is a common ruse for a white man and woman to stand on the bank, pleading for help, and then lure the people aboard into an ambush."

"Failure is out," Chad answered. "We must make them understand."

"If it is really the keelboat bound for the fort, Ezekiel Briggs, curse him, has good cause to worry," Hannah said. "What with the fat bounty promised him by General Hamilton should the stockade fall."

"The man is full of treachery," Chad said. "Look! There is a bucksin clad figure in the prow. I hope the runner from the stockade is some one we both know."

The keelboat was almost abreast of them midstream when they parted the small poplars and ran boldly out onto the small sand bar. Hannah waved a red bandanna while Chad cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Ho, the keelboat!" he yelled. "You on board bound for Fort Baxter!"

Chad's call caused an instant commotion by the bow of the big boat. Several men rushed up to join the individual in buckskins.

"They have noticed us," Hannah cried excitedly.

Chad called again. "I am Chadwick Waring, the fort's smithy. My companion is Hannah Milland, daughter of the former Hiram Milland."

"Also tell them," Hannah added in an aside, "that I am one well versed in the devil's art of witchcraft."

CHAD was aware of Hannah's bitterness, placed an arm about her slim waist. He looked down at her even features, the curve of parted red lips. There was much that he wanted to tell this girl. But this was not the time, not the proper place.

Hannah raised her head, her green eyes deep pools of mystery. "Thank heavens," she cried. "They are heading shoreward."

The first person to greet them over the breastwork of the keelboat was Long Tom Turner.

"Chad Waring," he bellered. "I had long since given you up."

"We were afraid," Chad said, "that you wouldn't recognize us."

"Ho, ho, ho,!" Long Tom roared to his companion, a stocky man with ruddy square features. "He looms up like a giant amongst pygmies, has the flaming-haired Hannah Milland beside him, then prates like this."

Willing hands hefted Chad and Hannah aboard. Long Tom introduced the squat man who wore a greatcoat and tricone hat: "This is Captain Trumbull just out of Fort Pitt with powder and supplies for beseiged Fort Baxter."

"That I already know," Chad said, and when Captain Trumbull's beetled eyebrows arched, he explained what had happened to him and Hannah since they had left the stockade. "And last night I managed to get within hearing distance as the traitor, Ezekiel Briggs, plotted with the King's men. They plan on attacking the keelboat at Piper's Bend. They believe they can take Fort Baxter successfully if the powder fails to get through."

"Ezekiel Briggs, a traitor as I suspected," Long Tom growled. "No wonder he made such a hubaloo about witchcraft. It would have served his purpose well. Just let me get his scrawny visage in line with my sights."

"I would much rather rake his face with my long nails," Hannah professed vengefully.

Chad laughed softly. "Sometimes," he told the others, "even behind a bloodthirsty exterior such as this, there lurks a heart soft as the mellow rays of the harvest moon."

"Fiddle faddle," Hannah said, and tossed her head back in disdain.

"Come into the cuddy," Captain Trumbull invited. "You both must be famished and tired to the core. And how many canoes do you think they have?"

Chad stooped as he entered the low doorway. "Not less than fifteen war canoes and nearly as many rafts," he said.

The captain lit a tallow lamp, his face in sober aspect.

"That puts us greatly at a disadvantage," he said. "I'm afraid they can overwhelm us by numbers alone."

"But the people at the fort?" Chad said. "We must make a try."

"Nay, lad," the captain said wearily. "I fear you have but saved the necks of we on board. 'Twould be foolhardy to even make the attempt."

Long Tom Turner put in his say, "But if you would lay out all available guns on deck, your extra hatchets, and have boiling water ready to scald the bucks. Then you can heave fireclubs at them made of greasy tow or linsey. Also you have two cannon to help blast your way through."

"Aye, aye, that I know," Captain Trumbull agreed. "But I have seen war canoes maneuvered by the wily Wyandottes before. Even an expert gunner is hard put to twist the muzzle of a cannon about to follow their swift zig-zag path. And once six of those red savages got aboard we would be doomed. While we did away with the first the rest would follow."

Hannah had seated herself on a crude chair near the table. With her shiny copper hair in pleasing disarray, Chad thought she looked most beautiful. And even above his own disturbed feelings, he had to admire the way she still held herself erect.

"Captain Trumbull," Hannah said suddenly. "Besides powder and supplies, do you happen to have any of those bomb shells?"

"Aye, lass, that is only natural, seeing as the keelboat has two brass cannon."

"Yes, a foolish question," Hannah said. "I was thinking, if your men are river wise and can gauge the current, why wouldn't it be possible to send some of the bombshells ahead. Perhaps you could strap them to logs with fuses timed to explode as they reached the bend. In the surprise and confusion that would follow, we might break clear."

Captain Trumbull's fist crashed onto the table.

"The lass has brains," he cried. "That shall be our line of strategy. We'll time our arrival so as to reach Piper's Bend well after dark."

They had brought the keelboat almost to a standstill and Piper's Bend loomed black and forebidding ahead of them. Overhead stars blinked feebly while nearer at hand the river lapped greedily at the plank sides. Silently, one by one, they placed the small rafts containing the bombshells into the water. Shielding the glow of the punk with a jacket, Long Tom lighted the fuses. Once, alive and hissing, he covered the fuses with green leaves and released the deadly logs.

"That makes fourteen," Long Tom said hoarsely, finally, snuffing out his punk. "And spaced at intervals like that, something should happen."

Chad, who had rested during the day, and with clean bandages about his wound, watched the scout get back on deck by the forward breastwork.

"It is silent as a tomb down there," he stated.

"A tomb that is about to roar with life," Hannah said tensely. "It needs but a little stirring, some prodding."

"Well spoken, Hannah," Long Tom said. "Frankly, I think all hell is about to erupt yonder."

Captain Trumbull had ordered the bilge drawn out of the hold that afternoon to float them lighter. Now he spoke lowly, issued further instructions:

"Manly, get ready to bring the copper kettle of fireclubs from the cubby. Chivers, you attend to the boiling water. Lansing and Brewster, man the steering sweep and keep us clear of snags and towheads. Mitchcomb, Anderson, hoist sail. The rest of you take your assigned places."

THE white sail fluttered, rose into the air. The mast groaned as it received the favorable wind and the keelboat leaped ahead under them.

Hannah followed Chad to the cubby

door. Here he pulled a small muff pistol from his waistband, handed it to her. "It's against my liking to be giving you this," he said. "But use it only as a last resort, in case things go against us."

Hannah guessed his reference, took it silently.

"They'll not take me alive," she said simply, and turned back to the bend rapidly drawing closer. Then, "The suspense is dreadful."

HER words were a signal. The night blossomed red and a thunderous explosion shook the keelboat. A weird scene unfolded itself before them. The river seemed to spew heavenwards with geyserous force, hefting shattered bits of a canoe, dashing its human occupants aside like straw puppets. And as the water still rose, they saw the further lineup of longboats and barges under overhanging branches with Wyandottes haunched to readiness. Then the red glare faded and the scene vanished.

The echoes of the blast went bouncing and rattling along the river bluffs. Now shrill cries of alarm and surprise and rage came from down stream.

A second blast pealed out in the middle of the river. One that only served to confuse. The next earth-rending boom was under the willow branches themselves. By its crimson glow they sighted three canoes topple over, the bronzed bodies of the Indians shining eerily as they careened into the river.

Another bombshell let loose, and another, and several in quick succession. The water churned with the force of the detonations, became alive with shaven, scalplocked heads and wet red bodies. Broken pieces of canoes floated about. Others, bottoms up, reeled crazily. A raft, crowded with Wyandottes upended and tilted its human cargo clawing and yelling into the stream.

Then the keelboat hit Piper's Bend proper!

Captain Trumbull signaled with his hand and Manly flung his lighted clubs of greasy tow far out onto the crest of the water. From the boat's concealment they began firing at the bobbing heads and floundering bodies.

On the bank an English voice shouted an order. Instantly several war canoes raced out from the willows. Two boats full of Wyandottes passed a flaring club, and then one shot in close.

A buck hooked a forked sapling over the breastwork near where Chad was standing. He saw a naked form pass the loophole, reached out and daggered a lightning stroke that caught the Indian dead center in the naval. He jerked back as another warrior thudded onto the deck beside him. With a swooping movement, Chad caught a red leg, upended the redskin and cracked his skull against the side of the cubby.

A gun flashed and powder scorched Chad's arm. He whirled, saw smoke curling out of the muzzle of Hannah's muff pistol. The buck beside the crate of supplies tried desperately to aim his musket at Chad. All at once the musket became too heavy, pulled him forward and he crumpled onto the deck—dead!

"Hannah, back into the cubby!" Chad cried. "And close the door behind you."

"Chad," she shrilled. "To your rear!" And flung her pistol at a warrior bearing down on Chad. The small gun cracked smartly against a painted cheekbone, caused the hatchet wielder to lose his balance. Before he could right himself, Chad's leg levered out and his heel sank deep into the muscled belly of the Indian. Steel arced as Chad's knife hand flashed downward.

Captain Trumbull and Manly rushed to Chad's aid. But this part of the fray was over. Somewhere a buck screamed in anguish as boiling water scalded him. And above the sound of shots and war whoops and bellows, Long Tom Turner's voice was raised in wild yells of joy.

"The men at the rear sweep," Manly cried. "They need help."

Chad whipped about, saw Lansing and Brewster struggling with two braves who were intent on clubbing them down. Lansing, unluckily, tripped. The tomahawk that crushed his skull was merciful. Long Tom's musket spat in quick retaliation from the forward breastwork. Grotesquely the redskin pitched writhing on top of his

fallen foe. In the meantime a third figure in linsey breeches had grabbed hold of the sweep, was heading the keelboat straight for the bank.

Captain Trumbull raised his horse pistol, aimed. Moving fast, Chad brushed the gun aside, leaped toward the white renegade holding the long pole.

EZEKIEL BRIGGS' face blanched yellow when he saw the young smithy hurtling at him. Releasing the sweep, he dashed for the breastwork, tried madly to scale it. Chad gave a cry of rage, left the deck in a flying tackle. His splayed fingers caught the traitor's left ankle. The smithy jerked savagely, caught Ezekiel Briggs' plummeting body, then enveloped the ruffian in a great bear hug. The renegade twisted and kicked and flailed. Futile efforts. He was hopelessly trapped. Manly rushed up, took the dangling sweep, cut the boat sharply back for the center of the river.

The fight ended with the same suddenness it had started.

Captain Trumbull's face was purple when he confronted Chad. "You spoiled my aim purposefully," he roared. "A couple more seconds and this renegade would have stove us up on the river bank."

Chad got up from where he had been trussing Ezekiel Briggs.

"Captain Trumbull," he said. "This is the traitor of whom I spoke. This is Ezekiel Briggs. I wanted him alive, for I intend that he shall clear Hannah Milland's name of witchcraft."

Captain Trumbull glared at the bound form lying on deck. Slowly some of his color receded.

"I understand your motive," he said finally. "It was good. This treacherous renegade will hang. Now, not only do I think that we have saved the powder for Fort Baxter, but I also believe we have broken the siege as well. That was the main band of redskins that attacked us back there. They left only enough stragglers at the fort to keep those within the stockade occupied."

"That is smart reasoning, Captain," Long Tom agreed. "I am of the same opinion."

A long time later, when things had quieted down, Chad stood in the prow of the boat. The misty river breeze that fanned his face was like cooling camphor. Hannah was beside him and he knew that without her cleverness Fort Baxter would have been doomed. Her nearness stirred him, made him yearn to take her in his arms again.

Hannah gazed at the dark bank flowing past, said: "It is serene now, and beautiful. Still, I am wondering what my reception will be when we arrive at the Stockade."

"It is common talk on board that you will be hailed as the fort's guardian angel," Chad said. "Clearly, it was Ezekiel Briggs' lying tongue that fomented the whole scandalous thing of witchcraft. He was working hand in glove with the British. That incident was supposed to catch the fort napping. Had it not been for you, the ending might have been different."

"No, I do not feel too bitter," Hannah said thoughtfully. "Sheep always follow a leader. Perhaps the people at the stockade will forget in time."

"Yes, I am sure they will," Chad said. "Yet, Hannah—that is, Captain Trumbull has the Good Book in his locker. It—it would make me happy if you returned there as my wife."

Hannah's face in the waxing moonlight was radiant.

"When I was alone and needed help, you were the only one who sided me," she said. "I accept your offer."

Chad's jaws set stubbornly.

"I am not asking it as a favor of gratitude," he stated. "If thoses are your feelings, you can forget I ever spoke about it."

"Gratitude, perhaps," Hannah said. "I think so, for it rises strong within me. But as to the other, I can show you best by deed." And reaching up she placed her arms about Chad's neck, drew him down and kissed him.

She held him like that and she didn't release him. Slowly it came to Chad that she loved him very greatly.

Big Matt moved in, fists smashing at the wagon captain.

RED RENDEZVOUS

By CHARLES DICKSON

The very grass smelled of ambush. Yet the covered wagons rolled recklessly on over the silent prairies. Had they not rid themselves of that wily renegade, Big Matt Brannan?

STANDING BESIDE THE CAVendish wagon, Big Matt Brannan watched the unknown horseman approach the noon camp of the wagon train. The stranger's figure was indistinct through the wavering heat haze.

Big Matt heard Jeanie Cavendish exclaim at his elbow, "It's a white man!"

He nodded. "And one that's covered a lot of desert since he slept last, from the frazzled look of him."

Other emigrants were pouring out of the wagons now, their curiosity stirred by the oncoming rider. They gathered around Big Matt and Jeanie.

Big Matt towered over most of them. He was a lean man in his early thirties, large of bone, with a sun-darkened face and a friendly tilt to his wide lips. Black hair swept the broad shoulders of his deerskin hunting shirt. He kept his keen, gray eyes on the stranger.

He saw a grizzled, hard-bitten frontiersman in fringed buckskin, with a percussion rifle cradled in his arms. The mounted man drew rein a few yards away.

"Who's cap'n of this outfit?" he demanded.

Sam Foggerty stepped forward. He eyed the newcomer coldly. Foggerty was a surly-faced, powerful man in a checkered shirt and deerskin leggings. Besides Big Matt, he was the only experienced plainsman with the emigrant train.

"I am," Foggerty said.

The stranger swung from the saddle wearily and placed the butt of his rifle against the baked earth.

"I'm Jeff Wicker," he announced. "Just over the mountains from Californy. You're headed for a nest of feathered hornets, amigo. The Snakes and Bannocks have gone scalp-crazy. They wiped out a train a week ahead of you. Kilt the whole company, thirty-eight souls, nearly half of 'em woman and young uns."

BIG MATT heard shocked voices rise around him. The crowd shifted nervously. But Sam Foggerty showed no trace of alarm.

"Thanks for the warnin'," the burly captain said, "but I guess we'll be able to take care of ourselves. We got forty-four able-bodied men, and we're all well armed. We ought to be more'n a match for any pack o' bow-and-arrer raiders."

Big Matt saw a doubt in Jeff Wicker's face. The Californian swept grim, appraising eyes along the two parallel lines of canvas-roofed Conestoga wagons.

"You got a good-sized outfit," Wicker admitted, "but you'll have yore hands full as shore as my rifle's got hindsights."

His gaze swung back to the emigrants.

"The Snake chief, Sly Eagle, swears he'll wipe out every caravan on the main trail this year. With the Bannocks helping him, he might do it, too. He's got more'n three hundred braves, most of 'em with guns as good as yours. And the whites riding with 'em are whipping 'em to a frenzy with trade whiskey."

Big Matt Brannan's sharp eyes narrowed. "You mean white men are fightin' alongside the Indians?"

"I mean just that," Wicker said. "A gang of renegade whites is furnishing the redskins with rifles and powder, and planning to gobble up most of the loot from the wagons. We got word of this in Californy from a friendly Ute chief who sent a messenger acrost the Sierra. I saddled up pronto and rode east to warn the trains."

Big Matt asked, "You got any idea where these red devils are now?"

Wicker shook his head. "I only saw sign of 'em once. That was when I got to the first caravan, about an hour after the Injuns had left it."

The grizzled Californian's alkali-split lips compressed wrathfully.

"I found one pore butchered emigrant who was still breathing, and he lived long enough to tell me what had happened. One of the renegades had been travelling with the train. They'd picked him up somewhere along the trail, and hired him as a guide. He guided 'em all right—straight into a brownskin ambush!"

The desert rolled its silence over the company. A searing wind stirred Big Matt's long hair. Anger took hold of him. His thick fingers curled into fists as brown and hard as pine knots.

"I'd like to line my sights on any white dog who'd turn his own kind over to a bunch of painted killers!" he said fiercely to the others.

"You'll likely get the chance," Jeff Wicker answered. With a sigh, the weary Californian heaved himself back into the saddle. "I got to be moving if I expect to reach water tonight," he said. "I hope you folks make it through!"

Waving farewell, he drummed moccasined heels against his horse's sides, and moved off into the quivering heat that strangled this thirsty land.

BIG MATT BRANNAN'S mind was already busy with plans for safeguarding the caravan. He thought of the tough crew of mountain men—seasoned Indian fighters—from which he had parted a few weeks before, and he wished they were with the train now.

Big Matt had overtaken the emigrant company just west of South Pass, having

come that far with a small, fast-moving party of free trappers who had been his wilderness companions for seven years.

At the time, he had been undecided whether to spend another season along the beaver streams of the northwest, or to strike out for California, where he intended to settle down before long.

A slim, brown-haired girl had settled the issue for him. Jeanie Cavendish her name was, and during the few days that the mountain men had travelled alongside the emigrants, Big Matt had decided that she was an excellent reason for him to follow the California trail . . .

Turning now to face the pioneers, he saw near-panic in their gaunt, dust-powdered faces. Big Matt knew that the hardships of the journey already had strained their nerves to the snapping point.

He said confidently, "We've got a good chance to get through, friends. On the other side of the desert, I know a route that leaves the main trail and cuts across the mountains.

"It's long and rough, but we can defend the camp sites on it easier than we can the ones on the main trace. And by usin' the detour, we may be able to sweep all the way around the redskins."

He saw hope spring into the emigrants' sunken eyes. Somebody shouted, "Sounds good to me. Let's take the detour!"

And then strong fingers clamped on Big Matt's arm. He was jerked around, found himself facing Sam Foggerty. The train captain roared. "Hold it! Who's master of this train? I decide which way we'll go!"

Foggerty's tiny, round eyes glittered venomously. "I been over that mountain trail myself," he bellowed, "and nobody could get a wagon through them narrow canyons. You can't get away with it, Brannan!"

Big Matt stared, perplexed by Foggerty's savage outburst. The mountain route could be traversed by wagons. That he knew.

"Can't get away with what?" he demanded.

"Murder!" the burly train captain snarled. "There's only one reason you'd try to steer us into them mountain gorges. You're in cahoots with the renegades! You want to lead us into a trap!"

Foggerty's hand flashed to his belt. Big Matt's startled eyes caught the gleam of a knife blade. Foggerty was lunging then, the knife poised for a kill.

Big Matt moved with swift, sure precision, meeting the other's bull-like rush head-on. His fingers fastened on the thick wrist of the hand that held the blade. Big Matt slid a leg behind Foggerty, hurled his weight solidly against the wagon master's body.

He felt Foggerty falling backward. Big Matt landed on top, saw the knife fly from his opponent's grasp. The two men rolled on the ground, locked tightly together. Hot sand gritted between Big Matt's clenched teeth. Alkali dust clogged his nostrils and throat.

Fingers were clawing at his eyes then, and a knee drove viciously into his stomach. The air whooshed out of him. Big Matt fought for breath, but the muscles of his lungs seemed paralyzed. He clung to Foggerty doggedly.

And then air was flowing into him again. He got his right arm free, put everything he had into a blow that landed behind the train captain's ear.

Foggerty's head bobbed sideways. His grip relaxed. Big Matt bounded to his feet.

The train captain lurched to a standing position. He was shaken, but there was a lot of fight still in him. With a roar of rage, he dived through the churning dust.

Big Matt set himself. The instant he swung he could tell from the smooth rhythm of the movement that his timing was perfect. His fist smashed Foggerty's jaw. The train master's arms dropped. Big Matt moved in.

A slashing left to Foggerty's midsection . . . Another bone-crushing right to the jaw . . . The train captain collapsed like a half-filled sack of sand.

BIG MATT turned to face the gaping emigrants. His breath came more easily after a moment.

He said grimly, "Foggerty was lyin' when he told you that wagons can't cross those mountains. He was wrong about me,

too." He glanced at the unconscious figure at his feet. "When he comes round, he's goin't to have a lot of explainin' to do."

Big Matt raised his head then and squinted at the sun, which hung overhead like the open mouth of a furnace.

He said, "If we don't get movin', we'll never make it to the sulphur springs by sundown. No tellin' how long Foggerty'll be out. Let's put him in his wagon and move on. This whole thing can be threshed out when we make camp tonight."

He scanned the gaunt faces around him, saw indecision in some of them, open suspicion in a few. He realized that Foggerty's accusation had made a strong impression.

These people had a good deal of confidence in their hard-eyed captain, Big Matt knew. Foggerty had demonstrated his ability to fight Indians by bringing the train safely through several minor brushes with the Sioux back in the Platte country.

Big Matt waited to see if anybody would oppose his proposal to get the caravan rolling. Nobody did. The group began to break up. Three men carried Foggerty toward the Conestoga in which the train master was hauling trade goods to the Pacific.

Big Matt saw Jeanie Cavendish coming toward him, accompanied by her bluff brother, Cal, with whom she was making this western trek. Jeanie's brown eyes were snapping with indignation.

"Sam Foggerty must've lost his mind!" she cried. "Anybody who's any judge of character at all could tell that you're no renegade!"

Big Matt Brannan grinned. He looked at this smoothly-tanned, bright-eyed girl, and decided that anger took nothing away from her pert beauty.

It gave him a good feeling to know she was so deeply concerned about him. He hadn't been able yet to muster enough nerve to tell her of the plans he was making for her future, but he realized now that breaking the news might not be such a tough job after all.

"I'm glad somebody believes me," he said. On a bold impulse, he gazed straight into the girl's eyes and added, "And I'm specially glad you're that somebody."

Jeanie blushed, looking even prettier.

Cal Cavendish said, "Matt, we'll take your word about that mountain trail. Why do you think Foggerty lied about it?"

"That's what we've got to find out," Big Matt answered, turning suddenly stern. "He's mighty anxious to keep us from takin' the mountain route. I wonder if it's because he wants us to run into the Indians."

Jeanie's eyes widened. "You mean you think he's a . . . a renegade himself?"

"It could be."

Cal said soberly, "Well, there'll be a showdown tonight. You can count on havin' at least the two of us behind you."

Big Matt said, "Thanks, amigos. I may need you."

He helped Jeanie mount to the high seat of the wagon, keenly conscious of the nearness of her, and then he turned to the rear of the caravan, where his horse was tethered.

He climbed into the saddle of the powerful gray. Whips were already cracking around him. He saw that one of the emigrants was driving Sam Foggerty's wagon. Axles squealed, and spokes that had shrunk in the scorching, arid air added their rattle to the din. The white-cowled Conestogas lumbered forward.

BIG MATT galloped away from the train, out across the desolate, sage-dotted plain. Narrowing his eyes against the glare, he sought through shifting mirage and dancing heat for Indian sign. Except for the caravan, the only thing that broke the monotony of the desert was a range of black, jagged peaks that scraped the sky far ahead of the lurching wagons.

He rode on until he could see the Conestogas only as a string of white dots gleaming through clouds of alkali dust rolled up by plodding hooves and ponderous wheels. He turned his horse's head at last, holding a course parallel to that of the train.

Two hours later, he had seen nothing to indicate that danger was near. He changed direction again, heading back to that distant billow of dust.

He struck the caravan near its rear and jogged through the gritty haze toward

the Cavendish wagon. A harsh voice arrested him.

"Brannan!"

He looked around, saw Sam Foggerty riding across from the opposite side of the train. A dozen mountedmen flanked the burly captain. Big Matt stared down the barrels of several rifles.

Foggerty's eyes gleamed with an implacable hatred. His face was lacerated and swollen where Big Matt's fist had slammed into it.

He said, "You're gettin' off light, Brannan! There ain't any doubt in my mind but what you ought to swing from a upended wagon tongue, but these other fellows don't want to go that far. They think you might've been honestly mistaken about that mountain trail."

He paused to dampen his bruised lips. "We're goin' to give you the benefit of the doubt," he went on, "but we ain't takin' any chances. You got to leave the train. And if you're ever seen in our neighborhood again, you'll be shot on sight."

Big Matt surveyed the emigrants with impassive eyes. "You folks are makin' a mistake," he said quietly. "If there's a renegade in this company, it's your own captain, Sam Foggerty."

The hulking train master laughed derisively. A man spoke from the group behind him. Big Matt recognized the voice of David Wainwright, a prosperous, well-educated farmer who had a great deal of influence with the pioneers.

Wainwright said, "We'll stick with Foggerty. He was highly recommended to us in Independence, Brannan, while you're just an unknown we picked up along the trail."

Big Matt shrugged, recognizing the futility of argument.

"I've got a couple of friends I'd like to speak to," he said.

Foggerty snarled, "You speak to nobody. Round up your packhorse and go!"

Big Matt looked at the menacing rifles. He decided he didn't want to argue with them either . . .

Leaving the rumbling wagons behind, Big Matt Brannan pushed his horses steadily until he reached the hot sulphur springs at the base of the mountain range. He peered at the sun, saw it was more than an hour high.

He watered his animals, then rode up into the hills, where he made camp in a clump of scrubby junipers. Picketing his packhorse, he returned to the springs and scouted the vicinity thoroughly. Finally

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of FRONTIER STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1949.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Malcolm Reiss, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the FRONTIER STORIES and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y ; Editor, Malcolm Reiss, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Business manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . . . (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) MALCOLM REISS,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of September, 1949.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1950.)

convinced that no Indians were lying in wait for the approaching train, he withdrew to his hidden camp.

Big Matt got little sleep that night. He lay awake under a froth of stars, sucking fragrant smoke from his pipe and staring thoughtfully off into the mountains' blackness.

He felt little doubt that Sam Foggerty was in league with the renegades. In no other way could he explain the train captain's determination to keep the caravan on the main trail.

The fact that Foggerty had been recommended to the emigrants failed to impress Big Matt. Recommendations, he knew, could be forged or bought.

He finally decided on his course of action for the next day. After the train had moved on, he would water his horses at the springs. Then he would sweep completely around the caravan, riding scout for it whether his services were wanted or not.

He slept at last, and dreamed of Jeanie Cavendish.

BIG MATT was up before the sun. With his small brass telescope, he crept on foot to the rim of a cliff overlooking the springs.

Day was near now. In the growing light, he could see the train coiled below him, the great wagons forming a corral for the mules and oxen. The camp was already astir. Sagebrush fires, burning with furious blue flames, sent clouds of smoke and white ashes up into the thin radiance of dawn.

He trained his spyglass on the Cavendish wagon, saw Jeanie deftly frying bacon. He thought of what would happen to her if scalp-hungry Snakes and Bannocks overran the train, and the picture didn't appeal to him at all.

The teamsters began to hitch up. Their shouts and the braying of mules floated up to Big Matt. He watched the Conestogas move sluggishly into double file.

He noticed suddenly that something seemed to be wrong with a wagon near the head of the column. Men were gathering around it. He swung the telescope. It was Sam Foggerty's wagon, he discovered, and something was wrong with it all right. The rear axle had broken.

Big Matt saw Foggerty shrug and shake his head hopelessly. The train captain, to judge by his gestures, didn't think the Conestoga could be repaired. Foggerty unhitched his mules and loaded two of the animals with a portion of his belongings.

He signaled, then, for the caravan to move on, obviously intending to abandon the wagon and the rest of its load.

The sharp crack of whips rose to Big Matt's ears. Mules and oxen strained forward, and the train rolled.

When the last wagon had lumbered around a nearby bend in the mountain wall, Big Matt ran back to his camp among the junipers. He mounted the big gray. Leading the packhorse, he rode into a rocky defile that opened out of the mountains about fifty yards from the sulphur springs.

He picked his way through a maze of towering boulders, and was almost to the gorge's mouth when the clatter of hooves rode to him on the quiet air. He reined up behind a stone outcropping high enough to conceal his horses.

Sliding to the ground, he drew his brassbound cap-and-ball rifle from its saddle boot. He peered over the rock, but all he could see was the deserted camp site, with the disabled Conestoga to one side.

The drum of hooves grew louder, coming from the opposite direction to that in which the caravan had gone. And then a strange cavalcade galloped into view.

There were four mounted men in the group, three whites in buckskin and one half-naked savage smeared with vermilion. They were urging along two mules hitched tandem to a two-wheeled contraption that looked to Big Matt like a cart without a body.

Big Matt's fingers tightened on his rifle. His eyes narrowed to grim, glittering slits. He realized that in all probability the whites before him were members of the renegade gang.

The party rode straight to Sam Foggerty's wagon and dismounted in a swirl of dust. Immediately they set to work unloading the Conestoga.

Soon one of the white men went over to the mule-drawn rig and untied an axe. He disappeared into the wagon.

Big Matt heard the sound of chopping. After several minutes, an irate curse came to him faintly from the Conestoga. The man with the axe stuck his head out over the tailgate of the wagon. He beckoned irritably to his companions, who were standing idly outside.

"I can't rip this damn floor up by myself," he shouted. "Give me some help!"

One of the other whites and the Indian climbed into the wagon. The sound of the axe resumed.

Finally, the chopping ceased. A voice in the wagon barked, "Gabe! Lend us a hand here!"

The remaining white man leaned into the opening at the back of the Conestoga. He helped drag forth a weighty metal cylinder that caused Big Matt's eyes to snap wide in stunned disbelief.

THE four men were carrying a cannon toward the two-wheeled rig! A small brass fieldpiece that gleamed brightly in the early-morning sun.

Big Matt felt a sudden chill slide over his body. The whole devilish plot was clear to him now.

There could no longer be any doubt about Sam Foggerty. He was a renegade. He had arranged this breakdown of his wagon so that his fellow outlaws could get possession of the cannon hidden under the Conestoga's false floor.

Big Matt thought of Jeanie Cavendish, and a cold fury mounted in him.

He saw that the wagon train was doomed unless he could do something to save it. Foggerty was undoubtedly planning to lead the wagons into an ambush from which there would be no escape if this cannon fell into the Indians' hands . . .

Big Matt dropped to his hands and knees and worked his way from rock to rock until he lay behind a boulder at the very mouth of the ravine. He peered out warily, found that the fieldpiece had been placed upon the cart-like contraption, which he realized now was a gun carriage. The men were working feverishly to secure the cannon.

Big Matt saw his chance. All four of the faces around the gun were momentarily turned away from him. He leaped out of the defile with the speed of a charging panther.

A dozen long strides put the white-topped wagon between him and the little group. He turned on silent feet, stole rapidly toward the Conestoga. Shifting his single-shot rifle to his left hand, he drew the .44 Colt revolving pistol from the fringed elk-skin holster at his belt.

He heard one of the renegades curse impatiently. The same voice said, "We got to get this rig movin', or they'll attack before we get there. Sly Eagle won't be able to keep a rein on them young bucks much longer, liquored up the way they are."

Big Matt was almost to the Conestoga. The sound of metal hammering metal rang in his ears, and then the renegade spoke again, the fretful note in his voice changing to one of triumph.

"There! That ought to hold her. "Let's—"

He broke off as a faint crackle of rifle fire drifted from the direction the wagon train had taken. Another curse ripped from the renegade.

"I knowed it!" he yelled savagely. "They've already jumped the train. Let's get this powder and shot lashed on the back of the gun rig, boys. Maybe we can still get there in time to try out this little beauty!"

Big Matt stepped out from behind the wagon, his revolving pistol leveled.

"A change of orders," he said. "Don't move!"

The three whites stared at him, their faces slack with astonishment. But the Indian reacted violently. Big Matt glimpsed a blur of movement as the redskin flung himself to one side. A tomahawk leaped into the buck's hand.

Big Matt sidestepped just in time. The axe swished past his ear. The revolving pistol bellowed, and a bullet smashed the Indian through the heart.

"The rest of you turn around," Big Matt commanded.

He stepped up behind the three whites

and disarmed them swiftly. He was sharply aware that the noise of the battle had grown to a distance-muffled roar.

He said, "All right! Go ahead and tie the ammunition to the gun carriage—and I mean for you to hustle!"

He stood watchfully by, inwardly chafing at the delay, while the sullen renegades lashed kegs of powder behind the cannon. He could detect no diminution in the fury of that distant gunfire. He hoped that was a good sign. At least, the caravan was holding its own.

He glanced over the assortment of projectiles that had been hidden with the field-piece.

"Never mind the solid shot," he ordered. "Just load on the grape."

When that had been done, Big Matt motioned toward the horses with his pistol. "We're all ridin' now," he said grimly. "We're ridin', and ridin' fast. And don't any of you get the notion you can outrun a rifle ball."

He mounted the dead Indian's pony and watched the renegades climb reluctantly into the saddle.

"Head for the train!" he shouted.

Big Matt galloped at the rear of the little troop, the long rifle ready in his hands. The crash of battle drew rapidly nearer. Soon he could hear the wild, shrill screams of the attacking warriors.

The trail they were following wound out of sight around a low spur of the mountains. Big Matt barked a command to halt.

"Load the cannon!" he yelled.

THE renegades muttered rebelliously, but they dismounted. Their movements were maddeningly slow. The urgency of the moment had Big Matt by the throat. Every muscle in his tall body was a spring that was twisted too tight, begging to be released.

"Faster!" he cried. "Faster!"

He wondered how he was going to touch off the cannon's charge. Whipping his pipe from a pouch at his belt, he packed it with tobacco and ignited a piece of punk with his flint and steel. He touched the burning punk to the tobacco, which he sucked to a bright glow.

By that time the gun was loaded. Big Matt urged his tiny army forward again. The cannon bounced around the bend in the trail.

He saw the caravan then. The wagons, standing tongue to tailgate, formed a rough square. Pillars of smoke were rising from blazing canvas, and rifles were spouting flame from dozens of places inside the crude fort.

His eyes swept to the besiegers. Howling savages were pouring around the caravan in an endless stream. Many were firing guns from the saddle. Others were arching arrows into the beleagured train. Thick billows of dust swirled everywhere.

Big Matt waved his column to a stop. He gave an order, and the renegades swung the cannon around with its back to the mountain spur. The mules sprang away as Big Matt slashed their harness with his knife.

He heard a welcoming shout go up from the Indians. A party of them galloped straight toward the cannon. Big Matt was careful to keep himself hidden as well as possible behind his three captives. He noted several white men among the oncoming riders.

A thin smile suddenly tightened his lips. He had recognized Sam Foggerty out there!

Keeping the pistol aimed at his prisoners with one hand, Big Matt reached out with the other and tapped burning tobacco into the cannon's touchhole.

As he did so, he saw Sam Foggerty jerk his pony to a rearing halt. The renegade pointed frantically at the big gun, bellowed something, and tried to spin his mount.

The cannon boomed. Men and horses went down in a churning mass before the whistling grapeshot. The few who managed to rise reeled back from the smoking muzzle. Big Matt couldn't find Foggerty among the survivors.

He forgot Foggerty then. Shrieks of rage were tearing from scores of savage throats. He saw a wall of vengeful riders forming to overwhelm the cannon.

"Load for your lives!" Big Matt roared. "They'll butcher all of us now!"

A bullet whined over his head. He

watched his terrified prisoners desperately ramming powder down the brass gun's gullet. There was nothing slow about their movements now, Big Matt thought with grim amusement.

The Indians charged, screaming. Arrows swooped to earth all around the cannon, and rifle balls whipped the air. Big Matt crouched beside the fieldpiece, narrowed eyes measuring the dwindling distance to that wave of frenzied killers.

One of the renegade cannoneers screeched and fell, an arrow through his chest. The other two leaped back from the gun's mouth. Big Matt calmly poured tobacco embers down the touchhole.

Another of his renegade helpers went down.

The fieldpiece thundered. Big Matt saw the grapeshot slice through the close-packed Indian ranks like a giant scythe. The attackers were thrown into hopeless confusion. Wounded ponies pitched wildly or struggled on the ground, tripping the uninjured horses behind them. Riders who had escaped the cannon's blast were trampled to death.

Big Matt emptied his pistol into the pall of dust before him. Hastily he reloaded, and the realization flashed over him that he was the only one of the cannoneers still on his feet.

He heard the wagon train pour a thunderous volley into the shattered foe.

THE Indians broke, Wailing, the survivors whirled their ponies and rode madly for the mountains.

Big Matt found himself running toward the caravan. The emigrants thronged out to meet him. His eyes quested anxiously among them—and then he relaxed a little. Jeanie Cavendish was there, smiling and safe . . .

By noon that day, order had been restored to the caravan. Big Matt Brannan rode up to the Cavendish wagon and climbed down from the saddle.

Jeanie came out of the Conestoga quickly. She smoothed her brown hair and smiled up at him.

Big Matt said, "Well, I guess that gang of renegades won't be causin' any more trouble. We've got the bodies of six of them, countin' Foggerty. I doubt there were any more."

Jeanie said, "And we owe it all to you, Matt. I hear they've made you captain of the train."

Big Matt frowned. "Not exactly," he said. "They offered me the job, but I haven't accepted. After you've been in the mountains as long as I have, it's hard to get beaver out of your blood. I'm thinkin' of headin' north for another season with my traps."

He saw the expression of blank dismay with which she stared at him.

She blurted, "But—but I thought you meant to settle in California."

"Of course," Big Matt said gravely, "I haven't fully made up my mind. I guess I could be persuaded."

Jeanie looked at him for a long moment, and then understanding brought a sparkle into her brown eyes.

"Will it be hard to persuade you," she asked softly.

"Not for you," Big Matt Brannan answered.

Bullets For Breakfast

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

Someone started young Hix Jardene down that owlhoot trail and it seemed he'd never get off it, because whenever he tried there was somebody waiting, itching to match that terrible draw, that sure-death aim.

THE KID SAW BOTH Broderick boys working their way toward the Colonel, who was talking to his auctioneer by the stand where the latter would work during the sale tomorrow. Perce Broderick was a little drunk, but he had sense enough to stay away from the Colonel. Mel was stone sober; he'd do the talking for the two.

The kid pushed through the crowd like a road-runner and got there first. He plucked the Colonel by the sleeve, and the old man turned around impatiently.

"Yes?"

"I'm Hix Jardene," the kid said. "My dad was Leland Jardene. I hear you want two men to take a string of horses to the railhead after the sale. I hear you guaranteed to deliver everything the Army bought to the cars. Me and my brother would like that job, Colonel."

Mel was pushing his way toward them, and the kid bubbled with nervousness. The Colonel frowned.

"You're Le Jardene's kid, are you? I suppose you're half horse, then. But I figgered on an older man. How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"And how old's your brother?"

"Sixteen."

Mel came up and said, "Howdy, Colonel. Likely string you've got this year. There's some of that Irish blood beginning to show. Me and Perce ain't workin' until the middle of the week. You want us to take the Army string over to the railhead again this year?"

The Colonel looked from Mel Broderick to young Hix Jardene and back again.

"I guess not, thanks, Mel," he said. "The Jardene kid offered to drive 'em, him and his brother." To Hix he said, "Got horses of your own, or—?" Hix nodded eagerly. "All right, then. You show up and help handle tomorrow until the Army man says he's got all he wants." away. He dared not look at Mel. The two Broderick boys were out of work for The kid stammered his thanks and backed a good reason. They had been on a five-day drunk, and Mel showed traces of it yet. They *needed* that job. It was not just a desire for a little extra money. They had spent theirs, and their bellies were empty.

"But Ma needs it worse," Hix panted, as he darted away from Mel's thunderously black glare. "Ma's money is gone, too, and she didn't booze it up."

He went into the livery stable and yelled, "I got it, I got the job!" and old one-legged Curt Newby, the owner, said, "Now that's plumb fine! The Colonel's a gentleman. Yes sir, they don't come no finer than Colonel Trask! I'll be hard put without you while you're gone, boy, but you kin ketch up when you get back."

There was no time to go home for supper. His brother, Ben, brought sandwiches and buttermilk from home, and ran back whooping to tell their mother the good news. Work was scarce. So was money, even for seasoned riders, because the range had been bad in this part of Nebraska for three years hand running. No one hired a man they could do without. For working in the stable, Hix got four dollars a week. He and Ben would get two dollars a day each for delivering the Army remuda, and Curt would not dock him for the two or three days he was away from the livery stable.

The Trask sale had not been held last year. This year the offering was twice as large as usual. So was the crowd that had come to bid. Maybe it was a good sign. Another good omen was the threat of rain

It was Hix's guns that drove them back.

in the air. Hix whistled as he worked, and did not mind that thirty extra horses came in after dark, to be tied and fed and bedded down.

IT WAS nine o'clock before he started home. The streets were packed, and even the pool halls were sleeping men on their tables. The fee was a dollar a night —or what was left of it after the players departed—and the buyers slept two to a table. The town looked alive, and the townspeople were jingling money in their pockets.

Hix had something to jingle, too. He was carrying three dollars and twenty cents in silver. In his vest pocket was a five dollar gold piece, given him by an alcoholic eastern horse broker in a moment of generosity. It was a worn leather vest, buttonless, and it served no particular purpose except that it always had a stout pocket—whenever Hix had anything to put in it.

He saw a rhinestone brooch in Gable's store window, and beside it a new bolt of yard goods. Abruptly he turned into the store, thinking, *Ma will raise what-for about me buyin' a dress, but tain't nothin' to what she'll do about that pin.* He bought both and headed for home, with the gold piece and ninety cents in silver left.

He was passing the saloon when Mel Broderick came out. They saw each other at the same instant, and Hix knew Mel was not drunk, and he knew why. Mel was too broke to drink, and he needed a drink, and he was more dangerous than he would have been drunk.

He came up and caught hold of Hix's shoulder and said loudly, "You shore took to your heels this afternoon, bub. You thought that was pretty smart, takin' me and Perce's job, but you shore didn't stay around after the old fool said yes".

"Cut it out, Mel," Hix said. He had expected to be afraid, but somehow he wasn't. He shifted his bundle and repeated, "Cut it out. It's a free country."

"You knowed them jobs was mine and Perce's!" Mel snarled.

Hix pulled back a little, until he felt his shirt tear. Then he stood still, and marvelled at the warm feeling that was going through him. He said, "You drove the string last year. What are you talkin' about? Indian Joe always used to drive, before that."

Mel suddenly struck at him with his open hand. The blow caught Hix over the ear, deafening him; the pain inside his head was like an explosion. He went down to his knees and instinctively clutched for support at the thing nearest to him--- Mel Broderick's knees.

Mel pushed him back with his foot, and the package fell out of Hix's hand. He reached for it, and Mel kicked it into the street, and one of the loafers stepped quickly aside to get out of its way. It was this, the act of a cowed spectator, that made Hix maddest. He heard two horses, and saw them push up to the hitchrail, legs dancing beyond the legs of the sidewalk bums. One of them, a white-stockinged sorrel, stepped on the package.

Hix slid away on his knees and got up. He said, "I'm goin' to take that out of your hide, Mel, just the way my daddy did your brother Bob." Mel swung another backhand slap before Hix could finish what he started to say--that Bob was a penitentiary hound. The tips of Mel's fingers caught Hix in the mouth, stinging him a little but bringing a grin. Hix moved in under the blow and hit for the abdomen twice again.

He had Mel groping for the post that supported the canopy, when a chinless cowboy who was gaping blankly at the edge of the crowd was pushed within reach of Mel. The cowboy was half drunk, and he was carrying a heavy oak cane he had just won at a spin-the-wheel booth up the street.

Mel grabbed for the cane. Hix saw it coming too late to dodge. He took the first one on his left shoulder. It knocked him to his knees, and he covered his head with his arms and tried to stand up and slide away from it. Mel hit both forearms with the next one, numbing them.

Hix saw him swing the next one. He felt a little of the pain as it laid a three-inch cut open on the back of his scalp. Then the feet of the loafers seemed to go shooting up in the air. The sidewalk disappeared, and all sound was drowned out in a tremendous hissing and groaning . . .

OLD Doc Prader had finished stitching him up when next Hix Jardene knew anything. Somebody saw him stir and said, "Give him a snort of the medicinal, Doc. It's the medicine he needs now. Damn them no-'count Brodericks anyway." Doc got a quart bottle down from the shelf and poured a drink. He put a few drops of ammonia in it and handed it to Hix. He drank it and felt much better.

The Brodericks were in jail, someone said. Someone offered to take him home, and fetched a spring wagon. They climbed in and started down the street, and the cool evening air helped clear Hix's head.

There was another commotion in front of the saloon, this time stretching out and blocking half the street. They turned around it, but from the spring wagon seat, Hix saw a drunken cowboy dancing a clumsy dance with a long shawl-like thing wrapped around him. As he danced, Mel Broderick came waltzing in to pin something on his shirt. It was the brooch Hix had bought for his mother, and the cowboy's shawl was the piece of dress goods.

The crowd surged back around their horses, and they had to stop. Hix said, "I thought Mel Broderick was in jail?" A man by the spring wagon—a stranger, who did not know Hix—looked up and said, "Colonel Trask bailed 'em out. They whipped the men that was going to drive over the Army string, and he had to have men."

"That story ain't quite true," Hix murmured, slipping down the wheel. The man in the spring wagon said, "Hey! You better get up here—your head ain't right yet." Hix said, "No, I'm all right," and he did feel curiously calm and sure of himself. Mel Broderick still had not seen him, but he was dancing this way, whooping and singing, and the man with the spring wagon drove away hurriedly.

Broderick had a gun. Hix picked his way through the crowd to the sidewalk. His head throbbed a little as he walked to the livery stable, but that was all. He went to Curt's office and got the hidden key and opened the safe and took out Curt's old .45. He tried the action and found it smooth and well-oiled. There was ammunition on a shelf over the desk. He buckled the gun around his middle and went back to the saloon and pushed between men until he was in the center of the ring.

Broderick had tired of dancing with the cowboy, and was trying to make him do a Spanish solo. The cowboy was no coward. He was drunk, but he did not want to be made ashamed before everyone. He was standing his ground without much hope or enthusiasm on his face whed Hix touched Mel with the muzzle of the gun. The cowboy yelled and dived for the shadows.

"Let's have that gun, Mel," Hix said.

He helped himself to Mel's gun, unloaded it, and dropped the cartridges into his own pocket. He pitched the gun away over the heads of the crowd and heard it hit the plank sidewalk across the street. Mel had his hands halfway up, trying to make up his mind whether to put them the rest of the way or try his luck. Hix gave him another nudge with the gun.

"Turn around," he said. Mel turned around with his hands still higher. "Now you start on down the middle of the street and keep walking. I'm going to follow you as far as the stage depot. I'm going to stop there. You walk on out of sight. I'll wait at the depot three minutes, and then I'm coming after you. If you ain't out of town, Mel, I'm going to kill you, and I ain't going to care if you ain't got a gun."

"Aw, Jardene, you cain't—" Mel began, half bullyingly, half pleadingly.

Hix jigged him with the gun again.

"Start walkin."

Mel started walking. The crowd parted for him. A man with a star on his shirt came up and touched Hix's arm and started to say something. It was Deputy Sheriff Bert O'Leary. He changed his mind.

"Oh, well! Do Mel good to get tamed down once. Run him out of town!" he said.

The crowd laughed. Hix followed ten paces behind Mel until they reached the livery stable. He sat down there, and Mel slouched away a few paces and stopped defiantly. Hix planted a .45 slug in the dust at his feet, and Mel yelped a string

of profanity and bolted.

"The three minutes has started," Hix called after him.

THEY wanted to buy him drinks. They wanted to take up a collection for him. Mel shook his head. He had no watch, but he waited until he judged the three minutes were gone. He stood up and started across the street, and it dawned on them then that he was really going to look for Mel Broderick.

Someone ran to summon Bert O'Leary. A few followed him, trying to argue, but Hix was growing a little light-headed and dizzy and he could not waste words. He kept wanting to laugh, and it was necessary a time or two to turn the gun on them. Still they followed him, and there were five of them when he walked into the saloon and made his way through the back door and into the card room at the back.

The back room waiter had just brought in a tray with a bottle and six glasses on it. Mel had gotten hold of a little money somewhere in these few minutes. He had dropped a half-dollar on the tray and was reaching for the bottle to pour a drink when he saw Hix. He had acquired a gun, too—a shiny, nickel-plated .44 that Hix recognized. It belonged to the helper at the feedstore. He was a sidekick of Mel's, and had probably loaned him the money, too.

Mel gave the waiter a push, and swivelled around on his heels and went for the nickel-plated gun. Hix grinned and took out his boss's .45 and shot Mel in the chest. Mel managed to get the .44 out of the holster, but it never went off. It dropped out of his hand as the big slug plowed through his breast bone. He started to topple backward, and Hix giggled a little and pumped another one into him.

The waiter ran for the door, baying for the law like a lion-dog, and the other occupants of the room picked themselves up gradually from the sawdust-littered floor under the card tables. Hix thought they looked mighty wide-eyed and comical. Then he didn't think any more. His head began pounding again, and he sat down and rolled, dropping Curt Newby's .45 not three feet from the nickel-plated .44. No one moved the two borrowed guns, and that's where they were laying when Bert O'Leary got there.

II

COLONEL TRASK CAME TO SEE him in jail. Hix had been there three days, and was still trying to hide the fact that he felt qeerly in the head. It was better today; it didn't ache so badly and he could walk around his cell without feeling dizzy. Still, he refused to get up off his bunk when the Colonel came in.

"You should have come to me when you heard that," the old man said. "I wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"You promised Mel and Perce the horse drive."

"Certainly. They would have ganged up on you boys the first night out of town. I had something else in mind for you and Ben."

"Nobody," said Hix, "makes up my mind for me. I hired out for one job, and you figgered to give me another one."

Trask sighed and ruffled his white hair. "I'll send you my lawyer. You won't do a year, Hix. We'll get you out in nine-ten months."

"Nine or ten *months*?" Hix gasped. "You mean I got to do time for this?"

"The judge can't do much else. And I don't think a jury would let you off scot-free. Too many people heard you tell Mel you'd kill him."

"He tried to brain me with a club—"

"I know! And, if it had stopped when you first pulled a gun on him, you'd have nothing to worry about. Instead, you hunted him down and killed him. He had a perfect right--legally--to arm himself after your threat."

Hix could remember only vaguely what happened that night, after that first blow on the back of his head. He revolted at the thought of telling the Colonel he had been light-headed when he killed Mel Broderick. In the first place, it was not quite true. *If I had it to do over again, I'd do it just that same way,* he thought, remembering the brooch and the dress goods.

"Never mind the lawyer," he said. "All

I want from anybody is a piece of bacon rind."

"Bacon rind?"

"The mosquitoes are eatin' me limb from limb. I got to get a night's sleep, Colonel. Can't you get me a sizeable slab of raw bacon rind to rub my hands and face and ankles with, so the danged mosquitoes will leave me alone?"

"Why," said the Colonel, "that's an easy thing to do. I'll see you get it before dark."

The deputy brought the rind to Hix an hour later. He said, "Thanks," and while the lawman watched, he rubbed all of his exposed skin with it and lay down on his cot. He heard the deputy's breathing for a long time, as he watched curiously. Finally, the man said, "That's smart, for a fact! Ain't been a skeeter teched him!"

He went off down the hall, and the door to the office closed, the iron latch was pushed into its three iron eyes. Hix dozed another hour, relaxed and calm and comfortable. It was dark by then—as dark as it would get tonight. The jail was less than a quarter of a mile from the main streets, and he could hear the revelry clearly. The Colonel's sale was over, but not every one had gone home. Those who had been outbid for horses were investing their money in alcohol.

He heard the deputy tilt his chair back so he could put his feet on the desk and doze. Then he got up and quietly peeled off his clothes, until he stood strip naked in his cell. He dropped the clothes a piece at a time through the barred window.

He took up the piece of bacon rind and began to rub the thick trunk of his body with it, paying particular attention to his chest. He was not a big man, but he had a thick, deep chest, and he had been proud of the mat of yellow hair on it until now. The hair resisted the coating of grease, and he had trouble with his back, too.

When he was throughly greased he leaped lightly to his bunk and climbed from it to the single barred window. The jail walls were of soft brown sandstone, eighteen inches thick. He grasped one of the bars with both hands, raised himself, and slid his feet through the window, turning on his side.

The edge of the stone sill scraped his bare body when he let go with his hands. The two bars gripped his chest tightly, but he began squirming vigorously, holding his breath out until he choked for air, letting the hanging weight of his body pull him through.

He dropped suddenly and lit lightly outside the jail, with no particular thrill, and with fewer abrasions than he had anticipated. He dressed quickly and made a circuit of the jail and peered in. The deputy was awake now, reading a book. Hix lurked in the shadows by the door, relaxed and patient and cool, until the deputy got up, yawning, and ambled over to the water keg in the corner.

HE WAS a young deputy, and not formidable; Bert O'Leary had an instinct that made him turn his back to walls and corners, but this one lacked it. He might have it tomorrow, but tonight he spraddled his legs and tilted his head to gulp down a tincup full of water.

Hix hit him in the small of the back and knocked him against the keg. They went down together, with the deputy on the bottom. Hix had his hand on the man's gun before they hit the floor. He sprang up and back and stepped out of sight of anyone who might be staring through the door or window. The deputy stared at him with eyes that showed how shocked he was at having to believe this.

There was no time for talk. Hix waved the gun and the deputy stood up with his arms raised. Hix relieved him of his keys first. The deputy told him where the Curt Newby gun was in two words— "In there!" Hix opened the safe with the biggest key and strapped the old .45 around him, filling the belt and one of his pockets with the sheriff's own ammunition.

He locked the deputy in his own cell and told him, "Yell your head off if you want to, but I've got as many friends in town as I need tonight." He went away while the deputy was still believing that, before he could find the grease on the bars and figure out how Hix really broke jail.

He went straight through town, keeping on the deserted side of the street, opposite the saloon. It was not bravado that made

him take that route. It was simply the shortest, and therefore the best. Sooner or later, Bert O'Leary would check in at the jail. Sooner or later, the imprisoned deputy would sound the alarm. Minutes counted. Because no one expected to see Hix Jardene walking the street, no one recognized him.

He had one of Curt's best horses saddled when a man came through the stable, calling softly, "Hix! Hix Jardene, you whelp! Are you there, Hix?" He waited with the gun in his hand until Colonel Trask's white shock was within three feet of him. He waggled the gun so the Colonel would see it.

"Keep quiet!"

"I thought you'd show up here," the Colonel wispered. "It came to me finally what you wanted with that bacon rind. So you're breaking jail?"

"I already broke it, Colonel, I'm not going to the pen, like Bob Broderick."

"It wouldn't be like Bob Broderick," the Colonel said, "because you're not like him. Bob will die there, either on this term or some other one, and he should. You're Leland Jardene's kid, and you can do your time and come out clean. Maybe," he added hesitantly, hopefully, "you won't need to do any. There's always that chance."

"It's not enough," Hix said. "I hope you don't try to stop me, Colonel, because I'm not going to be stopped."

"Why, no, I won't stand in your way," the Colonel sighed. "Not if your mind's made up."

"It is!"

"I suppose you'll stop in to see your mother?"

Hix shook his head and said shortly, "No. I haven't got time, and it would only make her miserable. What am I going to have to do with you?"

"Nothing. Are you going to take Curt's horse?" When Hix nodded, the Colonel went on: "Then you're a thief, and that's worse than a killer sometimes! Men who are defending you tonight will help lynch you tomorrow, if you steal Curt's horse."

"Curt can take mine. He's not much, but he's worth something. I'll send the rest back."

"Will you?" The Colonel gave an exasperated laugh. "Hunted men never send back anything. Your horse? I'll tell you about that thirty-dollar marvel! Ben, your brother, has a job, guiding a survey party up to the Rosebud. He needs your horse, because your mother sold his to buy you a suit of clothes, to look decent at your trial. Sure Curt can take your horse—and Ben loses his job, and your mother can take in washings again, as she did when you were small, and your dad had just died."

Hix started to say, "You could let Ben have a horse, of course—but you won't. You could give my job to the Brodericks, Colonel, but you can't give my brother a horse." He licked his lips and got only the first two words out. There was no use arguing. He gave the gun a little wave.

"That's why I don't want to go to the pen," he said. "Don't you worry, Colonel—she won't take in any washings." He choked with sudden anger, and stuttered a little: "You didn't have any good advice for the Brodericks, did you? If I remember rightly, Mel got what he wanted out of you. You didn't argue with him when he was pounding me over the head with that club, did you? Nobody did but me! The town didn't interfere then, and the town can't interfere now. If you think back, Colonel, mebbe you'll recollect how this started. All I did was ask you for two or three days work, driving a string of horses. Now you're all fussed up because a man is dead. Colonel, I just don't give a damn!"

THREE shots cracked suddenly, a long way off. Hix knew what they meant. Either the imprisoned deputy had gotten hold of a gun, or Bert O'Leary had checked in at the jail and found him. Bert had stood by and let Hix order Mel Broderick out of town, because he thought it would end there. It had not, and from a law-and-order standpoint, it was this error of his that resulted in Mel being killed. Bert would make up for it if he could. He had no use for the Brodericks, and he had eaten dinner at the Jardene house, but in thirty minutes he would have thirty armed men out searching. Bert O'Leary was a good officer. He made very few mistakes.

Hix jiggled the gun and said, "You'd better go back to that feed bin, Colonel. I've got to lock you up. I've changed my mind about Curt's horse. I think I'll take one of yours."

He pushed the old man through the stable and thrust him into the feed bin. There was a foot of oats in it. The Colonel settled down philosophically and said, "Take the brown gelding. The black's showier and faster, but he'll give you away. People notice him, and that's bad when you're running away. But you're still a thief, Hix."

Hix locked the door without answering. He shifted the saddle from Curt's horse to the Colonel's huge brown gelding. The night table attendant heard him and came out of the office, rubbing his eyes and fumbling for a lantern. Hix touched him with the gun and herded him to the oats bin and locked him in with the Colonel.

He got away fast, but already he could hear horses milling loudly down the street, as Bert lined out his posses. He took the Scottsbluff trail openly for a few miles, cut away from it, doubled back, and then headed for the Rosebud country, following Ben's route as closely as he could in the darkness.

He saw Ben and the surveyors, distantly, the next day, but he did not let them see him. He used their trail to help hide his own, and left it only when he fell in with a party of vagabond Sioux bucks, out on an expedition to steal whatever could safely be stolen. He rode with them for two days, and they put up with him for hopes of stealing his horse. In the end, he left them because he had to sleep. They were entertaining companions, but a man could not watch his horse twenty-four hours a day.

His mind found it funny that he could enjoy the company of thieving Indian neer-do-wells, but whenever they got on his nerves he had only to touch the unhealed welt on his head, and remember Mel Broderick, and how it felt to lie in jail. Over and over again he said to himself, *I was only looking for a job. That's all—I only wanted a few days work.*

His picture was up in Pierre; there was only a $500 reward, but the artist had drawn a good likeness. He ripped down three of the posters—all he saw. Pierre was wide open, and more than one wanted man was at peace here. Hix met one, a small, sly, fawning creature who had a plan to migrate to British Columbia. His name was Chet Jacobs, and Hix said, "All right, Jacobs, I'll go to British Columbia with you. I don't give a damn."

That night Chet Jacobs brought two deputy U. S. Marshals to the room where Hix was staying. He had had two days work breaking horses for a freight line, and had run the three dollars pay into forty at the crap tables. He heard Jacobs and the officers whispering outside his door, and he reached for his money before he reached for his gun. He had learned by now how important it was while a man was on the dodge.

He went out the window, and when the marshals crashed his door he drove them back with three shots through the glass. He could have reached his black horse—he had traded the Colonel's brown one—in a hundred feet, for the stable was just across the alley.

Instead, he waited for Chet Jacobs, who came out of the hotel a safe hundred yards behind the marshals. He put the gun he had borrowed from Curt Newby into the small of the small man's back and said, "You were pretty well heeled this afternoon, bub. Where's it hidden on you?" Jacobs babbled his terror and undressed there in front of the hotel, and Hix held the crowd off and relieved the little man of his money belt. It had two hundred and thirty dollars in it.

He left the black horse behind, because there was a place where a man could buy a horse in a hurry and no questions asked. It was a poor horse, and it came high—a hundred of Chet's money. The marshals were still looking for him in the shanties farther down the slope while Hix was pushing his new horse for the Montana line.

HE HAD another brush with the law up near the Canadian line, and he could not understand why they came at him in such a hurry. He was carrying two guns by then—Curt's .45, and a Walker

.44. He let them get to their horses, and while they were trying to get out of each other's way he opened up with the .44. He got two men and a horse, the horse fatally, the men painfully. As he rode away, he puzzled over the thing that made men boil out in droves to hunt down another man, when the odds were they would get shot for their pains.

"And they do get shot. This wasn't just my lucky day," he said to himself. "What business has a fool cowboy, that only uses his gun to finish off a sick critter, got up against me?" He could shoot now. He could think—he was always thinking—he had to think. He *had* to. What did a cowboy get out of it?

Then he saw his picture again, on a fence corner post. It was the same picture, but the reward was greater. He was wanted for holding up two stores in the Dakotas. He understood now why fools rode out in posses. A thousand dollars would set a cowboy up in business. He took out his pencil and wrote on the bottom of the poster:

This is wrong. I didn't stick up the stores. Blame that on the ones that did it, not me.

He grew a yellow mustache, and let it grow down around the corners of his mouth. In Laramie he joined the Cavalry and hunted Cheyennes for six months. It was dull going; he didn't miss the excitement, as did some of the other troopers, but the pay was poor. He had sent back over two hundred dollars to his mother. He had learned to play a good hand of poker, honest when he could play that way, dishonest when there were others rigging the deck too. There was little time to work, since he had to keep on the move, but he had little difficulty running a few days' pay into a stake at a lively poker table.

He parted company with the Army, and three weeks later saw his name posted as a deserter—a borrowed name, because he had enlisted as Ben Hicks. He got rid of the mustache and let his hair grow long in the back.

He went broke in Idaho, and stuck up a poker game and got away with four hundred dollars. A private guard for the casino got in his way, and Hix shot with his left hand, using the .44. He got the guard in both legs and fogged out of town, firing the .44 to keep people under cover. saving the .45 in case they followed.

In Sacramento a big man with a limp came up to him and said, "You're somebody I know. Your name is Jordan or something, ain't it?" He was a man well past fifty, with gray-blue eyes that were always squinting and darting like a trapped coyote's. Hix shrugged the man away, and later asked who he was, and nobody knew. The man did not bother him again, and Hix got a job on a mountain roundup, and held it until the snow closed in the passes.

He came back toSacramento and saw the man still hanging around, and this time someone identified him: "That's Sully Orcott. He's a damned murdering Arizona gunman. He used to be a deputy marshall or something, but he was too free with his gun. He's trying to bullhead somebody into starting a Cattleman's League, so they can hire him to protect them." The man spat between his teeth. "Range detective! Him!"

Hix asked, "Why don't they run him off?" and the man said, "Him? Run Orcott off? The way he uses that gun? Man, are you crazy?"

Hix thought he can't be so bad but he wondered . . . Orcott was pretty good with a gun probably as good as he needed to be anywhere. Still, Hix wished he could take some of the arrogant swing out of Orcott's walk.

Suddenly Orcott limped over and said, out of the corner of his mouth, "I've got you now! You're Hix Jardene, that held up the U.P. payroll. Don't worry, Blondie —I don't care one way or another. Come over here and I'll buy you a drink."

It was almost a year before Orcott learned the truth, that Hix had not held up the U.P. payroll, but by then it did not matter. They had cut a swath from Sacramento to Reno to Pheonix to Tulsa to Waco to Nogales, riding trains boldly at times, buying fast horses boldly at others, keeping continually on the move.

They holed up in Nogales for three months. Like Hix, Sully Orcott was a

saving man, with winning ways at cards and no love for liquor. They had eight thousand dollars between them when they settled down in Nogales, ten thousand when they pulled out for Southern California.

"That's where the money is," Orcott said, as they dozed away the long hours on the train. "I want twenty thousand dollars and not a cent more. Then I'm headin' for Panama. You can be a king down there on twenty thousand. What do you want to do with yours?"

Hix had seen a ranch up in Idaho that he fancied. Its price was fifteen thousand. stocked with three thousand head of cattle. Ben would be a grown man now in everything but age. He could make a fortune on a place like that . . .

"You're pretty good with them guns." Orcott went on. "Of course, no man that shoots two is ever as fast gettin' one out as the man that sticks to one. You can't shoot two out of a holster like you can one, in a pinch. I always got by with one. Still, two gives you just twice as much thunder when you need it."

"I'll get by, Sully." Hix said.

Sully grinned his ugly grin and said, "I s'pose you will, Blondie. I learned you a lot."

III

COMING OUT OF BLYTHE, ARIZona, their stage broke its tongue. and they had to wait there while another was brought out. They were three miles from Blythe, in the middle of a shimmering, scalding, brazen desert. They waited an hour, Hix and Sully Orcott and three other passengers—a wealthy Spanish-American cattleman and his wife, and a Chicago banker who wanted to look at the property he had won on a bet.

Ten thousand acres, and he had won it on a bet. Sully got Hix out of the coach to talk about it. They wandered away and stood there smoking and trying to think of something. They could see something moving out toward them from town, and took it for granted it was the driver bringing out a blacksmith with a new tongue.

It turned out to be three deputy sheriffs instead. Two of them were youngsters, the sheriff's son. The other was a tall man with a flat-topped, wide-brimmed black hat. Hix and Sully let them come within fifty feet and took only the precaution of moving ten feet or so apart.

"You two are under arrest!" one of the young deputies called. "Reach for the sky. Don't tr—"

The flat-topped hat tilted up, and the tall man said, "Hello, Sully!" and went for his gun. Sully went for his at the same time, but his slug went into the ground under the tall man's horse, and Sully went over in his face.

Hix had fanned two at the kid deputies and drove them back. Now he heeled on the tall man, who was trying to get his horse quiet after killing Sully. Hix got the tall man in the side, knocked him off the horse. He waved the two kids to get down. They handed over their guns, and Hix sent them off a little way to sit in the sand.

The tall man was dying. He looked up at Hix and panted, "Get me into the shade. Get me to town. You've got to get me to town. I'm losing too much blood!"

Hix shook his head and said, "Won't do any good. How come you pulled down on Sully that way, when you just told him to reach for the sky?" The tall man groaned, "I didn't tell him! Them damned fool kids—"

He got the story out of the two youthful deputies, after the tall man had died. His name was Frank Purnell, and like Sully Orcott, had started as a law officer. Like Sully, he was moving from place to place. He had recognized Sully in Blythe, and had gone to the sheriff and asked to be deputized.

"Dad's sick," one of the young deputies said. "Purnell came clean. He said he'd give Dad his share of the reward if he could settle down in Blythe and not be bothered."

"You're a fine pair of laws!" Hix snarled at them. He knew how it was from long talks with Sully. Sully's gunmanship had been valuable to him, but he had used it in a very practical manner. He had lacked the insane vanity which marked some of the killers he had told

Hix about. Purnell was that kind, and more than the reward or amnesty he wanted to beat Sully Orcott to the draw—and he had! "You're a fine pair of whelps!" Hix yelled at the two deputies. "What business has the law got siding with the likes of him?" (Or like the Brodericks?)

As for killing Purnell, he did not care much one way or another. That made two, but he could spare both of them. There was no honor in it, because Purnell was off balance, fighting a wild horse after just killing a man whose fame was wide wherever gunmen were known.

Yet the story went ahead of him. No one in Blythe wanted to make a second attempt at catching him, and he crossed the desert to San Bernardino without molestation. He was recognized there, but even when he went into the express office to claim a package, and stood beside his own picture, five men present pretended not to know him. He had killed Frank Purnell, who had killed Sully Orcott, who had killed somebody else, who had killed somebody else. There were officers in San Bernardino who needed the five thousand, seven hundred and fifty dollar reward that was offered for him, but they all found business elsewhere.

THE package contained ten thousand dollars in currency, and it was all his now, and the Blythe sheriff would collect the eight thousand dollar reward for Sully Orcott, dead or alive. Hix changed part of it into gold in San Bernardino, and and the rest to gold in Victorville, San Diego, Los Angeles and San Fernando. Then he faded back into the Saugus foothills and buried the money.

He liked Los Angeles. He had killed two men. Neither of them was a lawman. He crossed his fingers every time he thought of this, because lawmen become doubly purposeful and vindictive when the man they seek has killed one of their kind. He couldn't go on shooting Brodericks and Purnells forever, because they were mostly on his side. Sooner or later—

He had two thirds of what he needed for the Idaho ranch. He went into Los Angeles with ten double gold eagles, and ran it into eight hundred in one night, in a poker game. When he got up, the proprietor came to him and said, "Look, fella, I'll give you twenty dollars a day to stay out of my place or a hundred a day to deal for me. But don't you come in here to play no more cards against the house."

"Why?" said Hix.

"Because you're a young man, and you want to stay—" the gambler began.

Hix slapped him, knocking him back against the wall. He brought the back of his hand once more across the gambler's mouth, drawing blood. He said, "Don't try to tell me!" The gambler watched his chance and ducked under Hix's arm and ran yelling for help, and his helper charged in the door, pawing at a .32 in a shoulder holster. He saw Hix waiting with the .44 in his hand and stopped, gulping and smiling foolishly.

"Oh!" he said, "Jardene!" He began backing toward the door, keeping his hands in plain sight. His face grew whiter and whiter. "I didn't know it was you. You wouldn't—"

"Stand still," Hix told him, and the man stood still. "Call your boss." The guard yelled, "Harry!" without taking his eyes from Hix's face, and the gambler came in. Hix holstered the .44 and said to the guard, "Get out of here!" The guard groaned thankfully, "Thank you! Knowed you wouldn't pull on a man who wasn't lookin' for it, no matter what they say!" "Get out of here!" Hix repeated, and the guard bolted.

The gambler waited, playing it safe until he knew why his guard had behaved so. Hix hooked his thumbs in his belt and went toward him.

"My name's Jardene," he said, and the gambler wilted and grew as white as his guard. "How much do you value this place at?"

"I've got fo—fo—forty-three thousand in it," the gambler replied.

"I'll give you eight hundred for a half interest."

"No! Are you loco?"

Hix said nothing. Sweat came out on the gambler's face and he began to plead: "What kind of razmataz is this, Jardene?

I can't afford to tie up with you. I run a straight place, see, and I get along with the law, see, and if it gets out that you're a pardner, I'm ruined."

"I don't think so," Hix said. "Your name's Harry, ain't it? Well, Harry, do you want me to open a place across the street?"

The gambler looked relieved. He exclaimed, "The hotel owns everything across the street. You couldn't get in! I tried a hundred times to lease part of the ground floor." Hix said, "You think I couldn't?"

He walked past the gambler, who stepped quickly out of his way. For the first time, Hix was enjoying the thrill of being top man wherever he walked. He had not realized until now how much he had stood in Sully Orcott's shadow before, nor how great that shadow was. Men had gotten out of his way for fear of Sully. But he had killed the man who killed Sully, and that made his shadow greater.

There were a dozen men in the adjoining room, but they were very careful not to see him. He crossed the street to the hotel and asked to see the proprietor. While he was waiting, drumming his fingers on the desk, Harry, the gambler, came in the door.

"Let's think this over," he pleaded. "You don't want to run no casino, Jardene. You're here today and gone tomorrow. I cain't savvy you."

"I need five thousand dollars—quick!" Hix said. "I'l trade eight hundred dollars and two weeks of my time for it. A half interest for that long only, Harry. I'll draw trade—you'll have a play like you've never had. It'll last two weeks. After that —well, I've got to worry about myself, so you can worry about what happens to you."

Harry mopped his forehead and groaned.

"Had a man shot in my place in Temecula. They shot him in the back. Jardene, it ruined me! What if—?"

Hix grinned. "Nobody's going to shoot me in the back."

The hotel man came out of his office suddenly. He was a big, portly, florid man with small, hard, knowing eyes. Hix turned to him. "I'm Hix Jardene."

"I've heard of you," the hotel man said. "I'm Joe Glasford. Have a cigar?" Hix took the cigar, and the hotel man went on: "What's on your mind? Because I don't suppose this is a sociable call." He grinned unafraid.

Harry mopped his forehead. "I'll take you up, Jardene," he said.

Hix said, "Get out! I want to talk business with this gentleman."

Harry hesitated as long as he dared. Then he crossed the street to his own place, and Glasford took Hix into his private office and opened a bottle of Spanish brandy. It was Hix's first taste of fine liquor, and he refused a second. A man could learn to like things like that, and it would ruin him for those long, lonely rides that kept him whole.

Thus Hix Jardene went into business. The corner table was his, in what had been designed for a ballroom. Glasford called in the city marshal and explained how things were to be, while Hix sat at the new table, with it new green baize, and silently riffled a pack of cards.

"You can get by with it for a month if you're lucky," the marshal said. He could not keep his eyes off Hix. "The Federals are going to get around to it by then. Sooner, if there's any trouble."

"There won't be," Hix said.

The marshal nodded. "All right. Your name's Smith, then. But I don't like it Joe. I'm damned if I like it!"

"You don't have to like it," Hix said.

"Some day," the marshal said, picking up courage to tell what he thought was the truth, "somebody's going to call your hand on some remark just like that one."

Hix threw down the cards. The marshal jumped, but he stood his ground, with his arms folded peaceably across his chest. Hix went over and touched his shoulder.

"You've got enough nerve for two men," he said. "Joe says you're square. All right, I'll tell you how it is with me. You know who I am. Maybe you don't need that reward money. Maybe—"

The marshal interrupted, "I'm no man-hunter, Smith. I keep the peace in this town, that's all. The people here don't want no more than that." He grinned, and Hix liked his grin. "This ain't exactly the most moral community in the world. And you

couldn't spend reward money here. Folks would spit on it."

"I savvy," Hix said. "Here's how it is with me: I've killed two men—no more—and they had it coming. I've never had to kill a lawman, yet. I've nicked one or two, and drove one or two out of the business, Marshal, generally they get a new sheriff after I pass through, and I ain't braggin'!"

"I believe you."

"A man's shadow goes ahead of him, and you have to live up to it whether you like to or not."

"That's what I mean. But someday, somebody's going to call your hand. It better not be here, Smith."

"I can't guarantee it, Marshal," Hix said, "but I'll try."

He was glad, indeed, to try! Los Angeles was world's end, and there were many here with a price big enough to force a showdown anywhere else in the world. Men came in by ship, and by coach and saddle across the desert, and afoot—all kinds of men, many of them using up their last welcome on earth. Hix sat at his corner table, on a chair with two inches sawed off each leg. It kept his guns clear that way, and made a poorer mark of his head from the window, and he did not mind dealing with his armpits against the edge of the table.

There was a girl, too, while he was in Los Angeles. She was a little Mexican tough who posed as a gypsy fortune teller. Her father was a respectable rancher up north, but there was nothing respectable about Pancha. Her English was perfect, and it was the only thing perfect about her. She liked Hix, and she was the only woman he would let sit at his table.

ACROSS the street, Harry's place still drew trade, but it was not the kind of trade that made gamblers rich. He hired a new guard, a round-shouldered Texan who had served time in two penitentiaries and who fought with guerrillas in Mexico. He tried twice to pick fights with Hix, but Hix was prepared each time. The marshal arrested the Texan and let him cool off twice in jail.

"I'll kill him," Hix said flatly. "He's a tinhorn. Keep him out of my way."

"Go ahead and kill him!" Pancha urged.

He patted her arm and winked at the marshal.

Pancha knew Hix would drift on soon, and she begged to go with him. He said, "Why sure, Pancha! I wouldn't leave without you," because it was the only thing he could say. It was his first experience with a woman in love. He had fled too many towns not to know how impossible it was to take a woman along, but instinct warned him not to tell Pancha the truth.

He had six thousand dollars on his eighteenth day in Los Angeles, and he talked it over with Joe Glasford, who said, "Stick around, Hix. I'm in the hole yet—you've been taking the profit and more. Give me a chance to make some of it back." That was the kind of an argument he had to respect.

He had another three thousand on his thirtieth day in Los Angeles, and Glasford had back his investment and was running in the velvet. This time it was the marshal who brought up the subject of Hix leaving. This time, the marshal had Pancha on his side. She was scared to death, the girl said. Hix knew she had the wisdom and the information; he should have been scared too, but he was making good money and when he thought of the long, dry ride out of Los Angeles, he balked. Sometime he'd have to, he thought, but he wasn't ready yet.

There was no Sully Orcott to warn him he was getting fat and soft and vulnerable. But there was the Texan—Harry's man.

The Texan was the first to hear that there was an Army major, in civilian clothes, in town. The Texan had a girl, too, and she talked to the major, and the major said more than he should have. He was young; he would know better next time. The Texan wanted the reward, but more than that he wanted to kill the man who had killed Frank Purnell, who had killed Sully Orcott. His girl told him he had less than twenty-four hours. The major's men would arrive by boat from San Francisco the following day.

And Pancha, who once heard everything there was to hear, knew nothing about the major. She was scared and edgy and ner-

vous, and she spent all her time at Hix's table. She stopped playing, but she sat at his elbow and smoked and watched the door, now and then leaning over to curse him in a whisper because he laughed too much, and did *not* watch the door.

It was Pancha who saw the Texan come in on the morning of Hix's thirty-third day there. She choked a scream and touched his elbow, and he dropped a card and swore at her. Then he looked up and saw the Texan. Everyone else had heard Pancha's stifled scream; they saw the Texan, too, and the room grew quiet. The man sitting directly across the table from Hix was in direct line of fire between the two men. He dropped his cards and fainted quietly, and with scarcely any clatter at all fell to safety under the table. (Later, he would swear he thought he was dead when it went dark for him.)

Pancha did a fool thing. For the first time in her life she lost her head and threw her arms around Hix and began screaming.

The Texan twitched, but he stopped his draw halfway down. He could have collected the reward then, but it would always be said he killed Hix Jardene when Hix couldn't draw, and more than the money he wanted the fame and honor of killing Hix on his own terms.

Hix swore at Pancha and stamped on her toe—the quickest way to make her let go. She came to her senses and stepped back, and Hix got up and walked slowly around the table. The Texan grinned. There was a big, white, wooden pillar in the center of the big room, supporting the ceiling. The Texan backed up to it, felt it with his shoulders, stepped around it, and backed another ten feet and stood there with his right hand curved out from his side.

"You damned fool, you're really going to try it, are you?" Hix said.

The Texan grinned and murmured, "There's something smells bad in here. Mebbe it's you, Jardene, you rotten four-flusher." Hix waited a moment for the Texan to draw, and the Texan waited for him to draw, and Pancha began whimpering.

Hix jerked his shoulders suddenly, and the Texan expelled his breath gustily and went for his gun. Hix shot him in the chest with both guns, and the hole made by the Walker .44 was not three inches from the big gap torn by the .45. The Texan never got his gun out of his holster. The two slugs knocked him backward, and his dying knees did their best to keep him erect. He took one good step and half of another before he died, crumpling over backward just as Pancha began to sob hysterically.

HIX holstered his guns and strode swiftly into Joe Glasford's office and met Joe coming toward him. "It's come," he said. "I'll have to slope fast. That fool wouldn't have tried it if he wasn't afraid someone was going to beat him to me. Have you got a good stout sack I can carry my money in? I'll take it in gold."

Glasford bit off the end of a cigar and narrowed his eyes.

"What's your hurry, Hix? That's a lot of gold. I doubt if there's that much in the house." It took a moment for Hix to understand what he meant. "You kind of pushed me into this deal, Hix. Let's talk it over."

"No," Hix said.

"Yes!" Glasford snarled. "And don't lift your hands to me. Don't try to pull any of your damned gunmen's trick's here. You thought you had a sucker, didn't you? You thought you could come in here and use my stake—my money and my hotel!—and throw in nothing but your reputation and—"

"Yes," said Hix, "I thought I had me a sucker. I'll have the money, now, Glasford."

Glasford turned around and said, "Harry!" and the other door came open and the gambler from across the street appeared with a double barrelled shotgun in his hand. He was grinning nervously, and his forehead glistened with sweat, and he had two fingers hooked rigidly around the two triggers.

Hix went up on his toes as Glasford turned, and by the time Harry and his gun could be seen he was halfway toward Glasford. He hit him low and buckled him

over, just as Harry pulled both triggers. Glasford screamed and gurgled as he went down. Hix pushed him hard again, knocking him against Harry. Harry stepped back and dropped the shotgun with a clatter and raised both hands. Hix stood up and took out his .44 and went over and cracked Harry over the head with it. The little gambler went down on top of his gun.

"You were in cahoots," Hix panted. "Thought you'd play me on both of your ropes, didn't you?"

His left arm was bleeding, three buckshot pellets had gone through it. Glasford was dead. He had caught a large part of the charge in his chest, the rest of it scattering to blow a hole through the door leading to the casino.

Pancha bound his arm. Hix helped himself to ninety-three hundred in gold—all there was in the place. Harry was conscious and was dragging himself toward the side door, blood streaming down his face, as Hix ran past him. Hix spoke softly to him.

"Tell 'em how unhealthy it is," he said.

He got his horse out of the stable unmolested. He had promised to meet Pancha at her house. He left town by the other road. It was two hours before the posse began its pursuit, and it was Pancha who led them by the Saugus trail Hix had told her they would take together.

By the time they realized the Saugus trail was the wrong one, Hix was well on his way through the San Gabriel Valley, on the San Bernardino trail. A week later he double back and picked up his buried gold. He had lost eight pounds by then, and had his saddle calluses back. A month later he was in a broker's office in Idaho, listening to a fat man who had never heard of him.

"My heavens, stranger—that was a year ago! We had bad weather and no grass for five years straight. That's why you could buy ten thousand acres and three thousand head for fifteen thousand dollars. But my heavens, stranger, we've had rain since then. People ain't giving away their property no more."

"How much?"

"He figgered them critters at a dollar apiece then, because it looked like starvation for sure. I tell you, we've had rain."

"How much?"

"He sold off most of the stock. There's thirteen hundred head left—all old cows. There'll be nothing to sell—no income—for two-three years."

"How much?"

"Twenty thousand dollars!"

"I'll take it," Hix said. "Make out the deed to Ben Jardene and Eliza Jardene. I've got the money, in gold coin, on a pack horse outside."

The fat man raised his eyebrows and reached for his pen. "You don't waste time, my friend."

Hix grinned. "That's right," he said. "I don't."

IV

HE RODE INTO TOWN AT SUNset, wearing both guns and carrying the crisp document in his breast pocket, protected from the sweat of his body by a wrapping from the skirt of an old yellow rainslicker. The town had not changed much. Colonel Trask had a new office, a brick addition to his bank building. Curt Newby, it seemed, had sold out the livery stable, because there was a new name over the door. The saloon had a new plate glass window and new swinging doors.

He tied in front of Colonel Trask's office and knocked, but no one was there—the light inside was just a night-lamp. He could see his reflection in the glass, and he looked as no Jardene had ever looked. He would be recognized in a thousand strange places, but not here, because his home town folks would be looking for someone with the Jardene stamp. And this characteristic stamp Hix had mislaid somewhere thousands of miles back.

He went down the street and into the saloon and ordered a beer. He saw men he knew, but none of them paid any attention to him, except to glance curiously at his two guns. But more men were wearing guns now. He heard talk of a range war. There were nesters moving into the sandhills. That seemed odd.

Almost as odd was the way he looked forward to seeing his mother. He had no

intention of going there, but despite that he felt like he was coming home after a long trip. He stood there listening to them curse the dry-farmers who were plowing up the range, and finally he bought a shot of whiskey. Since he did not drink habitually, it steadied him.

He went outside again, and no one paid any attention to him. He asked a man where he would find Colonel Trask, and the man pointed to the old yellow frame house back of town and said, "Yander's his house, there." Hix thanked the man; it seemed strange that the Colonel, now a millionaire, would be living in the same rundown place.

He got his horse and rode to the big house and knocked, and the Colonel himself opened the door. He said, "You wanted to see me?" and Hix said, "Yes I do, Colonel. I'm Hix Jardene." The Colonel exclaimed. "Well, I'll be damned! Come in, Hix."

Hix went inside. He did not offer his hand, nor did the Colonel. The old man had not changed. They looked at each other a moment. The Colonel went over and lit a lamp and said, "Sit down, Hix," and Hix sat down. "We've been hearing about you, Hix. You made quite a name for yourself."

Hix made a motion with his hand.

"Never mind that. How's my mother?"

"Very well. Shall I call her?"

"Call her?" He started. "Is she here?"

"Where else would she be? She's my wife!" Hix jumped up from his chair. The Colonel leaned back in his and went on, "I couldn't let her starve in that shanty. Yes, Hix, it was a pity and charity. It's not that now, I may add. Your mother was always a great lady, and she has done me a great honor to be my wife."

Hix said, "Why—why—why that's fine, Colonel. I—I'm right glad. But she wasn't starving. Or she shouldn't! I—didn't she get the money I sent her?"

"You don't think she'd use that money, do you?" the Colonel said. "My boy, you're not as bright as I thought you were."

"Then—then what did she do with it?"

"Gave it to the church, what she could get her hands on. Ben commandeered some of it."

"But even if—Ben could have—"

The Colonel got up suddenly and said, "Sh-h-h!" Steps were sounding on the stairs.

"I've got a business guest, my dear," he called. "Do you mind?"

Hix heard his mother's voice: "Of course not." He sat down in the chair again, and then jumped up as the Colonel motioned him toward the door.

They went out, and the Colonel looked at his watch and said, "I'll tell you about Ben, now. Yes, I imagine we can find him. He didn't come home to dinner. But then, he hardly ever does. Leave your horse here. We can walk. I suppose the town looks quite changed to you?"

ALL the way down the path he made conversation, but Hix could not answer. They went to the saloon, and the Colonel pointed to a fine black mare and said, "Yes, Ben's here. He had your taste for good horseflesh. In fact, he has quite an admiration for you, Hix. He thinks you're the greatest man in the world. He'd have joined you long ago, if I hadn't bribed him with good horses—and if he had known where to reach you at any given time."

Hix grabbed the old man's arm and snarled at him, "You mean Ben wants to be like me?" The Colonel jerked loose and said, "Keep your hands off me! See for yourself."

They went inside.

Ben had grown. He was big, like their mother's people; he was all Hix, and not at all a Jardene. *They named the wrong kid the wrong name,* Hix thought. Ben was well dressed, and he carried a gun, and it was hard to picture him as a starveling who had guided surveyors for a few dollars to put bread on the table.

He had his admirers, too. Hix knew how that was, and how a man couldn't let it go to his head. Ben liked it.

"Ben," said the Colonel, "here's Hix."

Ben looked around and set down his whiskey glass and started toward them with jubilance on his face. Hix kept his thumbs hooked in his belt and said, "Hello, Ben," and walked past his brother to the

bar. Ben came after him and wanted to shake hands, and Hix said nervously, "Stay away from me, Ben. Keep your hands off me." He pushed past them to the other end of the bar, near the back door.

The Colonel smiled.

"Hix can't let anybody get next to his gun arm, you see, and he's in a bad way. Both of his are gun arms!"

The bartender wiped the bar in front of Hix and said, "What'll you have? I didn't —that is, when you was in here before, I didn't rec'anize you."

"Whiskey," Hix said. He turned to Ben, who was grinning at him admiringly. "Well, Ben, how's everything?"

"Fine," said Ben. "How's it with you?"

"Just so-so," Hix said. He laughed nervously, wondering how to make Ben understand how bad things were with him. He drank his whiskey. "Had to see the old town again, that's all. A fool thing to do."

It did no good. Ben looked at the other men in the saloon as though to say: *My brother! He killed Sully Orcott's killer. Best man with a gun in the world.* Hix looked imploringly at the Colonel, who turned his back and drummed on the bar with his fingers.

Hix ordered another whiskey. As it was set out in front of him, a man came in through the door, and a flood of remembrances surged over Hix, choking him. It was Perce Broderick, and he was wearing a deputy sheriff's star. He had lost weight; he looked older and harder and smarter, and perhaps a little proud of himself. That would come of wearing the star. Bob Broderick had gone to the pen, and Mel had died violently, in disgrace, and now Perce was cleaning up the Broderick name.

Perce did not recognize Hix. He went over to the Colonel and said, "Colonel, I hate to do this right in front of you, but it can't be helped."

"Don't mind me, Perce," the Colonel said.

Perce shrugged another apology. He touched Ben on the arm.

"Give me your gun, Ben."

"Why?" Ben said stridently.

"You give me your gun and come along with me." Perce was trying to be patient, and no Broderick could be patient long. He looked at the Colonel. "The little whelp thinks he's another Hix. He's raised hell once too often."

"What did he do this time, Perce?" the Colonel asked.

"He beat up the Miller kid. Ben, I'll take that gun away from you if I have to."

"Miller passed a remark about Hix!" Ben yelled. He jerked loose and stepped back from Broderick and pointed with his finger. "Miller's got a big mouth behind Hix's back. Maybe you have, too! Mel didn't have so much luck—why don't you try yours?"

NOTHING he said seemed to make sense, but both Hix and Broderick understood. Broderick backed away a few steps, going deathly white as he recognized Hix. Hix drank the whiskey with his left hand and flipped the glass back on the bar. It rolled across it and dropped.

"Don't do it, Perce," he said. "I never killed a lawman yet. I'll kill you if you draw. I'll be out of town in ten minutes if you don't push me."

Perce was hard put to control his trembling chin, but he said doggedly, "No you won't, Hix. You're wanted and, by golly, I'm the law here."

"Perce, you idiot," the Colonel said softly, "he killed your brother. He's a killer. He'll kill you."

Perce licked his lips and blinked.

"Mebbe he will," he said, "and mebbe he won't. I don't keer about Mel. That's old—and Mel had it comin', mebbe. If he walks out of here, his home town, they'll say I was scared of him. And I ain't."

"Yes, you are," Hix said. He stepped away from the bar, and so did everyone else. He looked at Perce pleadingly. "Go over in the corner and set down, Perce, and I'll be out of town in five minutes—in three. Perce, I'll go right away if you'll turn your back. Don't pull on me, Perce. I don't want to kill you." He let his eyes flick to Ben and snarled at him, "Stand there with your mouth open, you fool! Do you want to come along with me?"

Ben said, "N-no. I guess not, Hix."

Perce went for his gun, and Hix could understand, somehow, what an effort Perce had made to be a good officer. He must have practiced that draw for hours on end, day after day, week after week, month after month. year after year. It was pretty good. It would make Perce the master of any rowdy rider who thought he could pull on the home guards and make them like it. Of course, it was not good enough for the job Perce had now.

Hix left his right thumb hooked in his belt and went for the .44 with his left, wondering, *I wonder how good I really am? Mebbe this is it . . . mebbe I listened to too many stories about myself . . .* The .44 jumped in his hand, and he shot for Perce's arm, thinking *nobody but a fool would do this . . . when you have to shoot make it to kill.* Perce's .45 went off into the floor, and Perce sagged to the right, clutching at his shattered forearm. Hix thought, *I did it, but I'll never do it again . . .*

Aloud he said, "I warned you, Perce." Perce slumped to his knees, gritting his teeth and swearing. He fumbled for the gun with his other hand, and Hix drew the .44 swiftly and fired into the floor. Perce ducked back and then reached for the gun again, and Hix crossed the floor quickly and kicked it out of the way.

"You've got more guts than brains, Perce," he said. He turned to the Colonel. "You've left me stranded quite a way from my horse. Now what do we do?"

"History repeats itself," the Colonel said, with a wry smile. "Come down to the livery stable. There's a brown mare there—"

NO ONE molested them as they went out. Hix did not even glance at Ben. They went to the stable and saddled the brown mare quickly, and the Colonel led her outside.

"It was our fault, I see that now," he said. "If you were a born killer, you'd have killed Perce. There must have been something wrong with you the night you killed Mel." He frowned. "That bump on the head perhaps. You weren't in your right mind."

"It's too late to argue," Hix said.

"But we were to blame. You were just a kid—"

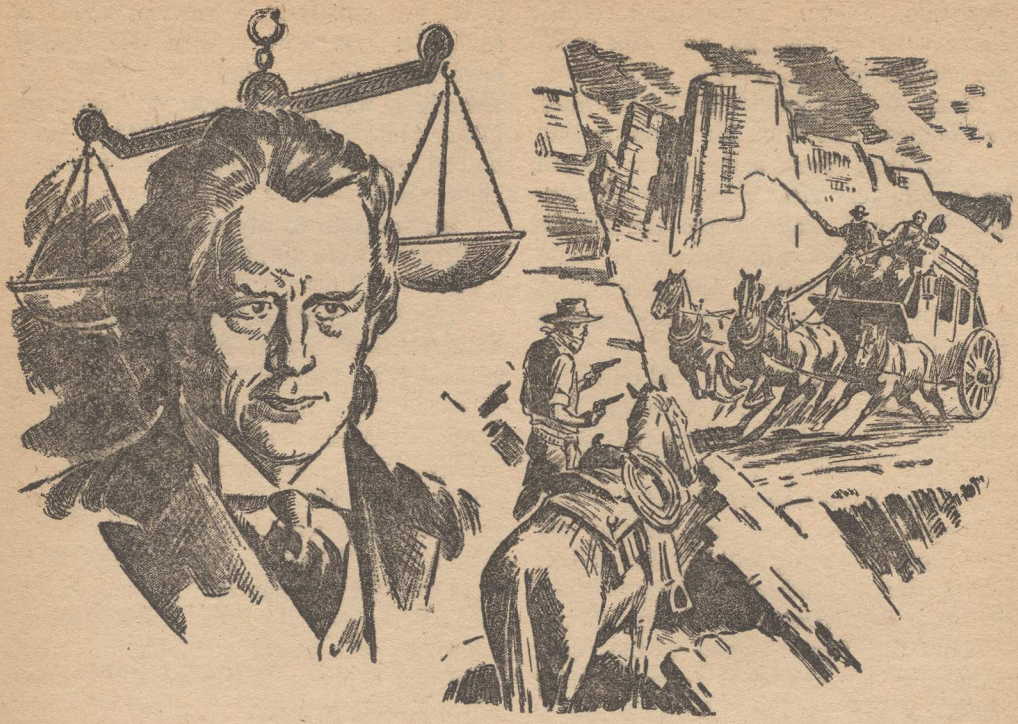
"Too late to argue," Hix repeated. He took the deed out of his pocket and explained it to Colonel Trask as he handed it over. "It's too late for that, too, I suppose. About half of it is gambling money. You can believe that or not—I don't care. The place is worth twenty thousand. Do what you like with it. I'm heading for Mexico. I'm through—or as near through as I can be, Colonel. A man like me is never through. There's always somebody who wants to try his luck. But, until that happens, I'm through! Will you tell my mother that?"

"Sure. I'll tell her that. I'll sell the Idaho place and square as much of your —debts—as I can. I've got friends, Hix; we can knock out some of the things against your record, if we make up the money. Is there anything else I can do? You'd better get going. Perce will have them out after you quickly. Do you need money?"

Hix swung up into the saddle and shook his head. He had less than a hundred dollars on him, but by living lean and riding nights it would carry him to the border.

"No money," he said, "but, if there's a chance, I wish you'd do something for me. There's a Mexican girl by the name of Pancha los Robles, in Los Angeles. Get word to her that I'll wait for her in Santa Margarita. Can you do that?"

The Colonel said, "Yes," and Hix Jardene touched his hat and turned the brown mare and rode out of his home town for the last time. He did not look back.



GOLD COAST JUSTICE

By KERMIT RAYBORN

The brand of law a man stood to get out there was as wild, fast and tricky as a she-wolf on the prod!

THE SHERIFF SWEARS THE mule is hisn and I believe so too," said Justice Barry, summing up the case. "It seems clear that Jesus Ramirez is guilty of stealing the aforesaid mule, feloniously and against the law made and provided for the dignity of the people of Sonora, and I sentence him to pay the costs of court, which will be ten dollars, and fine him another hundred as a terror to evil-doers."

"The Mexican says he has no money," said the court interpreter.

"Then, in that case, "said the Justice, "I will rule that the Sheriff must pay the costs of court and the fine as well. This court cannot be expected to work for nothing."

"But—your honor, please," protested the Sheriff's lawyer, "such a ruling is unheard of. There is no precedent for such a decision."

"Shet up," barked the Justice. "I don't give a damn for your law books. I am the law in this case, and this court cannot afford to work for nothing."

"But, your honor, you cannot fine Sheriff Work for being robbed."

"Oh, the hell I can't. We'll see."

The lawyer threw up his hands in disgust. "What's the use?" he groaned. "I have no chance of getting justice in this court."

"No, and, if I have anything to say, you'll never get justice in this court."

"Your honor," shouted the lawyer, "I object strongly to the court's conduct and language."

"Go ahead and object and see who gives a damn," roared the justice. "You are in contempt. I will fine you fifty dollars and commit you to jail for five days. Mister Constable, take him to the lock-up."

That was justice in California in 1850.

The aforementioned justice, Richard C. Barry, of Sonora, had been a captain of Texas Rangers in the Mexican War. A red-faced, Napoleonic little man, he was more interested in court fees than in square dealing.

Justices came in when California was admitted to the Union. The early justices knew nothing of law, but they muddled along the best they could and were a continual source of amusement to the community. In fact, if it hadn't been for the justices, most of the mining camps would have had no laughs on a rainy day.

Uncle Jake Emminger was a justice of the peace in the little settlement of Rancheira. He was noted for his ignorance of the law and for a long white beard which he usually kept folded up and tied with a ribbon. However, on Sundays and days when he was in court, he took off the ribbon and let the beard swing freely down his front and below the waist line.

Once a lawyer asked for a change of venue for his client. The justice stroked his long white beard and, after due deliberation announced, "Motion denied and judgment given for the plaintiff."

"Wait a minute," said the lawyer, "if my client's case has to be tried in this court, I demand a jury."

"A jury!" exclaimed the Justice. "What in the hell do you want with a jury? They don't prove nothin'."

Uncle Jake first became famous when he sentenced a Chinese to jail for life for stealing chickens.

ANOTHER "Uncle" was Uncle Zeked, justice of the peace of Nevada City. Once a man was charged with horse stealing and brought before Uncle Zeked. He listened to the prosecuting attorney present the facts and the evidence; then, when the defense attorney started to call a witness to the stand, Uncle Zeked stopped him.

"No use calling more witnesses," said the Justice.

"But, your honor, please," said the lawyer for the defense. "I wish to prove the good moral character of the defendant."

"Why, he's already been proved a horse thief."

"I contend that the evidence has not proved the defendant guilty," said the lawyer. "I demand that my character witness be heard."

"Hell, a horse thief ain't got no character. I won't hear another liar say he has."

"But, your honor, is it not a legal presumption that a defendant is innocent until he is proved guilty?"

"Humph," grunted Zeked. "It may be a presumption all right, but I'll tell you something, young man. It's a moral certainty that I'm not bottomed with cast iron. You can keep on with your argument as long as you're a mind to. But I'm going out for a snort o' good whiskey right now."

A boy once complained to Justice George Vail of Yreka that a man had refused to pay him his wages after he had worked for him all winter, and now that man was about to leave the country. Couldn't the court do something?

"Hell yes, the court can do something," said the justice.

The man was brought into the court, where he admitted the debt, but protested he had no money.

"Stand that fellow on his head and see if anything falls out," said the justice to two constables.

The two constables grabbed the man, turned him upside down with his head on the floor and his legs sticking up in the air. A bag containing two thousand dollars in gold dust fell out of his pocket. The judge paid off the boy's wages, took an ounce for himself and two for the constables as court costs, after which the man was freed.

A lawyer of Jackson had a gambler for a client. The gambler was charged with so many crimes that a prison term seemed almost a certainty. During the trial, the lawyer asked permission of the court to step outside for a word or two in private with his client. The permission was granted and, when the two men were outside the courthouse, the lawyer said, "Run!" The gambler, taking it as legal advice, ran.

Once Justice Yates of Fiddletown became indignant at a witness whom he knew was giving some perjured testimony. He couldn't tell the witness so from the

bench, however, so he said, "I declare this court adjourned for one minute."

He then stepped down from his bench, faced the witness and said, "Now it is my privilege to tell you that I think you are a damned liar."

Then, resuming his seat at the bench, he announced, "I now declare the court in session again. The hearing may proceed."

A road agent, Fred Amos, was convicted in a Justice King's court for stage robbery, and sentenced by the Justice to ten years in prison.

"I have a proposition to make the court," said Fred.

"What is it?" asked Justice King.

"Tell you what I'll do. You've given me ten years. All right. Let's play a hand of seven-up—just you and me, judge—for double or nothing. If I lose—it's twenty years in San Quentin. If I win, it's nothing. How about it, your honor?"

PRESIDING over his tribunal with great dignity and a bowie knife, Justice Niles of Donkeyville once tried a case for two big mining companies for adjudication. The courtroom was in the rear of Niles' drinking emporium, the Diana Saloon, back of the billiard tables and the faro layout. The big mining companies brought their lawyers from the city and they used all the formality and niceties of court etiquette that they knew on the old justice.

During the long testimony, one of the city lawyers got an idea. Winking at the justice, he suggested, "If your honor please, I move we adjourn for five minutes," and jerked his head in the direction of the bar.

"I suppose," said Justice Niles, rising from the bench and smiling, "that the jury and witnesses are included in that invitation?"

"By all means," said the lawyer.

Then everybody in the courtroom lined up at the bar for a drink of whiskey. Soon court was begun again, then adjourned again at the suggestion of the rival attorney. Began again, adjourned again. At the end, Justice Niles was thick-lipped and silver-tongued. He summed up the case royally even if a bit illogically. But a juror wasn't satisfied with the summing up.

"Your honor," asked the juror, "would you mind telling me in what law book you find all that law you have mentioned?"

Justice Niles glared at the juror. "I'll have you know when I say a thing is law, it is law. I am my own authority."

Then, purple with rage, he drew his bowie knife and leaped for the foolish juror. The juror leaped away and ran out the door. The other jurors, witnesses, lawyers and spectators followed as fast as as they could. Justice Niles was left standing in the center of the barrom, alone, soused to the gills, and the result of the trial known only to himself.

The justices all had their own method of performing a wedding ceremony. A young couple came into Justice Barry's court and asked to be married. Justice Barry did it in a hurry.

"Do you take this woman for your wife?"

"I do."

"Do you take this man for your husband?"

"I do."

"Spliced. Five dollars. Git."

But Justice Jenkins, of Sonora, was a great Democrat and a firm believer in the Constitution. When he married a couple it was more like an oath of office.

"Hold up your right hand," he said to the bridegroom. "Do you solemnly swear that you are twenty-one years old and that you will support the Constitution of the United States and be a true, faithful and obedient husband to this woman?"

"I do," said the bridegroom in a meek voice.

"Then I pronounce you man and wife."

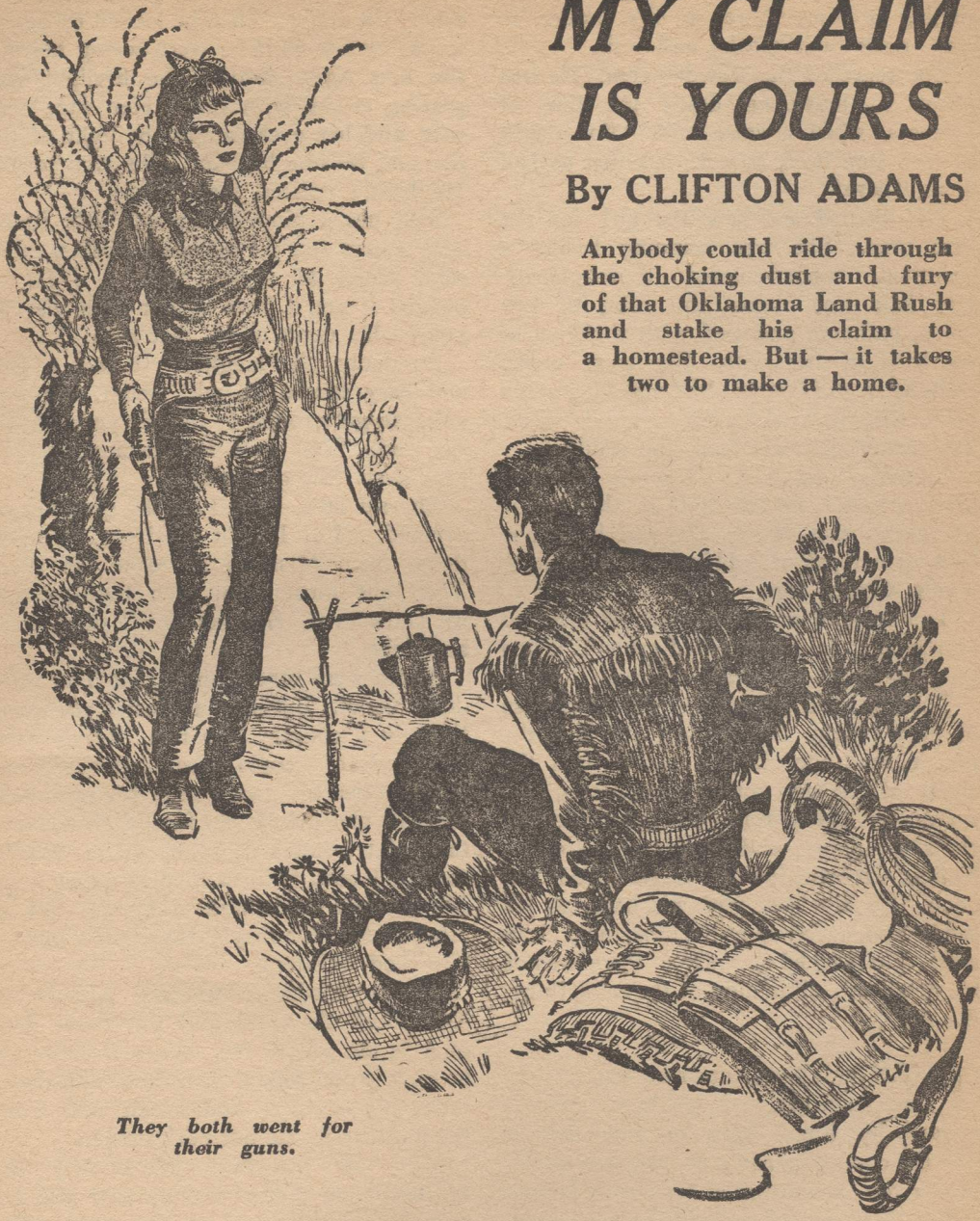
Speaking of Justice Jenkins, he once tried a young man charged with seduction. When the young lady was brought into court, the justice took one look at her and discharged the young man, saying, "The evidence clearly indicates that this young man acted in self defense."

For the young lady was big and buxom and the young man didn't look any too strong!

MY CLAIM IS YOURS

By CLIFTON ADAMS

Anybody could ride through the choking dust and fury of that Oklahoma Land Rush and stake his claim to a homestead. But — it takes two to make a home.



They both went for their guns.

EVEN BEFORE IT WAS ANnounced that Oklahoma would be thrown open to white settlement, the trail from Kansas across the Cherokee Outlet was marked with rolling clouds of red dust. The powdery stuff poured like water over the wheels of wagons, squirted from under hoofs of horses, and boots of walking men.

The chalky taste of the stuff was in Tod Winters' mouth, but, like the others, he was too excited to notice. They were people like himself, all headed for the Oklahoma border to enter the biggest race of them all. A race for a home.

The border was a mill of humanity, patroled by cavalry. The line of tents and wagons and the smoky curls of camp fires stretched across the prairie in either direction until they dropped over the horizons.

And people were still coming, somehow finding a place there on the border to stop, cook their meals, and wait.

Tod searched the crowded area. He was about to move on down the line of campers, when a voice said, "You might as well stop here, mister. It's just as bad down there."

Tod turned and saw the girl for the first time. She was standing beside a beautiful, copper-colored thoroughbred. Her hair was almost the color of her horse, gathered and tied with a ribbon at the back of her neck. She wore men's clothing, a plaid wool shirt and blue serge pants that were shiny from saddle wear. Tod dropped down from the saddle.

"Thanks," he said. "I guess I'll stop here at that." By the time he thought of something else to say, the girl had gone back to her job of rubbing the Thoroughbred's slender legs.

Tod stripped his own horse and picketed him away from his own bed ground. When he came back, the girl was gone.

The sun died in the west behind a haze of dust. Camp fires sprung up over the prairie, and the air was heavy with the smell of frying pork and coffee. Tod spread his saddle roll, gathered sticks and chips for a fire, and soon had his coffee boiling. It smelled good, and Tod felt good. He lay back with his head on his saddle and stared up at the amazingly clean stars. He listened absently to the voices of his neighbors, all talking of the same thing, the run.

THEN he felt someone near him. He sat up suddenly and his hand stabbed toward his hip. Then he saw that it was the copper-haired girl. She was standing by the fire staring at his pot of boiling coffee. She seemed undecided about something. Then she saw Tod looking at her, saw his hand on his gun. She dropped a hand on her own and then shook her head.

She made an uncertain sound and motioned vaguely at the fire. "I wonder . . . if I could borrow some coffee," she said. "I've been here two days, and mine seems to be gone."

Almost automatically, Tod said, "Sure," He rummaged through his saddle roll, found a frying pan, side pork, meal, and finally the coffee. Then he looked up again, it was almost as if he were seeing her for the first time. Maybe the firelight was playing tricks with him. Her face was soft, and her eyes caught the light of the fire and became brilliant. She was pretty He hadn't noticed that before.

Tod heard himself saying, "It's funny how a man can get lonesome with a thousand people all around him . . . I'd be obliged if you'd have supper with me. If your folks don't mind, that is."

Suddenly, she laughed. It was a free and easy laugh, as with relief. "I was going to get around to that, if you didn't," she said. "The truth is, I'm hungry. My provisions ran out today."

She sat cross-legged on the ground and grinned. "I'm Lorain Medford. I came down from Missouri to make the run." Then she must have seen the question in Tod's eyes. She added, "I don't have any folks."

There were other things that Tod wondered about. But a man doesn't ask questions in a country like this. There were thousands of people here, and every one of them had his own reason for uprooting himself, and maybe his family, to come to this wild country to begin again. Maybe they had been failures in their other lives. Maybe they were wanted by the law in other states. Or maybe they had a dream, like Tod Winters.

Lorain Medford watched quietly as Tod sliced the pork and put thick slabs of it in the pan to fry. When it was crisp he took it out, mixed corn meal with water from his canteen, added salt and fried the mixture in the hot pork grease.

They ate hungrily. When they had finished, Tod poured more coffee and for a while they listened to the night. The camp fires were dying over the prairie. Soldiers rode silently back and forth along the border, making sure that no one entered the territory before the appointed time.

Lorain said, "I wonder what it's really like out there. Oklahoma, I mean?"

For a moment Tod looked at her. He decided the firelight hadn't been playing tricks on him. "It's green," he said at

last, "and rich. The place I'm thinkin' about is, anyway. It's up north of where they've planned Oklahoma Station. There's a river there, and good land where you can grow corn, and build a home."

She said, "Have you been there?"

"Three years ago I went in with Captain Pain's Oklahoma Colony. I built a log cabin—it's still standing I guess. I planted corn too. But the soldiers forced us out before harvest time."

She said, "Are you really going in there to live? In that wilderness?"

Tod stared at her. "Of course. Aren't you?"

She laughed quickly. "I'm going to file on the best farm land I can find. Then I'm going to sell it. What do you think I would do with a farm?"

Tod had wondered about that. Now he knew. A lot of people would be doing the same thing, getting around the homestead law with faked papers. And a lot of other people with slower horses would have to pay the price, if they wanted a home. Tod knew it was none of his business, but somehow he wished . . . .

He stopped. He didn't wish anything. If she wanted to make money that way, it was all right with him.

THE next day still more home-seekers poured onto the border—coming in wagons, and carts, and buggies. Some few were walking. Up north, even more people would be coming in on the train as the run began.

A tightness seemed to stretch over the heads of the campers. Only one more day now. Men got their best horses, and groomed and pampered them. The soldiers rode their endless rounds, their eyes never resting.

Tod spent the day with his horse and tried to think only of the race. But there in the back of his mind he kept seeing a girl with copper-colored hair. He kept hearing her laugh as she said, *Are you going there to live? In that wilderness?*

A slow anger began to work in him. Who was this girl to mock at people for wanting homes? He thought he would like to see her again. He'd like to make her understand some things.

He saw her again that night, as he knew he would. But somehow the angry words had gone. They sat and watched the camp fires die early across the prairie. People were resting, for tomorrow was the day they had waited for so long.

Tod punched the coals of his own fire and felt Lorain watching him. She said, "I want to thank you for everything you've done."

Tod thought of all the things he was going to make her understand. But he could only say, "That's all right."

"You don't think much of me, do you?" she said. "You think I'll be robbing some of these people of a home. Well, maybe I will be."

Her voice was suddenly strange and hard. "I never had a home, so I wouldn't know about that. I just know that this is a chance to make money—money that will make me independent. Do you know what that means?"

"I think so," Tod said.

"It means I won't have to take care of rich women's children in St. Louis. I won't have to teach school in Abilene. I spent everything I had to buy a horse that would win this race. After it's over, maybe I can buy a dress shop in some town." Most of the hardness had gone out of her voice by now. She added, "I can sew, you know."

Tod was silent. She said, "Well, why don't you say something?"

There was something in his mind, but he hadn't meant to put it into words. Then he heard his voice saying:

"Why don't you get married?"

Her face did strange things.

Tod said quickly, "I . . . had no right to say that." Then, before she could leave, he tried to tell her some of the things that were in his mind. He hadn't had a home either. He had worked in the mills of the east, and later had drifted west toward Kansas. He had worked in the cattle pens of Abilene, and a lot of other places, but there weren't many jobs that paid a man enough to buy a home. If he had been born earlier he would have gone to the frontier. But there was no frontier in 1889.

He said, "This land means a lot to me,

and to a lot of other people." It sounded as if he were accusing her of taking it from them. He hadn't meant it that way. Before he could do anything about it, she was gone.

He watched her walk quickly into the darkness. He wanted to follow her and make things right. But he didn't.

Late that night he lay awake and tried to imagine how it would be to have a place of his own. He had never had any trouble imagining it before—but now, somehow, everything was all mixed up with a girl with copper hair.

Long before day-break there had been jostling for positions along the starting line. Another troop of sweating cavalry had been brought in to hold back the tide. As the hours crawled by a strange silence fell over the thousands of home-seekers. Horses switched nervously and tossed their heads at the smell of excitement. Eleven o'clock. A few men made a last minute check of their wagons and horses. Eleven-thirty. Even the air seemed motionless.

In thirty minutes, at high noon the soldiers would give the signal. Tod felt his nerves tighten as his horse stood quietly in position between two wagons. For the first time he began scanning the endless line of tight faces.

He saw her down the line, as her high-strung Thoroughbred reared in nervousness. Then the horse settled, and her face was lost among the others.

Tod patted his horses' neck gently. Everything would depend on the animal now. A cavalry officer shouted orders, and the soldiers lifted carbines to port-arms.

Then it happened so suddenly that it caught Tod unprepared. The officer shouted another order, the carbines lifted and roared. Tod's horse reared as did most of the others. Almost immediately he regained his balance and the horse rushed forward.

He fought clear of the two wagons. The horse seemed to sense the danger of being caught in the wild jam of heavier vehicles and spurted ahead. It was only a matter of seconds before the race had divided into two parts. The heavy wagons forming an echelon behind, and the horses out to the front. Slowly it divided again, with the faster horses leaving the slower ones behind.

Tod glanced anxiously for some sight of Lorain. He saw only the smothering clouds of dust boiling angrily behind him, and the wreckage of wagons that was already beginning to litter the prairie as teams ran wild. Instinctively he pulled his horse to one side to avoid the trampling rush behind him. But there was no place to go. On either side of him, as far as he could see, the maddened surge of men and animals swept forward.

Suddenly, it seemed, he was alone. His horse was running hard, leaving the clouds of dust, and the sound of horses behind them. Tod eased his horse to a slower gait. It would be a long race, too long to burn his mount out in the first few minutes. Off far to his flanks he could see other horsemen. Then, far ahead of the others, he glimpsed a glistening, copper-coated animal as it topped a small rise. It was Lorain's Thoroughbred. Tod felt relief wash over him.

THE miles rolled away. They stopped at a small stream where Tod let his horse rest for a few minutes while he drank and filled his canteen. They crossed the railroad tracks where the train would be bringing more home-seekers into Guthrie. At last the land began to grow familiar and green. There was no need to hurry now.

When he first saw the river it was only a green fringe on the horizon. As he rode closer the fringe grew to giant cottonwoods, and the land was rich at it sloped down to the river. He felt good, like a man who had been away from home for a long time, and at last he was coming back.

He was coming home. There was the log cabin he had built three years ago, shaded beneath a big elm. He got down from his horse just to feel the ground that was his. He walked behind the cabin to look at the clearing he had started there. It had grown up in weeds now, and his hands itched to feel a plow.

But there were other things to be done first. He had to stake his claim and file it

with the land office before the farm would be legally his.

He cut stakes, attached claim notes to them and drove them into the ground. When he was through he went back to the cabin. A strange feeling began to grow in him. He had never felt it before, and it took him a while to recognize it. It was a kind of . . . and her laugh—they were all mixed up with the feeling.

Suddenly he said a hard word. What was he thinking about! Talk to a pretty girl for a couple of nights and he started thinking crazy things. He was used to being alone. All he needed was this land. But the feeling was still with him.

Then, almost as if thinking about her had made her real, he saw her. She came leading her horse around the cabin, and they both stood dead still looking at each other.

Of all things that were in Tod's mind, the only thing he could say was, "You . . . What are you doing here?"

She grinned. She was glad to see him. Tod was sure of that.

She said, "It looks like we're neighbors. I've just staked this claim."

For a moment Tod couldn't make a sound. But there must have been something in his face. Her grin went away and Lorain said carefully, "What's the matter? You look . . . funny."

"This is my claim," Tod said. "I've got my stakes out and I'm going in to the land office to file."

He noticed for the first time that her eyes were green. And they were angry. "Your claim!" She stared speechless for a moment, then suddenly she turned and got on her horse. "You can get yourself another place," she said tightly. "I'm riding into the land office now to file this one."

Tod watched her wheel the horse and plunge down the slope toward the river. Almost immediately he was running for his own horse. He swung up angrily and spurred the animal in the same direction Lorain had taken.

After they had cleared the river Tod saw the thoroughbred veer to the right toward the railroad tracks. Since she wasn't familiar with the country, she was taking the only way she knew that would lead her to Guthrie and the land office, following the railroad.

Tod held back until she was out of sight. Then he moved his horse straight ahead. By doing that he could get to the land office an hour ahead of her and have his claim filed. If she wanted to contest the claim she could go ahead, but it would do her little good.

THE sun was hanging low in the west when he first saw the town. White tents seemed to be scattered aimlessly across the prairie. The town was only a few hours old, but already buildings were going up, and more lumber was being hauled in on freight wagons. The streets were choked with people and animals. Dice and poker tables were set up in the open. Saloons went into business in wagon-beds, bartenders dipping whiskey out of barrels.

Tod pushed his way into the town and left his horse at a big tent marked LIVERY. Two buildings had been built before the run, the railroad station and the land office. Tod made his way toward the larger one.

A seemingly endless line of homesteaders waited in front of the land building. Tod felt a fear grab him. What if Lorain got here before his number was called? But the fear went away. She would have to get at the end of the line, and there would be hundreds separating them by that time.

The line moved slowly. One minute dragged after the other, and Tod seemed to be no closer to the land office than at first. He watched more homesteaders fall in behind him and wait soberly. Almost an hour had gone by when he saw her.

She stood, bewildered-looking, to one side of the crowd, gazing in blank dismay at the hundreds of people waiting. Tod stared at her. He had that strange feeling again, and he wished . . .

He wished a lot of things. He wished that things could be different. But things couldn't be different, and the only thing he could do was push it out of his mind. He watched as she was more or less shoved to the end of the waiting line.

He wasn't sure when the commotion started. He was trying not to think of

anything when he heard the voice at the back shout, "Lady in line!" Then the other voices took it up. "Lady in line, make room up front for the lady!"

That was something that Tod hadn't counted on, the chivalry of pioneers. He almost shouted back, "She's to stay in line like the rest of us!" But he had frozen. He watched the big hands of men guide Lorain, up ahead of him, ahead of everybody else, to the front of the line. She saw him then, for the first time. For a moment she stared, and Tod wondered what was going on behind those eyes of hers.

If it was a feeling of victory, it didn't show. He couldn't tell. Then the hands had moved her away.

Even then he did nothing. He could contest her claim. He had staked it first. He had a right to it. But, for some reason, he did nothing. He waited in line until her number was called and she went inside, and that seemed to be the end of everything.

He moved aimlessly out of line and his feet moved heavily for somewhere. He didn't know where. Or care. He tried to think about the claim. The one he had lost. But even that didn't seem important any more. He admitted to himself that it had been another dream that had been important. The one that somehow had Lorain mixed up in it.

Finally he discovered it was night, and his insides were empty. He had wandered to the railroad station at the edge of town. Coal oil torches at the gambling tables cast a dirty light. But he didn't notice that. He only saw Lorain as she broke through the fringe of the milling crowd. She turned her head quickly one way and the other, as if she were looking for someone. Then she saw him.

Tod waited as she came forward. Her face had an uncertain look. They both waited for the other to speak. At last she said. "I still seem to be out of provisions. And the prices here are so high . . ." She tried to grin. It wasn't much, but she stuck with it. "I wonder if I could borrow some coffee."

Tod found himself answering automatic ally. "Sure. My saddle roll is in the livery barn." But neither of them moved.

She said, "You can still have that farm."

Tod shook his head. He couldn't pay her price. Anyway, there was something missing now. He didn't think he would ever be satisfied on the farm now, alone.

Then she added, "I filed the claim in your name."

IT took a minute for the words to make sense. Why had she filed in *his* name? It still didn't make sense. Questions swarmed in his mind, but they weren't the kind of questions that could be answered with words. He looked at her face.

He wondered if he really saw the answers there, or if it was his imagination. He waited a long time before he spoke.

"But why?" he said finally. "Why did you file in my name?"

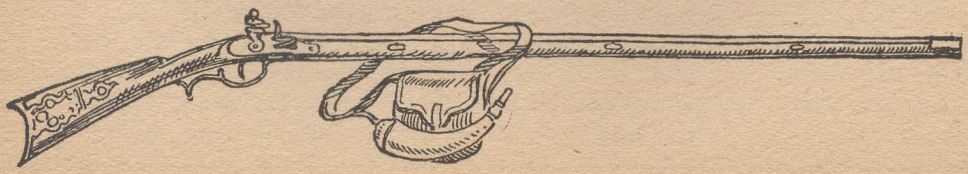
"A girl can change her mind," she said. "It's her right."

What had she changed her mind about? This country? The homesteaders? Or maybe it was something else. A crazy kind of hope made him say, "I asked you a question once: why don't you get married? You never did give me an answer."

She said, "A girl likes to be asked about such things."

Tod felt a strange pull on his face. He was grinning. He said, "I guess we'd better see about the coffee."

He had to have time to arrange a question in his mind. It was an important question. He didn't want to bungle it.



Next moment he was up, iron filling his hand.

BUFFALO HIDE

By DeWITT NEWBURY

Warn't nothin' tougher, opined Californy Dave. Mighty good coat to wear when the lead was flyin' —or you wuz floatin' down a ice-packed river!

SNOW FLICKED HIS EYES AS he squinted up the gulch, and plastered the brown scrub on his lean face. Titus Rawl was tired from climbing one timbered ridge after another, and night was coming.

He had stayed too long in the mountains. Winter had caught him, the early, sudden winter of the high country.

Now he was heading south for Clear Creek and the trail to Denver City. But he couldn't go much further tonight, and didn't hanker to sleep cold again.

He wouldn't have to. His squinting eyes picked out a wisp of smoke. The cabin was still there; and so, he hoped, was the old California man who had been his partner.

A few minutes later he was pounding on the hewn-slab door.

The answer was surprising. A rifle muzzle came through a slot in the door, poking his stomach. A voice bawled, "Git away! Vamoose, or I'll drill an' blast ye!"

He started back, yelling, "Hold on, Californy! It's Tite Rawl!"

The gun muzzle was jerked in, the door swung on leather hinges.

And there stood California Dave, a grin tangled in his whiskers. "Why didn't ye holler sooner?" he scolded. "I mighta dropped ye."

Tite stamped snow from his boots. "Why are you so scary? Injuns?"

Dave shook his bushy head. "They're my friends. No sirree, I'm scared of jumpers."

"After the claim?" Tite was a bit incredulous.

"Not only that. Since the weather turned so damn' cold, there's men would murder for a shebang like this. Or even a tent."

Thankfully young Rawl threw off pack and blanket coat. The little room was snug, a fire crackling. He wolfed bacon and beans, then borrowed tobacco for his empty pipe.

"So things are bad?" he asked.

California nodded. "You got no notion! Fellers are comin' in from all the gulches, squeezin' into town. Flock of greenhorns, too that rushed here to make their fortun' and had no luck. Can't all find sleepin' quarters. Half of them are busted. Starvin', freezin', sick."

Tite blew a ring of smoke. "But you're well fixed."

"Ye'd oughta stuck with me, instead of tearin' off to Gregory Gulch."

"Didn't stay there," Tite frowned. "The placer diggin's were giving out, boys gettin' discouraged. Lots of 'em moved to other camps—to Fair Play and Tarry All. Me, I went north into the rough country."

"How'd ye make out?"

"Picked up a little dust here and there."

Old Dave scratched his whiskers. "Ye've come back with more sense I hope. Ye'll settle down here, go pardners agin."

"On that piddlin' claim?" Tite laughed. "No, and I don't aim to live on you all winter, either."

Dave's eyes popped, his leathery cheeks turned red. "Piddlin' claim!" he exploded. "Oh, well, we won't say no more tonight. You're plumb tuckered. Just tumble into your old bunk, and I'll give ye hell an' flapjacks tomorrer."

The bunk felt good to Tite. He'd like to use it steady, he thought as he drowsed off. But that wouldn't be fair, if he meant to go prospecting again next spring . . .

THE SMELL of breakfast woke him, together with a rousing call: "Coffee an' flapjacks waitin'!"

He rolled out, grinning. "How about the hell?"

"In a minute." Old Dave was holding up a shaggy buffalo coat. "This here is a handy thing for cold travelin'. You can sleep under it in a blizzard, make it into a bull-boat to cross water."

"Going to town with me?" Tite asked with his mouth full.

"I'm goin'," Dave declared, "all by myself."

Puzzled, Tite stopped chewing. "What's that, Californy?"

"Now, now!" the other raised a quieting hand. "You need a rest, I need a stretch. Ain't had no chance, by glory, since I started watchin' my shack and all! So you'll hold the fort, like, while I lope off an' do some whoopin'!"

"In the snow?" Tite protested. "With things so bad in Denver?"

"Snow's stopped. I'll git there on the gallop. And there's always licker in Denver City, no matter what. Feller with a full poke can make out."

He stooped and dragged two old boots from under his bunk. They were ruinous, with patched legs and worn-out soles. But they were fat—and heavy. Dave pulled a stopper of blanket rags from one and out fell a handful of nuggets!

Lumps and pellets of yellow gold! He scooped them up and dropped them into his pockets, then plugged the boot again.

"Handy sizes," he chuckled. "Just like spendin' ten an' twenty dollar pieces. All from the piddlin' claim you got disgusted with and left to me!"

No wonder the old man had been on guard, gun in hand! And now Tite must be watchdog. He didn't feel easy, watching over so much gold.

Dave would be gone for several days. Long enough for a frolic and sober-up, and to buy a pack of supplies.

Left alone, Tite reloaded the guns and fitted fresh caps. He had the rifle as well as his own Colt revolver. He'd stay indoors mostly, he decided, with the door

barred. The small window was covered with canvas, but it had a shutter too.

On the first day he was busy. He took his shovel to the snow, clearing the cabin doorway. He brought a bucket of water from the stream, washed his clothes and himself.

But on the second day he had nothing to do.

He was lying in his bunk that afternoon half asleep, when he heard the noise. Hadn't heard anybody approaching through the snow; but suddenly booted feet scraped on the cleared ground by the door. Wide awake, Tite stiffened.

The door rattled against the bar, and a voice whined, "By damn, Bullhead, we're beat! Somebody here a'ready!"

Tite reared up to slam the window shutter. Then he picked up his rifle and stepped to the door.

Another voice rose in a bellow. "Hey, who's in there?"

"Who's out there?" Tite countered.

There was a shuffling of feet, a muttering. The first man spoke again in a more smoothing tone. "We're friends o' Californy's. Open up!"

"I'm a friend of his, too," Tite said. "So I won't open."

A third man cracked out an oath. "Ye bloodsucker! Ye've grabbed his shanty and his pile!"

Tite's heart sank. Dave's luck was no secret, then, and such luck was dangerous for a lonesome miner. "Pile?" he asked. "What pile?"

"Ye know what! He musta struck it rich, the way he's been throwin' the stuff around in town!"

So that was it. The old man had been foolish. "If he's got a pile," Tite said, "he's going to keep it."

He dropped on one knee to peer through the loophole. What he saw was discouraging. A bunch of roughs, frowsy and long-haired and whiskered, with pistols belted over their greasy coats of blanket or buckskin.

The soothering one began again. He had a hatchet face and a reddish beard. "Stranger, there's five of us, enough to rip this here shack apart an' ram it down your throat. But we're reasonable. Seein' as you got here fust, we'll take ye in. We'll whack up the boodle an' all bunk together, thick as thieves!"

Tite gave a hard laugh. "Thieves is the word."

The other laughed, too. "Not exactly. This layout don't belong to nobody no more. 'Cause Dave got kilt in town last night."

Flabbergasted, Tite sat back on his heels. "Killed!" he said. "Californy killed!" He pressed his face to the hole again. "How? Who did it?"

The five men had stepped back and were looking at the door, all grinning. "So we heerd," the red one drawled. "Big Phil shot him—the Cannibal."

The loud one disagreed; he was thick through, face covered with curly black hair. "No, Foxy, I got it diff'rent. A clubfooted gambler done it."

Tite gritted his teeth. "Ye seem to think it's mighty funny. I think you blacklegs waylaid the poor old feller!"

They shook their heads, still grinning. All but a slouch in an antelope cape. "Poor old *grizzly b'ar!*" he mumbled. "Look what he done to me." The cape fell open, showing one arm in a sling.

The thick man roared, "Shut up, you!" But the words were out.

Tite slid his rifle barrel through the slot and fired. The roughs had scattered, running down the gulch, and the hasty shot missed. He snatched for his hand-gun. Too late; they were all behind rocks or trees by that time.

A spatter of pistol shots came from down gulch, the bullets cracking into the cabin wall. A bellow came with them.

"We'll git ye! Or we'll keep ye holed up till your guts rot!"

THE jumpers didn't come back to the cabin that day. They didn't go away, either. When the light waned Tite saw the glare of their campfire.

They'd stay out of rifle range, he guessed, as long as there was any daylight; and try something after dark.

He might act first, surprise them. Or he might stand a siege. But no, he couldn't take a risk, couldn't tarry. He knew in

the back of his mind that he'd have to go after old Dave.

The old man might be dead and might not. He might be hurt and needing help. There was no believing those rapscallions.

They'd get the cabin, if only for a while. They musn't get the gold.

Where to hide it? Two boots full of gold were too heavy to carry, and the jumpers would ransack the cabin. Outside, somewhere? But his tracks in the snow would show the hiding place.

Why, then, he wouldn't leave any tracks!

Tite cooked and ate a good meal. After that he spied through the loophole. It was dark now, except for the white glimmer of snow. The men were still down the gulch. They weren't ready to move yet; and weren't watching, being sure that he'd stay forted.

He unbarred the door and stepped out on the bit of cleared ground with his shovel. On one side was the big heap of snow, the mound he had made when clearing. He dug into it, dug deep. Then he lugged out the heavy boots, stowed them in the hole and covered them up.

Who'd search a snow heap for buried gold? It would be safe there, maybe until spring. Plenty of times a man had been buried in snow and only found when it melted.

Tite left his pack and tools behind, but took the rifle. He made tracks up the side wall of the gulch, and didn't care. The jumpers wouldn't hunt him. They'd take possession of the snug house, and hunt for California's pile . . .

Next morning he crossed the South Platte by the rope ferry, helping the ferryman haul the clumsy scow. The water was high and swift, though it carried no ice.

Landing, Tite was astonished to see how Denver City had grown. It was larger now than its twin, Auraria, across Cherry Creek.

Most of the cottonwoods had been cut down, and streets were laid out on the river flat. Straggling rows of cabins and crazy huts, with tents and hooded wagons in between. Sorry horses were penned in pole corrals. And eastward along Cherry Creek, stood a cluster of Arapaho tepees; Chief Left Hand had brought his band to sell buffalo beef.

But Dave had been right about the bad times. Every shanty and tent seemed to be jammed full, every wagon was a dwelling. Men roamed the streets or huddled around smoky fires. Idle and hungry, dressed in weather-worn rags. Some had clothing of sacks, patched together.

There was no snow here, but the air was biting. Tite stepped out for the biggest hotel, the Elephant Corral, on Blake Street. That was the place to start his search.

In his hurry he almost stumbled over a prone, stiff body. A scrawny bunch of bones, sprawled in the middle of the road. Somebody had already stolen the boots and coat.

"What finished this poor cuss?" he asked the nearest lounger.

The lounger rubbed his red nose and snuffled. "Just give out and dropped. Likely lung fever."

"Do they let him lay?"

"Oh, McGovern will be around purty soon. He runs a graveyard up river, an' the town pays him to clean up. It's only dead fellers now, 'cause the Injuns eats the dead dogs."

Tite had to force his way into the Elephant Corral. The long, log-built room was crammed, business going full blast. Men crowded the bar, jostled around the gambling tables. Other men were sleeping soddenly on benches or on the floor, in spite of the noise. An orchestra was at work—fiddle, horn and banjo—the players sitting in a waist-high pen of sheet iron, scarred by bullets.

Hampered by his rifle, Tite pushed over to the bar. When the chance came he questioned the owner, a shrewd-faced Michigander as he helped his sweating bartenders.

"Was Californy Dave in here, night afore last? Did he get into a ruckus?"

The hotel keeper nodded. "He was here, spending gold pretty free. As to a ruckus, I couldn't say. Never interfere with guests."

"Was there a shootin'?"

The other shrugged. "Neighbor, there's shooting every night, but I never pay at-

tention. I only sell drinks and rent the tables to them gamblers. Ain't responsible for battles. If anybody's killed, he's dragged out and the undertaker gathers him."

Tite frowned. "Then this McGovern oughta know about a killin'?"

"He's the man to ask. Now I'm allfired busy—"

"Hold on," Tite said. "This rifle is a bother. Will you keep it?"

The hotel keeper reached a hand. "And if you don't show up again, it's mine. Right?"

"Right!" Tite snapped, and turned back to the big room.

THERE were six gamblers, each at a crowded table. He thrust his way to one after another, trying to get a look at their feet. It wasn't easy, with so many feet. Somehow he managed. And when he peered under the last table, he saw one regular boot and one with a queer toe.

That gambler was clubfooted! At the first opportunity Tite edged beside him and growled, "Did you have a mess-up, two nights back?"

The man looked up with beady eyes. He had a stringy mustache, and his stovepipe hat was perched on a bandage. "Ask me no questions," he said in a singsong, "and I'll tell you no lies. Just watch the ace of hearts, friend, that's the winning card. Now you see it and now you don't! Will you bet a pinch of dust?"

Tite gripped his shoulder. "I'm bettin' you shot Californy Dave!"

The gambler squirmed. "That old hellion? You lose. He shot me—tore my ear nigh off!"

Tite got out his poke and dropped a pinch of dust in the can. He was glad to lose.

Now his eyes searched the room and settled on a soggy hulk in a corner. A whiskers. It was Big Phil; the fellow who had once eaten human flesh in hungry times.

Crossing over, Tite shook him awake. "Hey, Cannibal! Did you see old Dave here, couple o' nights ago? Did you row with him?"

Big Phil stared around dazedly. "He wouldn't drink with me! I begged, but he wouldn't drink with no Injun eater." Phil smeared away tears with a huge paw. "I got no friends, and all because I was snowed up that time an' famishin'!"

He blubbered and swallowed. "Why ain't man-meat—even Injun—better'n hawg? 'Twixt you an' me, though, I'll take the hawg. Of all the tough, gristly—"

Tite shook him again. "Did you shoot Californy?"

"Shot *at* him, bein' insulted thataway. I can't hit nothin', I got the shakes."

"What happened then?"

"Didn't notice, after he throwed the bottle." The Cannibal lowered his head to show a clotted lump amongst the greasy hair.

Tite backed away, felling better. He had run down those two tales! He began to question others here and there.

Yes, they remembered Dave, in his buffalo coat, spending nuggets. He'd caused considerable excitement! But nobody knew what had become of him. They had all ducked when the shooting started.

And now a sound from the street caught Tite's ear; the grinding of wheels over frozen ruts. He struggled to the door.

A mule-drawn cart had stopped near by. A gangling ragged man and a gawky, ragged boy had swung down from it. They were lifting the dead man—the fellow who had died of lung fever—into a rough box.

"Hi, there!" Tite called. "McGovern! You know who-all gets killed around here, don't ye?"

The grave-digger straightened up. "Certain! They're all my customers, an' damn' satisfied. Every gent gits a fust class funeral with a coffin."

The boy sniggered. "As fur as the graveyard. Then they're dumped out and the coffin's used for the next."

"I only got one," McGovern admitted. "They ride in style, anyway."

"How about Californy Dave?" Tite asked. "Have ye give him a ride?"

The answer was emphatic. "Californy? Not any! Why, if I had—be damned if I wouldn't 'a' let him keep the box!"

Tite shook hands. He'd have shaken with the devil for such words.

But Dave was still missing. Well, there

were plenty more whisky hells in town, though none as likely as the Elephant. Suddenly Tite slapped his thigh.

He had just thought of the old Indian trader who kept store in Auraria. Uncle Dick Wootton was a crony of Dave's, sold him provisions. Likely the two old timers were chinning together while they drank the Mexican liquor that was Uncle Dick's specialty.

Happy at the notion, Tite started for the Larimer Street bridge. He hadn't gone far, though, when he checked his stride. A group of men had come up from the riverside.

Five men! For a moment Tite was set back on his heels. Had they come after him? And why, instead of sitting pretty? Then he thought, "They didn't find the gold! Didn't know how much there was, and reckoned I'd took it along!"

They didn't know him, either, he realized. Hadn't seen him at the cabin.

He must decide what to do, and in a hurry. Should he walk on? Or tackle them, try to learn what they really knew of Dave? The old boy had marked one in some tussle.

Five was quite a handful! He was past them before he had decided. Their eyes had slid over him without recognition. He slowed up, still puzzling.

And then he heard hurried steps behind him. Something hard and hurtful was jammed between his shoulder blades. At the same time a man flanked him on each side, grabbing his airms.

Bullhead rumbled, "Mister, let's stroll over to that bunch of cottonwoods by the river. We want to talk."

Tite gripped his gun, but couldn't pull it. "I don't think we're acquainted," he said politely. "Ain't you gents made a mistake?"

"Oh, no!" Foxy whined. "McGovern there, he just told us you been askin' questions!"

TITUS RAWL wasn't going to be dragged into any cottonwoods. He wrenched his arms suddenly, breaking loose and flinging himself forward. A gun roared as he rolled on the ground, the lead cracking over his head.

Next moment he was up and legging it, while more bullets sang around him and kicked up the frozen dirt.

He dodged into the nearest alley, turning back to snap a couple of shots around the corner shanty. Up Blake Street, one of the crew—the one with the crippled arm—lurched and keeled over. Having plenty bad luck, that snoozer! Tite couldn't shoot any more, because men were boiling out of the Elephant Corral, filling the street.

Nor could he stay there much longer. The roughs and the new crowd harangued each other, jawed back and forth. Until the whole mob began to move! It grew bigger as other dives emptied, loiterers joined in.

They were all coming after Tite! Coming with a rush and a roar! He couldn't guess why, couldn't wait to ask.

His coat was torn and he felt a burn along his ribs. It was nothing much, he judged, as he wasn't weakening. He raced into the next street, McGaa, and doubled back north.

Past the rear of the Elephant, through the cross alley above. Into Blake Street again, to fool them.

It didn't. He was spotted by some fellows still down the street, as well as from behind. Guns popped, men cheered drunkenly, laughed and howled. The whole town seemed to be turning out! For fun, for sheer deviltry, or for some reason he couldn't understand.

Tearing north once more, Tite came to a row of wagons in an open space. He crawled under one, and was in McGaa Street again. But he didn't stop there. He ducked into a tent and out through the back, bursting the rotten canvas. Somebody cursed from a heap of blankets.

And now he was in Larimer Street, and well ahead. This street was empty. There weren't so many buildings as clumps of prickly brush; and the dwellers were shut up from the cold, or had been drawn off westward by the excitement.

Tite ran south. He was still fast, but getting winded. His one thought now was to reach the bridge over Cherry Creek, to cross to Auraria and Uncle Dick Wootton.

He could still hear the racket over to

the west. The yelling and hallooing, the gun-shooting. Like a noisy celebration! Every moment he expected to see a hilarious, bloodthirsty crowd swarm through alleys or brushy lots.

They didn't come—yet. He saw nothing ahead but a solitary cart, jogging slowly toward the bridge.

He caught up with it, panting and stumbling. It was McGovern's dead-wagon.

The undertaker turned a lean, worried face, then pulled on his reins. "Sho, it's you!" he said. "Reckon I done wrong, tellin' them jiggers how ye was trailing' old Dave."

"Talked me into trouble!" Tite wheezed, slowing to a walk.

"Sorry," McGovern nodded. "But I'll fix it. Up with ye, boy! Git into my hearse, alongside the coffin. Turn on your belly an' lay quiet."

Tite heaved himself over the tailboard and stretched out. Not a bit too soon.

The racket sounded louder, closer, and then came the rat-tat of hoofs on hard ground. Some of the mob had saddled up, like a posse after a bandit! He didn't know how he could stop panting, but held his breath. Didn't dare to look, but he pictured the eager riders on their winter-rough ponies.

He heard them come clattering around, heard them shout questions. He heard McGovern answer calmly.

"Yep, got a double load. Nope, ain't seen him."

Then the riders were off, pounding over the rickety bridge, and the grave-digger was chuckling. "Saved your hide, youngster. I'll take ye clear to my place and hide ye in a hole!"

"Pull up at Wootton's store," Tite told him.

"All right," McGovern agreed. "I could use a snort of Taos lightnin'. Dang it, this here bridge is nigh ruint! There's a rail busted where some drunk fell off an' likely drowneded."

Slowly the cart rumbled over. By the time it had crawled through Auraria to Wootton's store, the posse had searched the little settlement and scampered back to Denver.

THE TRADER combed his white beard with horny fingers. "It's safe here," he opined, "because they've came and went. The crazy fools said you was wanted for bushwhackin' Dave!"

Tite felt a little dizzy. He hadn't rested or eaten much for quite a while. Now, with Mexican brandy burning inside him, his wits seemed addled.

"Say that agin," he croaked.

"Enough said, ontil ye've filled your belly and had that skinned rib fixed. I believe your tale, son, and I'll study on it."

The food made him so sleepy that he was glad to roll into a bunk in the little back room. The next he knew it was dark and Wootton was bringing in a lighted lantern.

Uncle Dick was scowling. "It beats me," he complained. "Californy can gen-'rally take care of hisself, but why ain't he here? He always comes when he's in town."

"It beats me, too," Tite said. "These Denver boys don't give a hoot for killin', seems like. Yet a word agin me, and the whole town turns out."

"They don't fuss over ordinary shootin's, man to man," Wootton explained. "But when five pitches into one, that's different. And when it's murder an' robbery, they do take notice.

"Them scamps misjudged when they tried to stop you with lead. Had to give a reason, when the boys piled out to enquire. So they made a holler that ye'd jumped Dave's cabin, done for him when he come home, and scooted with his whole cache of gold. Yessir! Then the hotel boss, he has to say he'd reco'nized Dave's rifle, that ye left with him.

"Can't blame the boys. There's a lot of robbin' since miners been comin' in from the diggin's with their dust. They git lickered, roam around at night. Some just vanishes. Some are found in the mornin', butchered an' cleaned."

"Looks like a gang was workin'," Tite allowed.

"Yes, and it looks like them that bothered you was that very gang!" The trader swore unhappily. "I'm anxious about Californy. Mebbe they worked on him."

A doleful silence followed, Wootton staring at the dirt floor and Tite wondering what he could do next, with the town against him. In a few minutes both heard the thump of feet in the outer room.

The store-keeper rose, grunting disgustedly, and moved out to serve a late customer. Next moment Tite heard an ear-splitting yell.

"Hi-yi-yi!"

He went into the front room with one leap—and saw the customer. A tough one, sturdy and whiskered, twice as large as life in a buffalo coat!

Uncle Dick was shouting. "Californy! Where ye been, the last two days? Have a drink of licker! Have a jug! Have a bar'l!"

Old Dave shook with laughter. "Taos lightnin'! The very thing I come for! How'd ye guess?"

He emptied and refilled the tin cup again and again while he listened. "So my nuggets been put to cool," he said, "I been murdered, an' Tite's nigh been lynched! Guess I missed some fun, but not all."

"Dang ye!" Uncle Dick bawled, "What's your story?"

"I was on my way here, 'tother night," Dave began, "when I fell off the bridge."

"Fell off the—hell, was you that drunk?"

Dave laughed again. "Mebbe I seen two bridges an' chose the wrong one. But I seem to recollect lookin' ahead and seein' three hombres, lookin' behind and seein,' two more. They sorta had me surrounded.

"It was all pretty sudden. They couldn't shoot without hittin' each other ontil they closed in. Popped off a few then, but my old buffler coat is so wide an' woolly, them bullets got lost. Never touched my hide. I pulled iron, plugged one cuss. Then the damn' rail give way an' down I went!"

"Water's high now, too!" Wootton exclaimed.

"Ever try to swim in a buffler coat? I couldn't, but I floated. It turned up around me Reg'lar bull-boat, though it did leak a mite. I floated under the bridge and hung onto a stake.

"The holdups thought I was gone. They stomped around some then off they went. Me, I was a leetle wet, and so was my coat. I seen fire up creek when I come ashore, headed for it, and 'twas the Arapaho camp.

"That's all. I been there since, confabbin' with my old friend, Chief Left Hand. Got my coat patched an' dried out limber, like the Injuns knows how. And I'm glad, because a buffler coat is sure handy!"

Tite had been growing grimmer and grimmer as the old man talked. "No, it ain't all, Californy," he said. "That gang has made a heap of trouble. Tackled you, tried for your pile. Tackled me and raised the town agin me."

"Well," Dave reasoned, "ye won't be lynched for murderin' me, not while I'm along. Why are we wastin' time?"

"Likely they're at the Elephant right now" Tite suggested.

"Let's go gobble 'em! I'm feelin' cannibalistic—like Big Phil." California slapped his rough-coated chest and whooped. "Wah-hoo!"

THE Elephant Corral was lit by lanterns and flares, hot with the reek of alcohol, unwashed clothes and men. The gamblers were working hard, bartenders harder. The musicians were squeaking, braying and thumping in their bullet-proof pen.

"Scout 'em careful," Dave muttered, just inside the door. "I'll take three, you take two."

"There's only four left," Tite answered. "Didn't I tell ye? I got one—the snoozer you plugged in the arm."

"Only four?" Dave was disappointed. "Glad ye finished that job, anyway. Look a-there, down at the end. You know 'em better'n I do."

Tite looked. "Sure 'nough!" he breathed. "The feller they call Bullhead! T'other one, Foxy, is with him; they're buckin' the paddle-wheel set-up. And see that galoot with the bristly mustache? An' the dark-complected devil? Bet he's half Injun."

Slowly Tite and Dave edged through the room. Nobody paid them any attention; the drinkers and gamers were too busy. They stopped at the paddle-wheel

table. Dave put out a fist to whack a broad, stooping back.

Bullhead jerked around angrily. What he saw was a ghost! A grinning ghost in a shaggy buffalo coat! He made no sound, but his eyes showed rings of white. His mouth was a hole in his beard.

It was Foxy who made the noise, a startled yelp. The yelp turned into a snarl as he backed against the table and couldn't retreat any further. His hands whipped down and up.

There was a frantic scramble. Men fled aside to the walls, or threw themselves on the floor. Bartenders dropped behind the bar, musicians behind their sheet-iron barricade. The paddlewheel table was upset, big wheel flying one way, score-board another. The operator fell flat.

And now the guns were banging! Back and forth, filling the room with smoke.

Tite's hat was whisked off, as if by a blast of wind. Something ripped through his hair, a whiplash seemed to slice his cheek. He crouched as he shot, saw Foxy's hatchet face twist into a knot. Saw him fold up in the middle, as if his belt were a hinge.

Abruptly the hammering explosions stopped. Tite swung his gun for Bullhead, but didn't see him. Ah, there he was! On the floor, toes up! McGovern's hearse would have another double load tomorrow.

"More holes in my coat," Dave was grumbling. "Where did t'other pair go?"

They hadn't put up any fight; they were making for a back window. The swarthy one struggled over, dove-head-first through the canvas.

Not all the way through! That window was near Big Phil's corner. The Cannibal surged up with a wild yell, wrapped huge arms around the man's legs. Hauled him back and hurled him at the other . . .

With two bandits dead and two ready for hanging, things quieted down in short order. Dave climbed on a table and made a speech.

"So ye see, boys," he ended, "this young feller didn't murder me. The gang done it—seems they been hangin' out here, spottin' the miners who come back with full pokes. Only I didn't stay murdered, an' so we've cleaned 'em up all hunky-dory!"

"I helped some," Big Phil urged. "Now will ye drink with me?"

"I'll drink with everybody. Start the whisky flowin', gents! Me an' my pardner is treatin'!"

As the bartenders filled glasses and handed bottles overhead to men who couldn't reach the bar, Tite Rawl spoke up. "You're plumb forgetful, Californy. I ain't your pardner no more."

"So I am," California beamed. "I'll just stay forgetful!"

LONG HAIR'S LAST STAND

By NORMAN B. WILTSEY

What happened that bloody day on the Little Big Horn? Neither Custer nor any of his command survived. Now hear Charging Bear tell it.

IN COMMON WITH MANY readers, I had often wondered why historians and fiction writers stubbornly insist that the destruction of Custer's Seventh Cavalry by the Sioux be classed a "massacre." Blandly ignored by these literary gentlemen are the indisputable facts that Custer was the aggressor, that his troopers were well-armed and superbly mounted, and that the disaster overtaking the dashing young Cavalry commander was due not only to the admittedly superior numbers and tactics of the Sioux, but to Custer's own recklessness and astounding lack of carefully planned strategy against a deadly foe.

I wondered too about the Indian version of the affair, and my lively curiosity finally drove me to the Pine Ridge Oglala Indian Reservation in South Dakota to find out what I could. Back, in 1937, still survived a venerable warrior or two who had taken part in the bloody scrap on the Little Big Horn on that long-gone twenty-fifth of June in 1876. I got my story from the wrinkled lips of one of these ancients, a seventy-six-year-old brave who had fought in the battle as a boy and had earned his proud warrior's name of Charging Bear for his courage that day. A story told haltingly over many pipes; a story patiently translated for me by Charley Wise Wolf, the old Bear's grandson . . .

IT WAS a happy time and free—the last such good time our people were to know. Warriors from each of the Seven Council Fires of the Teton Lakotas were gathered there in the great camp along the Greasy Grass, the stream that white men call the Little Big Horn: Oglalas, Hunkpapas. Sans Arcs, Minniconjous, Santees, Two Kettles and Blackfoot Sioux. Some Cheyennes were with us too. Amongst all the villages we had more than two thousand braves; our lodge-circles stretched for three miles along the river. Our scouts had found no game in the valley, but the *parfleches* of the women still held plenty of meat from the last big buffalo hunt.

The people rested during the day and danced and feasted in the cool nights, waiting for the soldiers to come. We knew that they were coming soon. Sitting Bull, chief of the Hunkpapas, had dreamed of soldiers without ears falling into camp head-down from the sky. This was a true

vision, for all men knew that soldiers had no ears for listening to truth. And they would come upon us swiftly as arrows falling from the sky, for they were angry and would charge us fiercely. Only the week before we had whipped General Crook, the soldier-chief we knew as Three Stars, in a big fight on the Rosebud. The Great Father at Washington was angry with us too, and would send his young men riding hard to punish us for whipping Three Stars. We were not afraid of the soldiers, for Sitting Bull's vision had foretold that many would die!

About noon on the eighth day after the Rosebud fight, near the end of the Moon of Making Fat, the enemy came. We, in the Oglala camp, first saw the great cloud of dust kicked up by their horses' feet upriver from us on our side of the water. Next we saw the soldiers, more than a hundred of them, with Ree scouts riding at the upper end of the long line. We heard the criers in the Hunkpapa camp shouting: "The chargers are coming to kill us! Warriors, get ready to fight!" Then the bugle blew for the charge, and we heard the loud noise of many guns fired together and the smacking of bullets against the lodge-poles of the tipis.

The Hunkpapa lodges were closest to the soldiers, and Sitting Bull's warriors grabbed their bows and guns and held back the whites until the old men and the women and children got away to the flats beyond the camp and hid in the tall grass there. Soon warriors from all the other villages came galloping up to help the Hunkpapas. Chief Gall led a charge straight at the soldiers, and the whites stopped and huddled together. The bugle blew another call, and the soldiers got off their horses to fight on foot.

Hoh, what a bad mistake *that* was! Our hearts were glad when we saw the soldiers do this foolish thing, for then we knew that our helpless ones were safe from pursuit, and we could fight hard without fearing for them. We drove the whites out of the Hunkpapa camp and back into the woods along a cutbank where once, long before, the river had flowed. Here they rallied and made a stand.

Now the fighting became all mixed up, with warriors charging the soldiers in twos and threes to count *Coups* and take scalps and guns. I wanted one of those guns, so I rode my pony right up to a big soldier with red hair all over his face and shot him with an arrow. He fell to the ground with the arrow sticking in his throat. His carbine went off when it hit the ground and the bullet creased my pony's neck so that he reared and screamed with pain. I was scared then—my belly got cold and sick with fear. I forgot all about getting the soldier's gun, and started to run away. A warrior grabbed my pony's head and called to me: "Don't be afraid, boy! Only the earth lives forever. Today is as good a day as any to die. Be brave—take the white man's scalp and gun and help your brothers fight!"

I took heart at these strong words. I scalped the big white man I had killed and took his gun and shot another soldier with it. I was afraid no more until the battle was over.

Suddenly the soldiers jumped back on their horses and ran away across the river, trying to reach the hills beyond. The little soldier-chief—the one called Reno—galloped off ahead of all the others, spurring his horse like a crazy man to get away. We rode after them, knocking them off their horses with war clubs and striking them with lances. *Hoh,* it was good sport—better than hunting buffalo! Only a few of the whites fought back; the others dropped their empty guns without trying to reload and bent yelling over their horses' necks to dodge our blows.

NOW we heard firing across the river and farther down, opposite the lower camps. More soldiers, a double line of them this time, were riding toward the crossing at the mouth of the creek. We were too far away to stop these new enemies before they reached the river, but as we wheeled our ponies and raced toward them we saw a fine brave thing. Four Cheyenne warriors—Bob-Tail Horse, Calf, Roan Bear and another whose name I have forgotten—forded the river and rode out to meet Long Hair and his men: four against more than two hundred! They came up behind a little ridge and began

to shoot at the soldiers as fast as they could work their guns—and the soldiers stopped! Whether Long Hair feared a trap I do not know—I know only that he stopped there before Bob-Tail and his three friends. Five Sioux braves joined the Cheyennes behind the ridge, and together these nine Strong-Hearts stood off the whites until warriors from all the camps came up.

Low Dog lead an attack on the soldiers then, and Crow King another charge from the side. The noise of the guns was like great bundles of sticks being broken together. Wounded horses flopped around on the ground, screaming, and blowing froth from their lungs. I saw one soldier shoot his horse between the eyes and then put the muzzle of his Colt into his mouth and blow off the top of his own head! One man, with three chevrons on his sleeve, ran out a little way before the others and fought us all alone until he died full of bullets. He was a brave warrior—that soldier of Long Hair's!

Now came Crazy Horse, racing his pinto war horse and shouting above the great noise of the battle, "Follow me, my brothers! *Hoka hey*—let us go!"

He whirled his pony, and we were off through the choking dust and stinking powder smoke—circling behind the soldiers to attack them from the rear. Up a ravine and over the top of the hill our Strange Man Crazy Horse, led us—and down upon the white men below! For just a little while they fought strongly—and then there were no more soldiers left for us to kill. Long Hair and his young men were all dead—their pale, bloody faces staring up at the sky . . .

So it happened—the big fight an old warrior can never forget. There is more to be told, but it is of bad times that I speak now—of hunger and sadness and defeat. How Crazy Horse kept the Oglalas from going in to sit and rot on the white man's island while shells remained for the guns and food in the lodges. How at last, when everything was gone, we rode out behind Crazy Horse to surrender to Three Stars at Fort Robinson.

More bad times came then. The great soldier-chief's promise to Crazy Horse that the Lakotas would have their own reservation near the Tongue River, where the people could live undisturbed by the whites and at peace with all men—the promise that was never kept! The jealousy of the Agency chiefs, who foolishly believed that Three Stars planned to make our Strange Man head-chief of all the Lakotas. And the lying half-breed interpreter, The Grabber, who twisted Crazy Horse's words in council until the timid white man feared that he was about to lead the people again to war—or even kill Three Stars himself.

Yes, all was bad. Men who had never lied before spoke now with forked tongues and betrayed their brothers. Wickedness was everywhere; and *Wakan Tanka,* the Great Spirt, turned his face from the Lakotas in sorrow . . .

THE white man's side of all this trouble was sent to the Great Father at Washington. No one spoke for Crazy Horse. Soon the Great Father sent back word by the talking wires that Crazy Horse was to be punished by being locked up all his life in a far-away place called Florida. The little soldier-chief at the fort was frightened when he heard this, for it meant that he would have to arrest Crazy Horse and keep him chained in the iron house until the time came for him to be taken away. But men cannot cage the eagle; and so our Strange Man fought with only his knife—fought soldiers and treacherous Indians alike until stabbed by the sword-gun of the guard. Stabbed in the back while his arms were being held by Little Big Man, an old friend whose heart had been turned against Crazy Horse by the lies and promises of the white men.

So Crazy Horse died, receiving his death-wound from a white man who struck him down from behind. The Lakota nation died with him.

There is nothing more to be told. All is finished. I, Bear-That Charges, have spoken truth.

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THE FOREST RUNNER

By BART CASSIDY

Roll the war drums! Prime the flintlocks! Iroquois and Senecas and Mohawks . . . Renegade Butler with a thousand silent braves whetting their scalp-knives for the dark and bloody kill. And men were laughing at Morgan's Rifles!

IT was 1778—and Death roamed along the frontier. County Tryon, that vast expanse of western New York that lay next to the Dark Empire of the Iroquois Indians, seethed with rumors and alarms. As a group of six riflemen swung south along the Cherry Valley trail their eyes were alert and cautious.

The trailing thrums on the buckskins of the six men were dyed green, and their hunting shirts were belted with wampun. Long rifles rested across their arms, the tails of coonskin caps dangled over their shoulders. They were a detached scout of Morgan's Rifles.

The leader of the forest runners was lean and wiry. Donald McCall's skin was bronzed as dark as a Mohawk's, and long months of roaming the wilderness had knit his body as tough as twisted rawhide. Behind him strode a blond giant in buckskin, Big Ruyvven of Claverack, and then a rifleman as tall and lean as a scarecrow. There were many notches in the stock of Long John Randall's rifle, and a cluster of dyed Iroquois scalps hung from his baldric.

Those two men were old companions, veterans who had marched together when Michael Cresap led the first riflemen to the siege of Boston in the early days of the war. The others were cast in the same mould—hard-eyed, thin-lipped, tireless. Morgan's Rifles held a record second to none in the ragged Continental army.

It was early afternoon, and they were nearing Cherry Valley settlement, when they met an elderly farmer driving a wagon. He reined in his horse and peered at the riflemen with a smile on his wrinkled face.

"God save our country, friends," he piped. McCall lowered the rifle he had instinctively cocked.

"Same to you, pappy."

"Do ye come to Cherry Valley? The village is full of Alden's Connecticut men."

"We are sent to do some scout duty for the garrison," McCall answered shortly, "You're taking a chance out alone this way."

"I reckon not." The old man shook his head stubbornly. "There's an infantry patrol on the trail not half a mile behind me."

"Lot of help they'd be if you met McGail's renegades."

"Is McGail out?"

"Aye, he rides the forest once more. They struck Blair's farm yesterday, scalped and killed the whole family."

"Did they now!" The old man's smile faded, and he rubbed his chin. "I used to trap muskrat together with Clam Blair. We've heard so many rumors, here in Cherry Valley, we've come to believe none of them. Men even say that the Mohawks are gathering with Butler's Rangers to raid the border again, but Colonel Alden says there is no danger."

"The man is then a fool!" Long John Randall stated grimly from his place in the patrol, where he stood leaning on the barrel of his rifle. Like all irregular troops, the rifleman paid little attention to the minor formalities of discipline.

A moment later the patrol moved on, while behind them they heard the creaking of axles as the wagon resumed its journey. McCall was frowning as he stared through the warm September sun with watchful eyes. There was trouble coming! He was as sure of it as though he had already seen Iroquois moccasin tracks on the trail.

THE path wound onward, and at another bend they met a sentinel who halted them with lowered musket. He

wore the dark blue uniform with white facings of the New England Line. After a few words he signed to them to pass on, while four companions sprawled on the grass glanced up curiously. Long John Randall looked at the sentry glumly.

"Best take post in the bushes instead of in the center of the trail, friend," he said. "You'd be an easy target for a lurking Iroquois or one of Terry McGail's hellions."

"Do tell!" the sentry drawled, dropping the butt of his musket to the ground and leaning on the muzzle. "And since when has a forest runner been able to instruct a regular in his business?"

"Don't you know this uniform?" Randall asked shortly.

"Rifles."

"Aye, but whose? We are Danny Morgan's men."

"Morgan's macaronis, eh?" the sentry sneered. "Forest dandies!"

Randall slipped the pack from his shoulders in one swift movement and handed his rifle to Ruyvven who was grinning broadly.

"Put down your musket, my young jackanapes," Randall said grimly, "and I'll dust that blue jacket of yours for you. No New England penny-pincher can mock at Morgan's Rifles."

"I am now on duty," the sentry protested, while his seated companions guffawed loudly. Their sympathies seemed to be with the rifleman.

"Then I'll just wait here till your tour of duty ends."

"Come, John, come!" McCall laughed, pulling the tall woodsman away. "Save your energies for fighting the Tories." Randall resumed his pack and rifle, but he was muttering under his breath as he strode on. Then the trail dipped, and before them lay the hamlet of Cherry Valley.

Very quiet and peaceful it looked, under the warm sunshine of Indian summer. Sloping, wooded hills surrounded the valley on all sides. At the lower end stood the square log fort that had been built by Lafayette, with a gleam of sun on steel above the palisade and a flag flying lazily in the sunshine. Scattered cottages straggled along the way and down the Springfield road.

A young woman in homespun came out of the underbrush with a basket of berries and stared curiously at the halted riflemen.

"Good after noon," she said. "I'me Sue Wheeler. Can I help you?"

"Reckon not, ma'am." McCall grinned and pulled off his battered coonskin cap. "We're just going to report at the headquarters of the garrison.

"You'll find it in the fort."

The gates of the stockade stood open, and the blue uniforms of soldiers off duty were visible about the village. Others were cutting wood on the slopes of the hill to the west. It was a peaceful and pleasant scene, but as they prepared to move on Long John Randall suddenly lifted his arm. He said no word, but the others followed his pointing forefinger. To the northwest, where the dim blue shapes of hills were etched against the sky, rose a thin and just visible trail of smoke!

Somewhere, far off, another fire would be answering that one. Signals against the sky! Minutes passed while they all stood in silence. The gaunt faces of the men had suddenly gone grim, and a little old. At last the girl said in a low voice:

"Perhaps—perhaps it's only autumn mist." McCall shook his head in negation and shouldered his rifle with a weary gesture.

"You never saw mist like that, Mistress Wheeler. There are signal smokes on the hills, and the Iroquois are talking to each other across the distances. It bodes no good to County Tryon."

THEY were all silent as they trudged down into the valley. A company of Continentals was passing as they marched out to relieve the videttes. Drums rolled steadily, and the fifes trilled the gay rhythm of "Unadilla."

People came to doors and windows as the little group of riflemen swung down into Cherry Valley. Women greeted the newcomers with smiles, but back of their weary eyes was a lurking fear. The frontier was troubled these days. The few men left in the village shouted friendly greetings.

"Hi there, forest runners, how's the scalp market? What news from the army?"

Soldiers of the garrison off duty were everywhere, sitting in door yards or perched on rail fences. They glanced at the dusty rangers with faint smiles. The riflemen, conscious of belonging to a famous corps, tipped their fur caps to a more rakish angle and marched with an insolent swagger.

McCall led his men straight for the square mass of the log fort. The lone sentry on guard at the gate did not even challenge them. The riflemen were frowning as they leaned on their weapons and glanced about them. The fort seemed poorly run. Only a few sentries strolled along the firing platforms inside the stockade. No men stood to arms for quick action in case of sudden assault. A few brass cannon peered out embrasures, but no charges of powder or piles of roundshot stood ready beside them. McCall turned to Randall.

"They keep but poor watch here," he muttered.

"Aye! One would think them safe in their own Connecticut, not here on the frontier of Tryon County."

None of the soldiers scattered about the fort, dozing against the palisade or washing their clothes at a row of wooden tubs paid any attention to the newcomers. At last a young lieutenant of the Connecticut Line, very smart and dapper in a new uniform, walked briskly toward them. He meticulously returned McCall's salute.

"Can I help you?"

"An ensign and a scout of six from Morgan's Rifles reporting to Colonel Alden for orders," McCall returned shortly. "Where can I report to the Colonel?"

"That would be a little difficult at the moment, sir. Colonel Alden is at his quarters at the Taylor house down in the village. He will be back at the fort for an hour at dusk."

"Do you mean that he sleeps down in the village instead of at the fort?" McCall asked in amazement. The Lieutenant smiled.

"Surely, sir. Most of the officers do. It is far more comfortable."

McCall heard a faint snigger from Randall behind him. He was about to protest himself, but nothing would be gained by criticism at the moment. His feeling of insecurity became stronger than ever. With a shrug he asked:

"Can you assign some quarters to my men? I'll report to Colonel Alden when he comes back."

"Surely, sir. Take any of those empty huts if you wish to stay in the fort. Many of the men are also quartered down in the village."

The riflemen dropped their packs in a bare but clean cabin of hewn logs that stood in one corner of the stockade. Randall rubbed his shoulders and stretched his long arms.

"Zooks!" he muttered. "It seems that we must play wet nurse to a pack of overgrown farmers who think the Iroquois send notes before they attack."

"Aye, John," McCall answered gloomily. "It seems a mistake to guard the frontier with men who do not understand its dangers."

THERE was nothing for McCall to do until he could report to Colonel Alden. Restless, always uncomfortable when within walls and under a roof, he picked up his rifle and strolled out to make the circuit of the settlement. It was badly scattered —hopeless for defense. The only wise plan was to bring everybody within the fort at night. Well, he wasn't running the place.

As McCall passed close by a willow thicket on the edge of the village, a tall Iroquois in full warpaint stepped out from the bushes. The rifleman's hand flashed to the war hatchet at his belt, then fell away as he recognized the Indian as a friendly Oneida scout with whom he had served in the past. The Iroquois flung up one arm in a gesture of friendship.

"*Koue*, my younger brother," he said in Oneida, the dialect of the one nation that had remained friendly to the Colonists.

"Black Beaver! It is good to see you again."

The Oneida's face was painted in black and white, and the outline of a timber wolf on his chest was touched with blue.

"We have both traveled many miles since we parted," he said with a sadness in his sonorous tones. "The Long House

mourns its ancient glories."

"It is so. But what brings you here, my elder brother?"

"I have been scouting toward the Minisink with two companions of the Wolf clan. We heard you had arrived here and came to offer our services. There is trouble in the wind."

"What do you mean?"

"The Senecas are gathering. The witch drums of the Mountain Snakes are throbbing through the forest shadows," he said significantly.

Two other Oneidas joined them a moment later, saluting McCall with upraised arms. When he started back to the fort the trio of Iroquois strode at his heels with their oiled scalp locks gleaming in the late afternoon sun.

The Continentals were beginning to form for evening roll call in the yard of the stockade when McCall re-entered the fort. He left two of the Oneidas at the hut with the riflemen, but took Black Beaver with him to the headquarters cabin. A minute later they stood before the commander of Cherry Valley fort.

Colonel Ichabod Alden, of the Sixth Connecticut Regiment, was a small man with a ruddy face and the pomposity of a strutting turkey-cock. His powdered wig and his blue uniform with its white facings were immaculate to the point of foppery. He nodded peevishly to an officer who had just finished making a report, and then turned to McCall.

"Well, sir, what is it? Speak up!"

"Ensign McCall and a scout of six reporting for duty, sir. We are from Morgan's Rifles."

"Yes, yes, of course. I did not think you a member of Congress. Already there has been trouble with your men, sir. A thin rifleman and a giant in leather started a brawl in the Commissary hut and near crippled five of my men. Damme, sir, you must control your forest hell-cats"

"It will not happen again, sir," McCall promised shortly. "Have you any orders?"

"You may take your men and scout. It is better than having them hang around the fort and make trouble. At that, your energy will be wasted, as there are no British troops within miles of us."

"We saw smoke in the hills as we came in this afternoon, sir. I believe the Mohawks and Senecas are gathering to strike somewhere in Tryon before winter sets in."

"Nonsense, sir. Fiddlesticks!" Alden's face grew more ruddy than ever, his small eyes snapped. "I will not have you alarming the people with such rumors. Even if there should be a raid, what could a handful of savages and Tories do against a body of trained troops like this garrison?"

FOR an instant McCall glanced out the window of the hut. A bugle call was sounding, and the Continentals stood motionless in their straight blue lines. Alden's gaze followed that of the rifleman.

"A regiment of such troops is worth an army of your undisciplined Rangers."

"There was once a British general named Braddock who thought the same thing," McCall replied with a thin, tight smile. "He died. The best of troops are at a loss in an Indian raid if they do not understand frontier warfare."

"Well, you may take your men and scout to your heart's content. And who is this filthy savage you have with you?"

McCall flushed under his tan, and his lean jaw shut like a steel trap. At that moment he was profoundly thankful that his companion did not speak English. Then his face became an expressionless mask.

"This is Black Beaver, of the Wolf Clan of the Oneida nation," he answered. "He is a sachem—and a gentleman."

"Take him along with you, then. You may go, sir."

McCall saluted sharply, turned on his heel, and stalked from the hut. Pig-headed fool! He caught a glimpse of amusement in the tall Oneida's flashing eyes.

"I understand the white man's tongue better than I speak it, oh, my younger brother," Black Beaver said quietly. "Calm thyself. The wise man never heeds the empty chatter of a woodpecker."

II

NEXT morning McCall awoke at dawn, while half a dozen cocks throughout the settlement were crowing loudly. He

tossed aside his blanket and crossed the cabin to douse his head in a bucket of water. He shook the water from his long hair, brushed his teeth with the frayed end of a willow twig, and then began to make up his pack. Through the open door he could see the top of the log stockade, a black mass against the graying sky.

The three Oneidas were waiting by the gate, leaning impassively on their rifles. The sentries on the parapet were staring down at them with a mixture of curiosity and awe. With the half dozen riflemen trooping at his heels, packs slung and long brown rifles cradled in the hollows of their left arms. McCall walked up to the guard at the gate.

"Let us out, friend," he said. "We have a long trail ahead."

"The gate is not usually opened till the sun is fully up," one of the men demurred A bearded sergeant blew on his chilled hands and shrugged.

"Let the forest hellions go, Nate. They'll be good riddance."

In single file they strode out of the fort, their moccasins making no sound. Randall called a sardonic farewell to the sergeant. The villages were awakening as they strode swiftly through the settlement. Women went to the wells to draw water, men in homespun moved out to attend to their livestock. McCall saw the Wheeler girl in front of her house, and lifted his cap and she waved.

"Hurry back, rifleman!" she called.

"I'll try to ma'am."

They halted at the edge of the woods, adjusting packs and war-belts. McCall tested the priming of his rifle.

"Randall and Ruyvven and the three Oneidas will come with me," he said. "The rest of you under Phil Wagner go straight north and scout beyond the Mohawk. We will go west."

Wagner, a stocky rifleman with high cheek-bones and the straight hair of an Indian, eased his pack and spat on his hands.

"Don't reckon I envy you," he said. "Well—keep your hair on. Come on, boys, pull foot."

For an instant McCall hesitated, watching the four riflemen plod off through the thinning mist. The green thrums on their buckskins tossed as they walked, a rifle barrel twinkled. As McCall turned westward, Black Beaver glided ahead without command. The other two Oneidas moved out on either flank, Ruyvven dropped fifty paces to the rear. Without a word the scouting party took up the march.

Before them, McCall knew, lay a hand that was almost unknown to white men. There were a few scattered farms nearby, but otherwise nothing broke the virgin wilderness for thousands of miles but the Iroquois villages. Even they were scattered and far apart. Many were now legendary and almost forgotten. Somewhere far ahead lay the Seneca stronghold of Catherine's-town, where the twisted hag Matrine Montour ruled her brood of witches.

It was not merely the fear of roving Mohawk scalping parties that held them all silent as the scouting party moved steadily westward. The forest itself seemed to breed silence. No sunlight fell through the thick canopy of trees that had been growing since long before man came to this western continent. Their trunks formed an endless series of Gothic arches under which the light was dim and shadowed.

The painted shapes of the Oneidas, and the leather clad riflemen, were like shadows as they went forward on silent moccasins. Once, when McCall's powder horn struck against the stock of his rifle for an instant, the sound seemed almost loud. The tall Oneida in the lead threw him a warning glance.

ONCE they came to an Indian path. It was a narrow trail through the moss, several inches deep, worn by the moccasins of unnumbered generations. Black Beaver saw it first, holding up his hand in warning and then sitting on his heels to examine the tracks. McCall joined him. There were moccasin tracks in the dust, but the edges were faded and dim.

"Mohawk?" McCall asked, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"Seneca." The Oneida indicated one print clearer than the rest. "Many days old, before the last rain."

They halted in a small hollow close to a rippling stream, and lay without a fire. After a scanty supper of parched corn, McCall nodded to Black Beaver to take up the first watch. It was already dark. With his rifle barrel gleaming in the starlight, the Oneida moved up to the crest of the rise and sat down with his back against a tree. The others rolled up in their blankets.

Sleep was slow in coming to McCall. After a while he heard Randall beside him stir restlessly.

"Still awake, John?"

"Aye. The second watch is mine, and I am minded to wait till it is over before sleeping."

Again there was silence. Then Randall lifted one long arm to point up at the sky.

"Look to the stars. There is what the Iroquois call the belt of Tanamund, and yonder are the Seven Oneida Dancers. Those same stars were there when the Stonish Giants of whom the Iroquois tell, rode out of Biskoona in their rusted armor. I wonder if there are forests on those stars the same as ours? And if the hunting is good?"

The low conversation died away, and there was no sound but the murmur of the brook and a faint sighing of the wind. At last McCall slept.

They all roused at dawn. Black Beaver was missing, but he reappeared a few minutes later.

"It will be safe to make a fire," he said. "There are no more enemies near at present."

"No *more* enemies?" McCall asked. The Oneida smiled and pointed to a freshly taken scalp that hung from his girdle.

"Seneca. Mountain Snake. He was prowling around our camp like a catamount."

They lit a small fire in the hollow, carefully choosing dry wood that would not smoke, and cooked a supply of ashen cakes. Then Randall filled his cap with water and extinguished the glowing coals. McCall ran his fingers through the damp ashes to be sure no spark remained, then they replaced the square of moss they had cut from the sod before building the fire. No one could tell that there had been a camp in this hollow at all. It seemed very quiet in these peaceful woodlands, but a fresh scalp dangled from Black Beaver's belt.

Far and wide they ranged, traveling always with the utmost caution. One afternoon they caught the faint murmur of swiftly flowing water. The Oneida in the lead halted behind a tree trunk, and as the others came up with him they cocked their rifles and peered across the stream.

"The Aulyoulet," Black Beaver murmured softly. McCall nodded.

"Aye. A few miles beyond we'll find the Susquehanna."

For minutes on end they stayed there motionless. A red deer came down to drink at the river, but nothing else moved. At last the watchers relaxed. One of the Oneidas forded the shallow stream under the rifles of the others, and then waved his hand.

BEYOND the Ouleout, to use the white man's name, they moved with greater caution. It was near dusk when they came to the broader and deeper waters of the Susquehanna. The river was crimson with reflected sunset, and as they crouched on the bank Black Beaver touched McCall's shoulder. His arm pointed to a mark on the damp sand at the water's edge. A canoe had landed there not long before!

"Iroquois?" McCall whispered. Black Beaver shook his head.

"White men. One landed for a few minutes. I can see the tracks from here."

"Your eyes are better than mine," McCall muttered. Long John Randall was smiling grimly.

"If they're white men, they're no friends of ours."

In the twilight they filed off between the trees. Less than two hundred wards further they swung aside to pass a windfall, and something bright on the moss caught McCall's eye. He picked it up—a pewter button that bore the legend "Butler's Rangers." Without comment he passed it to Randall, whose gaunt face grew grim.

"Butler's Rangers," the lean rifleman muttered, "If young Walter Butler is on the Susquehanna with his Tory murderers, Thayendaragea and the Mohawks cannot be far away."

Slowly the dusk deepened, seeming to increase the size of the great trees all about them. As they climbed a rock strewn knoll, Black Beaver suddenly threw himself flat on his face. His tense, motionless body carried a soundless warning. As the others crawled up behind him, looking down the long slope, they saw an Iroquois stride out from a clump of willows. His beaded sporran hung to his knees, his rifle was at the trail. He glanced around, then stalked off between the trees. Another followed him, and another, and then a whole group all together. They slipped through the dusk like painted shadows and were gone as quietly as they had come.

"Mohawks and Senecas!" Randall muttered through his teeth, "My trigger finger itches."

"You'd kill us all," McCall answered shortly. "There are a good two score of them."

They held their places without moving till darkness had completely fallen. Then they rose to their feet, and at the same moment the silence was broken by a new sound—the throb of witch drums. Dull and monotonous, drifting through the darkness from somewhere close at hand, the pulsating rhythm was eerie and strange. Then they could hear a low chant.

Slowly a red glow appeared between the trees, the gleam of a fire. As it grew stronger they could see a ring of seated figures silhouetted black against the ruddy glow. They swayed from side to side as they chanted, and ever the throb of the drums continued unbroken. Above the deep chant rose a shrill wailing.

"Hark to the Eries!" Black Beaver's low whisper was scornful. "The people of the Cat squawl like their namesake."

"We've learned all we came to find out," McCall muttered. "Let's slip away while we can."

Like deeper shadows in the blackness they stole away from the menace that lay around the fire. When they had traveled a hundred yards the Oneida in the lead quickened his pace. An instant later there came a sharp crack. Big Ruyvven had incautiously trod on a fallen branch!

No one said a word, but from all his companions McCall heard the quick hiss

of intaken breath. They all knew what it would mean if that breaking branch had been heard by any of the Mohawk sentries. As they trotted swiftly away it seemed that the throb of the drums had taken on a new and more ominous rhythm.

III

HOUR by hour they traveled on at a steady trot, only pausing now and then for a brief period of listening. The Oneidas seemed tireless, but the riflemen were panting as they leaned heavily on their rifles.

Half way through the night they halted where the trees thinned out on a rock ridge overlooking the river. For minutes on end they stood still and listened. There was no sound but the ripple of the water below them, and the passing of some small animal in the dark. Once an owl hooted.

"Reckon we're safe now," Randall muttered in a whisper no louder than the rustle of leaves in the wind.

McCall shook his head. The forest was silent all around them, but some woodsmen's instinct still warned him of danger. Then the eldest Oneida, his crested head black against the stars, raised one arm to point out over the water.

"Someone is swimming the river above us," he said.

For an instant McCall could see nothing move on the black and star-strewn expanse of the river. Then the Oneida pointed again. A faint shape, the head of a swimming man, was just visible against the star-shine on the water. At the same moment Ruyvven hissed warningly and lifted his rifle. Something was moving along the river bank immediately below them!

The moon was just rising, and by its light McCall saw the head of a wolf. The animal's snout was lifted as though sniffing the air, and the head slowly turned toward them. A moment later another wolf joined the first, and then a third. As one of them slipped quietly across to another group of shadows, the short hairs tingled all along the back of McCall's neck. The thing had the body of a man! It was an Indian wearing the skin of a wolf over his head and shoulders. Black Beaver gripped his arm with fingers of iron.

"Andastes!" he hissed. "They scout for the Senecas. We have been tracked through the forest. Come!"

Stealthily they crept away from the river. In the next moment, even as they moved back toward the deeper woods, a war hatchet flashed in the moonlight. It struck the youngest Oneida squarely between the eyes.

Dark figures leaped at them from among the trees. A rifle crashed out, splitting the darkness with a tongue of flame. Another report sounded, and a third. A bullet seared McCall's cheek. A pair of painted Senecas, weird shapes in the dim moonlight, rustled at him with hatchets flashing. He shot the first at point blank range, then reversed his weapon and leaped aside. He lashed out with the butt and struck the hatchet from the Seneca's hand. An instant later the Iroquois had ducked under the swing of the clubbed rifle and closed with the rifleman, tripping him so that the two of them fell to the ground in a writhing struggle.

McCall tried to pin that oiled and slippery body beneath him. Even as he fought to keep the Seneca from getting his knife, he heard the sounds of other combats all around him. Randall was swearing through his teeth. Then the night became hideous with the fierce Oneida scalp yell as Black Beaver lifted his dripping hatchet aloft and sprang over his fallen antagonist. Big Ruyvven, shaking free from the men who swarmed about him, swung the stock of his heavy rifle and smashed the skull of the Seneca with whom McCall was struggling.

Then they were all running at top speed. Shrill yells sounded behind them, and the scattering crash of rifles. Bullets droned by or smacked into the trees. Once McCall thought that Big Ruyvven staggered, but the giant rifleman ran on with his long-legged stride.

THE trees were thinner as they swung up a long slope, and the moonlight guided them. Twisting and turning, they ran on while the tortured breath hissed through their teeth. McCall was reloading as they ran, pouring powder down the

barrel by guesswork and priming by touch. For an instant he stopped, spun about, and dropped on one knee. His long rifle crashed. A Seneca who had been bounding on their trail faltered in mid stride and crashed against a tree trunk. McCall was running again before the echoes of the shot had died out among the trees.

"Up the slope!" he panted. "They can't track us over bare rock."

Weary muscles and straining lungs weakened at last, and they slowed down to a steady dog-trot. The left side of McCall's face was stiff from dried blood. Not till the faint light of an overcast dawn came gliding between the trees did they halt with the knowledge that they were safe. They had taken a heavy toll from the war party, and the survivors had been unable to track their swift flight after they began to travel across rocky ground.

They halted by a small stream, dropping their packs without a word and sprawling on the moss. The two surviving Oneidas, unwearied after an all night flight, squatted on their heels and began to clean their weapons. Even in the turmoil of that brief melee in the night Black Beaver had taken a scalp, and he now began to braid and stretch the grisly thing.

Only Ruyvven had not relaxed with the others. He stood with his legs far apart, bent somewhat forward and leaning heavily on his rifle. In the strengthening light McCall noticed that the big Ranger's face was ashen.

"Ruyvven! Man, you've been hit!" The rifleman nodded slowly.

"Aye, a slight scratch," he said, but his tone was heavy. Then the grip of his hands loosened. The rifle fell aside and Ruyvven crashed forward to lie on his face The whole back of his leather hunting shirt was crimson with blood.

They propped him against a boulder and fetched a cap of water from the stream. It was all they could do. A man less strong would have dropped long before. His face was very pale, and there was a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth.

"You lads pull foot," he said in a failing voice. "Don't worry about me. Just leave my rifle close at hand."

"You'll be all right in a few minutes,"

McCall said. Ruyvven shook his head.

"No, Mac, my trail ends here. I've seen too many men die not to know the signs."

They said little. Randall's gaunt face seemed carved from old walnut as he crouched beside the dying man. The two Oneidas were watching the slope across the stream, their rifles resting on boulders, but they glanced back from time to time with compassion in their dark eyes. McCall washed his own shallow wound and smeared it over with balsam gum, then returned to squat on his heels beside Ruyvven.

"Don't let them scalp me," the dying man muttered. McCall touched his shoulder.

"Depend on us, old friend. The Iroquois will never lift your hair."

Ruyvven's eyes were glazing, and he was failing fast. His mind was wandering and he spoke in scattered snatches. He seemed to be hunting over old trails in distant forests. Just at the end his voice grew stronger. He fumbled for his rifle and raised on one elbow.

"The trail grows dim. Good hunting! *Hiro*—I have spoken!" he said— and died.

McCall stood up and pulled off his coonskin cap.

"We must bury him here," he said. "And in a grave that no one will ever see."

NEAR the bank of the stream was a big boulder. They rolled it aside, and then dug a grave in the soft soil with their knives and hatchets. As they removed the earth they threw it on a blanket. At last they wrapped Ruyvven in his own blanket and laid him in the shallow trench. McCall placed the dead man's rifle beside him.

"He would never feel at home without it," he said.

They filled in the grave and carefully relaced the moss and the boulder. When the surplus earth had been thrown into the stream, no one could tell that there was a grave in that place. No prowling Seneca or Erie would ever lift Ruyvven's scalp, no wolverine could push aside the boulder to disturb his bones. At once the others slung their packs and took up the trail once more.

For an instant they looked back at that unmarked grave. The two white men raised their arms, the Oneidas lifted their war hatchets.

"Salute — *Roya-neh!*" droned Black Beaver, rendering the honor due only to a chieftain and a noble.

It was mid-afternoon of a chill November day when the survivors of the scout at last swung along the Cherry Valley trail. Even in the two weeks they had been gone the hand of winter had come down upon the valley. Shocks of corn stalks stood brown in the fields, and the wind was biting.

An infantry post of the Connecticut men halted them for a moment on the trail a few hundred yards from the hamlet. The men wore tattered great-coats outside their uniforms, and one had half a ragged blanket pinned around his shoulders. Most wore woolen mittens. The sergeant in command showed his yellow teeth in a friendly grin.

"Welcome back to the settlements, Rangers. The rest of your crowd came in two days ago, and have been swilling ale at the commissary ever since."

"Did they report anything?"

"Mohawks on the banks of the Sacandaga. Reckon *they* won't hurt us none. How about you?"

"We saw some Iroquois war parties," McCall answered shortly. The details of his report must go first to Colonel Alden. The sergeant tucked his musket under his arm and blew on his cold hands.

"Wall," he drawled, "I reckon they're just skulking around. Where's the other Injun and your friend with the yellow hair?"

"Dead," McCall answered, and shouldered his rifle. The sergeant's quick glance probed them all, taking in the wound on McCall's cheek and the fresh scalps at Black Beaver's belt. His unshaven face lost its smile.

"Pass in," he said, and resumed his post.

As they moved up the road toward the fort, Randall spat scornfully.

"I see our fancy Colonel still posts his pickets right in the road," he said.

"Aye, there's no teaching a farmer."

"Maybe our news will change his mind."

The gates of the fort stood open as usual. The rest of the patrol swung off toward their cabin, but McCall continued on toward the headquarters hut. Half way there he met Phil Wagner who had commanded the other patrol.

"What news, Phil?" McCall asked. The stocky rifleman smiled wryly as he hooked his thumbs in his war-belt.

"Plenty of signs. Mohawks are thicker'n fleas on a Tory's dog, along the Sacandaga. But they're not raiding there. Seem to be moving south."

"Did you tell Colonel Alden?"

"Aye. He said not to go alarming the settlers with old wives' tales."

McCALL grunted and went on his way. He found Colonel Alden as precise and impatient as ever. He kept the rifleman waiting while he finished a letter and sanded the paper, then leaned back and fumbled for his snuff-box.

"Well, sir, I see you're back."

"Yes sir. I have to report Senecas in strength along the Susquehanna, with Eries and Andastes. Also traces of Butler's Rangers along the Ouleout. I regret to report the death of the rifleman Ruyvven, and the Oneida scout Small Fox."

"Very regrettable. But I see nothing strange about Iroquois warriors in the territory of the Long House."

"These were war parties on the move," sir. And the presence of Butler's Rangers is a very bad sign."

McCall made his report in full detail. He saw the staff officers, erect and soldierly in their blue uniforms, staring at his own soiled and travel stained buckskins. Their eyes were troubled. but the Colonel only grunted.

"Very well," he said at the end. "You may go. Give your men a few days rest. Be so kind as to refrain from alarming the settlers. This fort and garrison are ample to protect them."

McCall saluted and turned on his heel. He was only an ensign of riflemen, with no authority in this fort, and he could do no more than bring the facts to the officers in command. The rest was in their hands.

That evening McCall stopped in at the Wheeler cottage. The girl and her parents

welcomed him and set out a jug of Monongahela rum. After a while the rifleman brought the talk around to what was in his mind.

"I'd feel better if you people would move into the fort. At least at night."

The two women looked at Wheeler with nervous eyes, but the farmer only laughed. He blew out a cloud of tobacco smoke, and his eyes twinkled under their heavy white brows.

"Nonsense, rifleman! Forest running has gone to your head. Colonel Alden told me personally that it is safe for us to remain in our house."

"But father," the girl interposed, "if there should be a raid. . . ." Wheeler waved his long pipe in a gesture of finality.

"My mind is made up, daughter. We are far more comfortable here."

An hour later McCall stepped out into the night to make his way back to the fort. Black Beaver was waiting in the shadows.

"It is not wise to walk alone," he said. "There is blood on the moon."

Instinctively McCall glanced up at the pale crescent of a November moon. It looked peaceful and calm, but he shivered.

IV

FOR the next three days nothing disturbed the peaceful routine of life in Cherry Valley settlement. Just after dawn on the fourth day, Donald McCall strolled out toward the western side of the hamlet. It was the morning of the eleventh of November, 1778.

The sky was bleak and overcast, and a chill drizzle was falling. McCall wrapped the lock of his rifle in a piece of deer skin and walked on, his head bent against the thin rain. The cold wind fluttered the thrums on sleeves and leggins. Seen through the faint mist that filled all the hollow, the village of Cherry Valley looked lonely and forlorn. The rifleman trudged steadily onward over the muddy road where the pools were rimmed with thin ice that crackled under his moccasins.

By the westward sentry post, a few yards beyond the Gault cottage, McCall found Colonel Alden and two other officers. They wore long blue cloaks which the wind whipped about their mud-stained boots, and their faces were pinched with the cold. The half dozen Continentals on guard were stamping their feet and swinging their arms. The breath of all the men rose white and cloudy against the mist.

As McCall came up beside them, and dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, he heard James Gault's quavering old voice lifted in complaint.

"I tell ye I'm nervous, Colonel. I'm fidgety as a cat with kittens. I was one of the original settlers in this here valley, and I reckon I know the ways of these Iroquois varmints as well as any man."

"I have just sent out an infantry patrol, Master Gault." Alden's voice was tired. "We shall undoubtedly hear from them before long."

A faint sound drifted on the air from the westward, rising above the drip of the rain and the creak of leather as men shifted on their feet. They all turned to peer into the misty shroud that half obscured the forest to the westward. The sound grew steadily louder. It was the dull clatter of furiously galloping hoofs! Somehow there was a definite note of alarm in that hollow thudding, hint of disaster. McCall shifted his rifle and slid the cover off the lock.

Then a lone horseman appeared, bulking large through the mist. He was a farmer in homespun, long hair flying on the wind of his swift progress. Mud spurted from under the hoofs of his galloping horse. As he came closer, they saw that he was covered with mud and that one arm hung useless while his shoulder was covered with blood. The rider dragged at the reins with his one good arm till his horse slithered to a stop.

"The Iroquois come!" he panted through bleeding lips. "Butler's in the forest with a thousand men. They raided Beaverdam before dawn. They come!"

An instant later the horseman had gone on, his bucketing horse splashing up the trail toward the fort. Old James Gault ran for his cabin at top speed, his unsteady voice lifted in a shrill cry of alarm. Colonel Alden's ruddy face had gone strangely pale. The officers with him reached for the pistols in their belts. Then the mists thinned out, and all along the edge of the

forest McCall saw dark shapes slipping forward with muskets at the trail. The woods were swarming with men!

McCall flung his rifle to his shoulder, and fired as soon as the sights came on line. The dull crashes of the muskets at the sentry posts sounded a moment later. Hundreds of rifles spoke in reply, while puffs of white smoke broke out all along the edge of the forest. Then arose a wild and fierce yelling. It was the battle cry of an enraged nation, as the strength of the Long House of the Iroquois swept down upon Cherry Valley through the thinning mist.

ONE of the soldiers at the sentry post lay coughing in the mud of the road. Another had dropped his musket to clutch his thigh with both hands. He slipped down to a sitting position and rocked from side to side. McCall ran at top speed for the shelter of a tree trunk a few yards behind where he had been standing.

The rifleman's lips were a thin line, and his eyes were bitter. God help the settlers now! Well—he'd done his best. The ramrod rattled in the barrel as he reloaded in furious haste.

From his shelter McCall saw a wave of painted Cayugas sweep down upon the survivors of the sentry post. For a few moments muskets flailed and war hatchets gleamed, then the Iroquois swept on while the staccato Mohawk scalp yell rose on the air. A Mohawk chief crushed the skull of the wounded Continental with a blow of his death maul, and ripped the scalp loose with a fierce cry of triumph.

Black uniforms with orange facing were moving forward on the right, where Butler's Rangers were closing in for the kill. Rangers and renegades, Mohawks and Cayugas, the entire warrior strength of the savage Senecas, the whole yelling horde swept down upon Cherry Valley settlement like a tidal wave of death and destruction.

McCall retreated before them, shifting from tree to tree, firing steadily. He was cursing monotonously through his teeth. Colonel Alden had run toward the fort but had been cut off by a swarm of Senecas. When he saw that there was no escape, he squared his shoulders and drew his sword. McCall, firing into the mass of Indians be-

hind, wondered what was in the doomed man's mind at that moment.

Ichabod Alden had brought disaster upon the village by his stubbornness, but at least he was not a coward. He faced the yelling onset with a faint smile on his face, the naked sword in his hand. Then a Seneca hurled his hatchet. The next time McCall looked that way, a blue-clad figure lay still in the mud and a crested Iroquois was waving the freshly severed scalp at the fort. The rifleman fired with a snarl, and the Seneca went sprawling beside his victim.

The uproar had become terrific. A ring of flame seemed to encircle the valley as nearly a thousand men closed in, and the swirling powder smoke mingled with the mist and the falling rain. The roar of musketry was continuous, and above it sounded the coughing grunts of the several brass cannon set in the stockade of the fort. McCall brushed the rain from his eyes and continued to fire with a steady deliberation. Somewhere across the settlemen he could hear a Ranger's conch horn persistently calling, calling.

Spurts of flame stabbed through the loopholed shutters of the Gault house as a horde of Mohawks rushed at it. The smash of their musket butts against the door was a steady thunder. From where he crouched McCall could see the door splinter and fall inward, while old James Gault appeared in the opening with his clubbed rifle in his hands. He leaped at the Iroquois with a bellow of rage, but they bore him down with knives and hatchets swinging. A moment later the women of the family were dragged out and bound.

A Mohawk swinging a blazing torch bounded into the house. Dark smoke curled up from under the eaves, and a ruddy glow began to flicker through the cracks in the shutters. A torch was tossed into the haystack which smoked and smoldered and then burst into bright flame. Sharp, acrid smoke drifted along close to the ground.

A PLATOON of Tories in black uniforms advanced at the double, and McCall fell back once more. Other houses and haystacks were afire. Smoke was rolling up on every hand, and the red glow of the flames added to the horror of the scene. He passed a Continental soldier, sprawled with his head in a puddle. He had been shot through the forehead, and the muddy water was slowly turning red. The rifleman jumped over the body and ran on. Then he saw a puff of power smoke drift away from one of the loopholes of the Wheeler house. The family had not been able to reach the fort!

McCall ran at top speed across the trampled ground, while bullets sang through the air or kicked up little spurts of mud around him. A mounted renegade tried to ride him down, but he parried the slashing broadsword with the barrel of his rifle and fired from the hip. As the renegade swayed in the saddle, McCall bounded ahead once more. As he neared the cabin, a rifle crashed through one of the loopholes and a Mohawk crouching nearby bounded in the air like a stricken deer. Then the door opened wide enough for him to slip inside.

It was Sue Wheeler who stood by the door, a smoking rifle in her hand. Her hair hung loose about her dark dress.

"You are more than welcome," she said as he slammed the door behind him and slid heavy bars into place, "Father is firing from the back windows."

"Couldn't you make the fort?"

"No, we were cut off."

A pair of candles burned on the table in the center of the room, the flames seeming unnaturally tall in the drifting powder smoke that filled the cabin. The light was very dim. Mistress Wheeler was loading two spare muskets at the table, and she glanced up to give the rifleman a wan smile.

Sue took one of the muskets and stepped to the nearest loop-hole. Her slender body jumped under the recoil of the heavy weapon, but she stepped back and went to the table for another musket. The powder smoke drifted back through the slit of the loophole.

McCall was firing coolly and steadily now, aiming at a group of Mohawks who were ever creeping closer to them. In the moments of reloading, as he stood with his legs wide apart and the butt of his rifle on the floor, a strange detachment came to

him. He wondered how things were going at the fort and if all his men were safe. They could have no idea where he was. He was conscious of the wet leather of his hunting shirt clinging to his back, and the slow drip of water from his sodden thrums to the floor.

From his loophole McCall could see the swift disaster that came upon the Wells family. Four or five rifles had held the house inviolate till a horde of renegades dismounted and swept the loopholes with concentrated fire. Many of the Tories were stripped and painted like Iroquois. Then they rose all together and rushed for the house like a howling pack of timber wolves.

John Wells was killed on his own doorstep. His brother went down, fighting to the last and pierced by a dozen wounds. The shrill shouting of the renegades sounded wild and inhuman as it rose above the steady roll of the firing. The two women of the house, the three children, the servant—all were dragged out and killed in the front yard.

McCall fired and loaded and fired again while the barrel of his rifle grew hot in his hands.

ONE of the Wells girls broke away and ran for safety with her long hair streaming out behind her, but she was caught and killed within a dozen yards. Even the Iroquois were not as bad as these white renegades. The flame tipped fury of the Tories and Iroquois was writing a new and terrible chapter in the stormy history of the frontier.

Once, when the pressure against their own house had lessened momentarily, McCall went back to the kitchen. From one of the loopholes he could see the fort. The log parapet was ringed in smoke as the Continentals fired by volley, and the cannon were crashing steadily. Rangers and Iroquois ringed in close. The smoke of their muskets burst out in white puffs, and then drifted away to mingle with the pall of mist and smoke that overlay all Cherry Valley. The fort still held out—but over a hundred people had been unable to gain the shelter of the stockade.

Henry Wheeler, his beard black with

powder stains, glanced at the rifleman with tortured eyes as he fitted a new flint to his musket. He was bleeding from one shoulder.

"Looks like the end," he muttered. "It was good of you to come to help us."

"We may hold out," McCall said with an assurance he did not feel. Wheeler shook his head.

"Not a chance. My powder is running low. Yours?"

McCall glanced at his powder horn. "No more than a dozen charges," he said grimly.

"No more than a dozen charges."

A renewed burst of firing from the front of the house, and a shout from the girl, sent McCall running back to the other room. Even as he stepped through the door, coughing in the smoke, the heavy outer portal began to shake and quiver under the impact of steel shod rifle butts. A glance out a loophole showed Mohawks swarming all along the log wall.

McCall thrust the muzzle of his rifle out the opening and fired at a war chief painted in scarlet who stood a few feet away. The door was splintering and one hinge had given way. So this was the end! He stepped back and flung aside his rifle, drawing hatchet and knife from their beaded sheaths at his belt. Even as Henry Wheeler ran in from the kitchen, the door split from top to bottom and then fell inward.

A flood of misty daylight poured into the dimness of the shuttered cabin. It shone on the oiled crests of a score of Mohawks who poured in the open door with their ruddy bodies glistening from the wet. McCall met them with shout, dodging a swinging hatchet and thrusting home with his knife. Then a death maul knocked him flat with a glancing blow that dazed but did not stun.

As McCall struggled to rise, he saw a pair of sinewy Mohawks twist the rifle from the girl's grasp and twist her arms behind her. He saw Henry Wheeler go down with an Iroquois hatchet in his skull and two slain Indians to bear him company on the Long Trail. Then, as he managed to struggle to his knees, someone struck him over the head with a rifle butt and everything went black.

V

WHEN McCall recovered consciousness he lay on the muddy ground near the road. There was a throbbing ache in his skull. His wrists and ankles were tied, his weapons were gone. For a few minutes he lay motionless, almost wishing he had been killed outright. The tales of what happened to prisoners were not pleasant to hear.

The sky was darker and the day bleaker than ever as the prisoners were gathered together under a guard of Senecas. It had begun to snow. The white flakes drifted down through the smoke and began to form a thin carpet on the ground. Still the ripple and crash of musketry continued.

Rolling half over, in an attempt to keep the snow from his face, McCall saw that the Wheeler house was all afire and half consumed. Even as he watched the roof fell in, shooting a shower of sparks up into the falling snow. The whole village was ablaze. Houses and barns sheds and hayricks, all were burning. Dense clouds of smoke were rolling across the snowy fields that were dotted with fallen bodies. The whole valley was a desolation of fire and massacre.

Then he saw a neglected hunting knife lying on the ground a few feet away! Inch by inch he crawled toward it, and at last his fingers touched the steel. It would not be easy to cut thongs with his hands so tightly bound, but it could be done. Then he saw a Cayuga striding toward him, and hastily managed to slip his knife inside his belt at the back where the hunting shirt would hide it.

The Cayuga cut the bonds from McCall's ankles and pulled him to his feet. The captives were being collected into one group. The cannon at the fort were still booming steadily over the rattling crash of the volleys, but the swarms of savages made any sortie impossible.

Drooping and listless in their bonds, the prisoners stood silent. The horror of the massacre lay heavy upon all of them. Now and then a woman moaned softly. A wounded Continental with his face pallid and his eyes half closed stood next to McCall. The slow drip from his wounds fell

on the snow in crimson drops.

The swirling snow fell ever more thickly, and the wind was colder. As another group of prisoners came up McCall saw Sue Wheeler among them. Her wrists and arms were bound behind her with a heavy stick holding the elbows back. The Seneca executioner painted dead black to the waist in token of his office, fingered the girl's long hair but she twisted away from him. Her eyes were expressionless, but as she saw the rifleman they brightened momentarily. They stood together on the edge of the mass of captives.

"Have you seen anything of my mother?" she asked through pale lips.

"No."

"I hear she is with another group of prisoners. The Wells family were all killed."

"I know. I saw it from my loophole."

"Reverend Dunlop's life was saved by the Indian, Little Aaron, who was once his pupil," the girl continued in the same toneless voice. "But his wife was killed. Mr. Mitchell's family were all killed—a Tory named Newberry murdered the little girl after the Iroquois spared her. Mrs. Dickson hid her children safely but was killed when she came back for milk. I—I saw her scalp. She had long red hair."

There sounded the slow beat of hoofs, and Walter Butler, the Tory leader, rode past. He was muffled in his cloak, his thin face pallid as ever and his dark eyes staring straight before him. Perhaps he was already seeing those ghosts of murdered women and children that were always to haunt him thereafter.

GUTTURAL commands rang out along the line, the Seneca guards closed in and the pitiful column of captives began to move. Past the burning houses they went, and past some others which were now only smoldering heaps of ashes. At the edge of the forest many of the captives turned for a last look back at Cherry Valley, but the Iroquois guards pushed them forward.

In the face of a blinding snowstorm the column plodded off, straight into the wilderness, while their sacked and ravaged homes smoked and smoldered behind them.

The knife was still safe in McCall's belt. He had been stripped of weapons when captured and they would not think to search him again. The knife was safe—but it was no use to him at the moment. Perhaps he would find a chance to escape during the night. Meanwhile every step was taking him deeper into the territory of the Dark Empire.

The Senecas ever urged greater speed, but the condition of the prisoners held the column down to a slow pace. Sue Wheeler walked at McCall's side. Her lips were blue from the cold, her hair was full of snow. He knew that the tightness of her bonds must be painful, but she uttered no complaint.

The wounded Continental died during the afternoon, died on his feet and still moving till the last. A Cayuga pulled the body out of the trail and left it laying in the snow. An old woman named Cannon had been steadily failing, and when it was evident she could not go on, the war-party executioner stepped forward. A few flecks of snow were clinging to his black paint as he drew his hatchet from its sheath. McCall turned his head away. A moment later the executioner trotted back to his place, wiping the blade of his ax on a bit of moss.

At dusk they halted in a clearing. The snow no longer fell, but big patches of it lay beneath the bare trees. While most of the prisoners dropped in their tracks, Seneca sentries trotted out on all sides.

Soon several fires were crackling and blazing in the twilight. The prisoners were unbound and allowed to gather around the fires. Some of the women had not even a cloak, that cold November night, and there was not a blanket or covering of any sort in the lot. McCall went to sit beside the Wheeler girl.

"Keep close to me when they tie us up again," he whispered. The girl nodded silently, rubbing her bruised wrists. After a moment she said slowly:

"Poor father! But—perhaps he is luckier than we." McCall nodded wordlessly. He knew, far better than the girl, what it would mean if the renegades started to torture the prisoners. She spoke again:

"Where are they taking us?"

"Westward. Into the heart of the Long House. I hear we are to be taken to Kanedaseago."

"If we live to arrive there!"

The prisoners received a scanty meal of parched corn and a few pieces of smoked meat. The pain in McCall's bruised head had subsided to a dull ache, but there was a big lump where the rifle butt had struck him. He was just stretching out to a more comfortable position by the fire when a dozen of the guards rose to their feet.

A SENECA walked over and motioned Sue to rise. Wearily she stood up. He crossed her wrists and bound them securely with a rawhide thong, knotting the cord so tightly she bit her lips. Another tied McCall's hands behind him, then both were bound to the nearest tree. In a few minutes all the prisoners had been secured in the same manner. More wood was thrown on the fires.

The red light shone on the painted Iroquois sitting around the flames and blinking like cats, and on the pale prisoners bound to their trees.

The ground vibrated, a challenge rang out, and a column of men in black uniforms swung into the clearing. Their musket barrels gleamed, their canteens bobbed against their buttocks. Then Walter Butler rode into the circle of firelight, dismounting and giving his horse to an orderly.

Watching the renegade leader's pale face, McCall wondered about his sanity. The man must be mad!

More men moved along the trail, and the Mohawks passed through the clearing behind their great war-chief Thayendanegea, sometimes called Joseph Brandt. Keepers of the Eastern Gate of the Long House, light in color and noble in stature, they were different from the more savage Senecas. Their beaded sporrans swung as they marched with rifles at the trail, their heads were thrown forward.

The hours passed, and the clearing was deserted except for the prisoners and the dozing guards. The fires mostly burned down to glowing heaps of coals, but were revived from time to time as one of the Mohawks threw fresh branches upon

them. Dry twigs rattled as the gusty wind swept through the wilderness, and gaunt branches tossed against the moon. It was very cold.

The fires burned low, the sentries were changed again, and the night drew near to an end. A few more scattered flakes of snow drifted past on the chill wind. It was a night of torture for the half frozen captives, a dark sequel to the massacre which would make the name of Cherry Valley always stand as a symbol of ruthless cruelty. Then a twig snapped in the forest somewhere behind McCall!

The forest runner twisted to the side and looked back. The faint glow of the dying fires penetrated only a few yards into the forest. Beyond that point the trunks of a few trees stood dark against the patches of snow, and then there was only blackness. As he strained his eyes to catch some sign of movement, one of the patches of snow was obscured for an instant. That was all— but he knew that someone was creeping stealthily toward him.

ONE of the Mohawks stirred restlessly in his sleep, muttered, and sat up. After a moment he threw aside his blanket and rose to his feet. For a moment he stood listening, then drew his hatchet and walked slowly toward McCall. The rifleman closed his eyes and breathed slowly.

For an instant the Mohawk hesitated beside McCall. Then he turned and walked straight into the shadows of the forest. By turning his head the rifleman could see the swift and silent drama that immediately followed.

Five strides the Mohawk took into the darkness, a sixth, and then halted. At that instant a dark shape seemed to rise from the ground at his feet. A hatchet flashed in the starlight, but another man leaped forward to seize the Mohawk's arm before he could strike. By their silhouette against the snow McCall could see that one of the prowlers was an Indian and the other a tall man in fringed buckskin. He began to saw furiously at his bonds.

In a moment it was over. The Mohawk lay still on the ground, and one of his assailants was thrusting a knife into the moss to clean it. There had been almost no sound,

and the other guards slept undisturbed by the fire. Then one of the men glided to the rear of McCall's tree. As he felt the cold steel of a knife blade against his numbed hands, and the cords about his wrists fell away, a familiar voice whispered:

"Be silent, oh, my younger brother!" The words had been the faintest of whispers, and in the same tone McCall replied:

"Black Beaver! Well done! Free the girl, too."

The Oneida's knife flashed again, and Sue was free from the tree. Her hands were still tied before her, but without stopping for that the three of them glided back into the shadows surrounding the clearing. After a few strides the lean figure of Long John Randall loomed before them. He gripped McCall's hand wordlessly, then thrust out to him the war-belt taken from the slain Mohawk.

After fifty yards they came upon a dead Seneca, one of the sentries. The younger Oneida met them a little further along. He smiled with a sudden flash of teeth and handed the other two their rifles.

"Phil Wagner waits for us across the stream," Randall muttered. "He has a rifle for you."

They crossed a narrow stream that chattered in the starlight, and moved up a long slope. A minute later they met Wagner. The stocky rifleman held up his hand in a warning gesture, then pointed toward a clear space in the forest ahead of them. A single horseman sat his mount not fifty yards away.

"One of McGail's riders," Wagner whispered. At once Black Beaver handed his rifle to the other Oneida, set his knife between his teeth, and slipped away from them.

There was still no alarm from behind them, and every minute counted. The slow passage of time seemed interminable. The mounted sentry was no more than a black silhouette against the starlight. He sat his horse close under the trees with only an occasional slight turn of the head to show that he was awake. The barrel of the carbine across his saddle gleamed faintly, his cloak stirred on the wind.

The watchers crouched in the underbrush could see nothing moving. There was no sign of the Oneida, but by now he must be close at hand. The frosty breath of horse and man rose steaming on the cold air. The sentry's head nodded, and he jerked it upright again. At that same instant part of the shadow gathered in the tree above seemed to detach itself.

SOMETHING dropped on the sentry from above, a dark and terrible shape that gripped his throat in one hand while a knife flashed in the other. McCall and Randall ran at top speed across the clearing. The two locked figures swayed on the horse and fell to the ground.

The horse snorted, hesitated, and started to move away. McCall caught him by the trailing bridle. A moment later Black Beaver had risen to his feet. He sheathed his knife and waved his hand. The trail was clear before them!

"What about the horse?" Randall asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Let the girl ride and we'll make better time," McCall snapped. At his nod the girl swung up to the saddle, her still fettered hands gripping the pommel.

They swung eastward in a broad curve, with freedom before them. The two Oneidas trotted ahead, the three riflemen strode along even with the horse. McCall turned to Randall.

"Did the fort hold out?"

"Aye, but the settlement is a ruin. Skulking Tories and Cayugas still snarl at the stockade, but the four of us slipped over the palisade after dark and managed to get through to look for you. They say the Mohawk Valley militia under old Jacob Klock are on the march now, and some Continentals under Gordon."

They had gone half a mile, and the eastern sky was paling fast, when a single musket shot rang out far behind them. Then came the notes of a bugle, and the shrill blast of a Ranger's whistle. Their escape had been discovered! McCall tightened his belt.

"Stole away!" he said. "The hunt is on! Pull foot, lads. We've still a long way to go, but they'll not catch us now."

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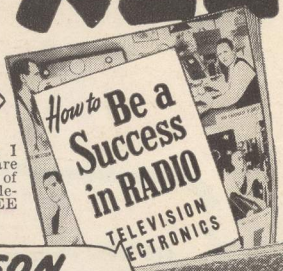

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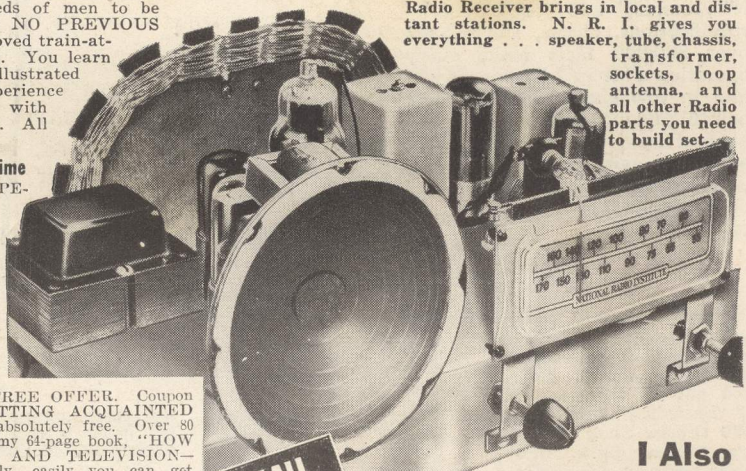

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