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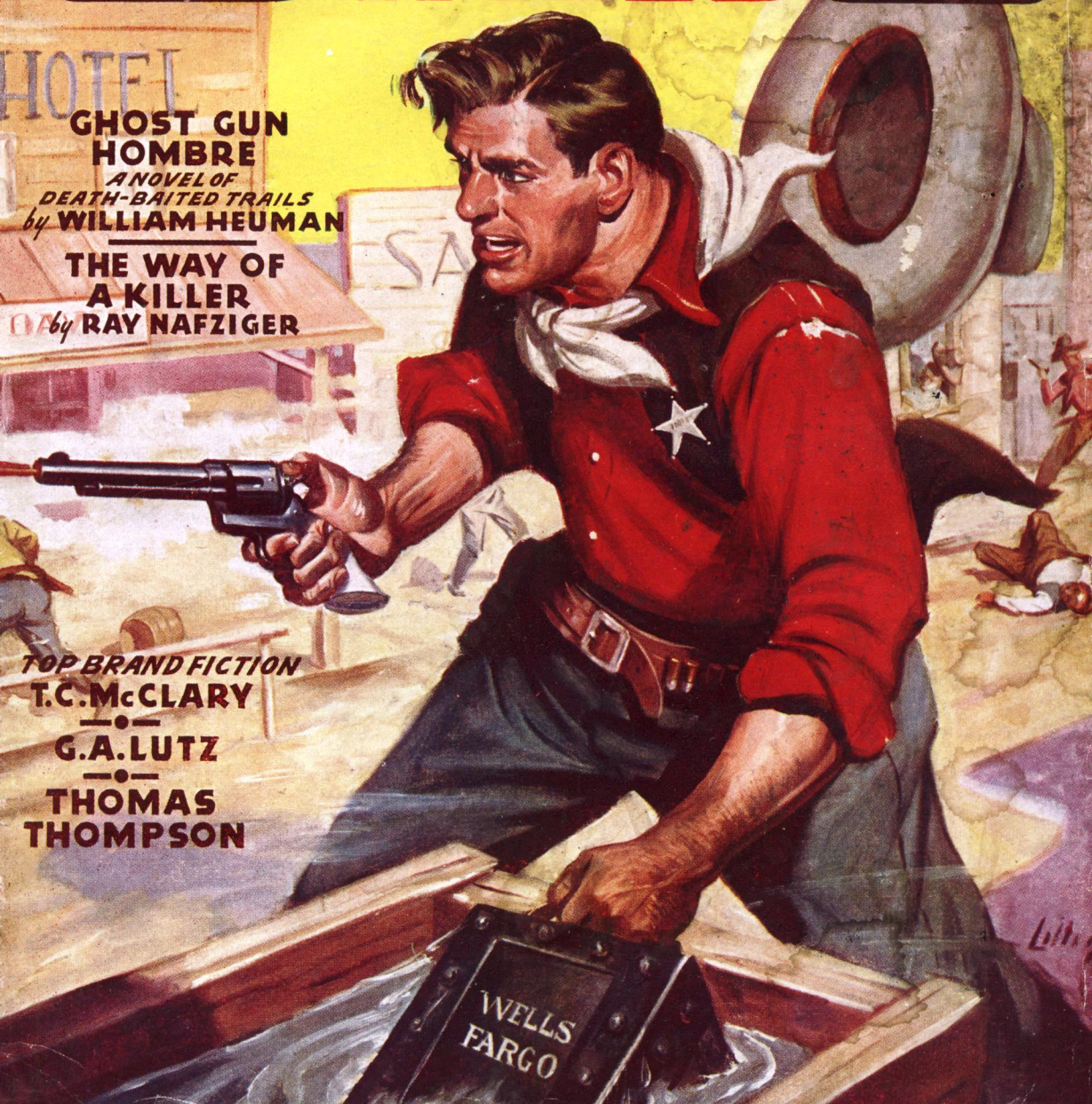
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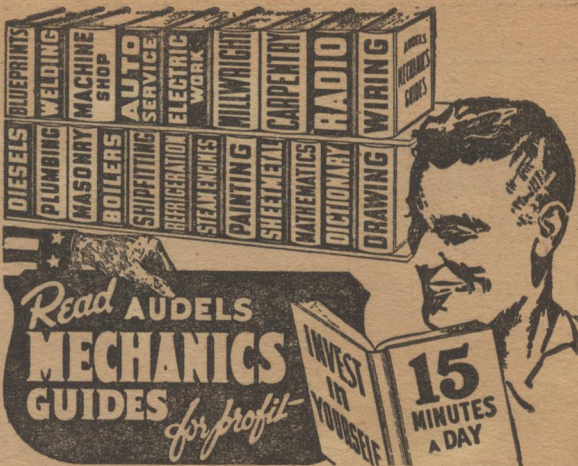
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● ON THE TRAIL ●



MAYBE some of you range-riding hombres will like to horn in on a little argument! It seems a gent named "Duke" Duncanson has risen up in his saddle and has taken violent exceptions to some of the palaver which has appeared in our CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ talkfest, written by Hallack McCord. For further palaver, we are giving you "The Duke's" letter, with Mr. McCord's answer to come.

What do you think, gents? "The Duke" writes as follows:

Gentlemen:

As an old-timer, who can never forget the smell of frying sowbelly, cow dung, saddle leather, bathless sweat, sage brush and mountain air, I am going to break my law of silence and comment on a special feature printed in your January issue, more in amusement than any attempt to correct you.

Business has separated me and kept me from the range for more than thirty years, and I am aware that there have been many evolutions, digressions corruptions and silly misunderstandings that have crept in, both in the garb and speech of the old cow country of long ago.

"Brooklyn Cowboys" and "Sears Roebuck Outfits," with the influx of strange dialects from the far east, adenoids and lack of palates, have changed much of the range appearance speech and customs, as well as mutilated, degenerated and other wise distorted old range sayings, terms and definitions. And the pity of it all is disheartening, not to say hand-itchy for the six-gun.

On page 89, Hallack McCord has undertaken to give us the real lowdown on 20 ex-

amples of range blubber, and I am bound to wonder where he managed to find many of the definitions or explanations he has furnished with such glib authority, and then has the guts to expect old-timers as well as clod hoppers, to gauge their range savvy by them. If I were in his boots, I'd be looking for a very small hole to crawl into. He undertook a very dangerous subject, which, in the old days, would sure make gunsmoke stink, if he made as many mistakes as he has in this "wise-up" of his.

Giving him full benefit of 30 years of degeneracy of the range and all that has happened to dudize the old cowpoke and his language, he is still subject to be thought a maverick, without brand or rope mark. He has been nibbling loco weed or maybe taking a "snow-slide."

With nothing else to do at the moment, and with curiosity about my own score (innocent as a sheepman's baa), I first read over the twenty examples and then took up my pencil and wrote them off with as much familiarity as if the 30 years that intervene had not been.

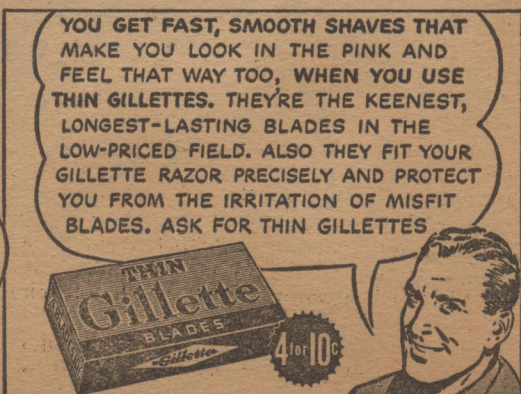
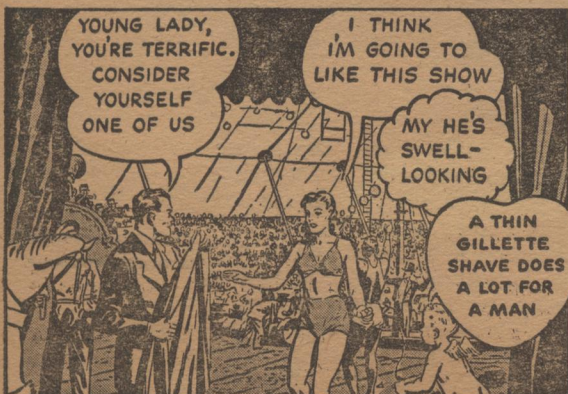
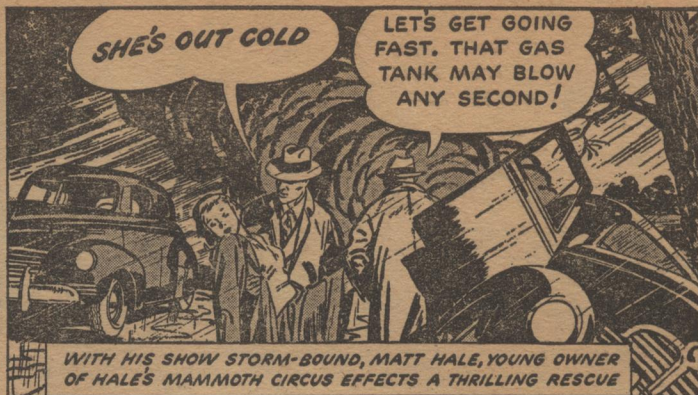
Then, still gullible and without suspicion, I turned to the "Answers" to check my score. Well, what a ruckus there would have been in the old days—

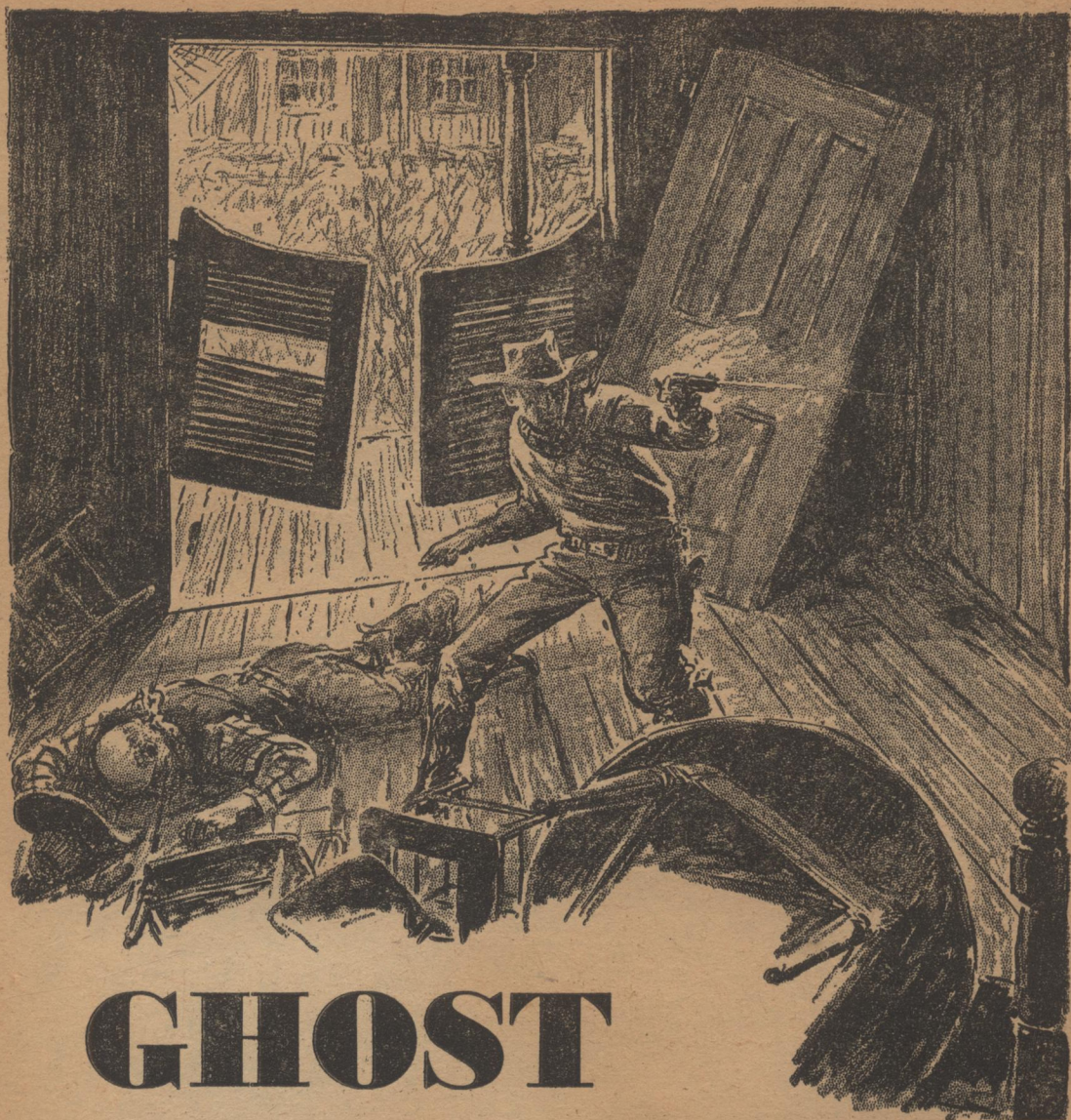
But to calm down a bit first, I have a couple of things to add to his list, that he skipped—among other things.

1—"For instance, what was *really* meant by "Cow-shy?" 2—"Waddy?" 3—"Cow-poke?" 4—"Tail-up?" 5—"Long-loop?" 6—"Long-iron?" 7—"Creepier-loop?" 8—"Toss a half-hitch?"

Ask your Mr. McCord—at this point—to
(Continued on page 27)

ILL WIND FOR MATT, UNTIL...





GHOST GUN HOMBRE

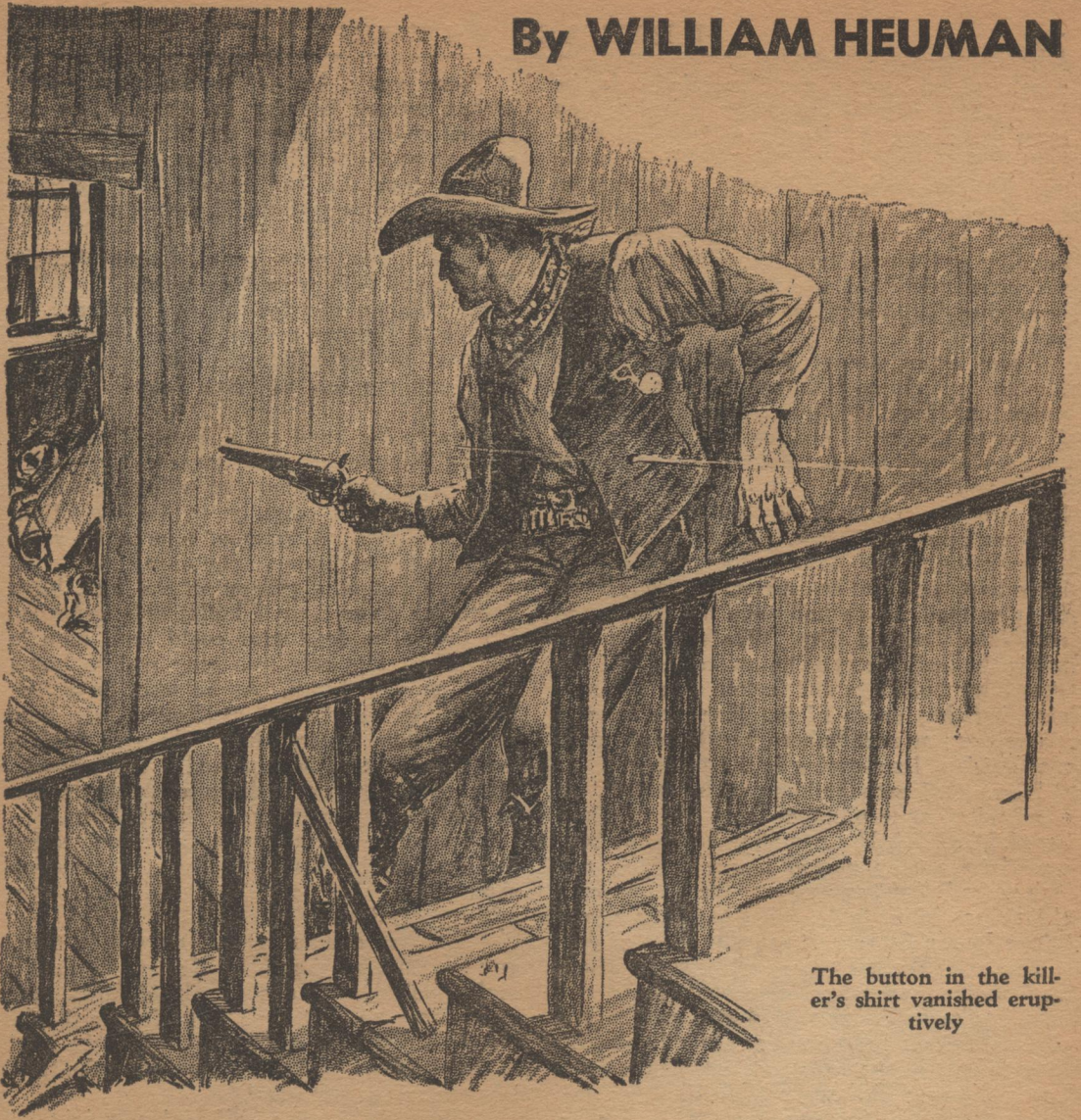
CHAPTER ONE

Rest Yore—Bones

HE CAME upon the town sprawling across the sparse valley floor, the wide, weed-covered main street dying out near the approach to the north pass. False-fronted buildings lined the main street, with a squat, two-story structure facing the square. The late afternoon sun glared red on the remaining panes of glass in this largest building, and Logan Starr, lighting a Mexican cigarette, studied it speculatively.

Several of the buildings had brick chimneys, but no smoke curled up from them. A hundred tumbledown shacks occupied the east wall of the valley. Several tall, circular chimneys

By WILLIAM HEUMAN



The button in the killer's shirt vanished eruptively

edged up from low, massive buildings on the west rim and these, Logan Starr surmised, had been the stamp mills of Carnival City, twenty-five years earlier the leading silver producer of the West.

Unhurriedly, he finished his cigarette, one leg swinging out of the stirrup, the black horse waiting patiently for him to resume this journey which had already carried them nine hundred miles from the Panhandle of Texas. In the mountains, they'd passed through many ghost towns, but none of them as large as Carnival City, or so well preserved. The high atmosphere seemed to have dealt kindly with the main structures, although wind and storm had caused havoc among the hastily thrown-up miners' shacks on the east slope.

This is it, Starr thought idly. Noting the

||
When Logan Starr rode north he was looking for a town full of ghosts—the kind who could testify to his father's powdersmoke past!
||

dozen saloon fronts along the main street, he knew that Carnival City had been a hell-raising town in its day. Without trouble he immediately picked out the big Carleton House hotel, and the Nevada saloon directly opposite it on the square. A block down from the saloon, wedged in between the Wells-Fargo bank building and a two story boarding house, was the little cubbyhole of a building which had been the Carnival City sheriff's office, and jail.

Room seven, second floor of the Carleton House. . . . He noticed that it was a walk of about one hundred feet from the Carleton House to the sheriff's office and tried to picture a tall, red-haired man swinging down that busy street, heavy Colt six-gun on his right hip, hat cocked back on his head, an infectious grin on his face. . . .

Squinting up into the sun, Logan slipped his loose boot back into the stirrup and rode down the dim trail which had once been the main road into Carnival City. Weeds grew a foot tall in the main street as he passed the first few straggling buildings and looked over the sagging batwing doors of the Emperor Saloon. There were no sounds here, and Logan's black made little noise stepping in the soft earth.

He studied each building with interest, remembering some of them from the talk he'd heard. The High Hat gambling house had been owned by a man named Darcy Phipps, and Phipps had died twenty-seven years ago with eight slugs in his body. That had been a year before Logan Starr first saw the light of day.

The brick Wells-Fargo bank building, whose iron shutters now sagged on rusted hinges, had been the scene of four hold-ups, and in one of them three bandits had been killed outright, their twisted bodies lying just outside the door. Logan Starr pulled up outside the tiny jail house, hesitated for one instant, trying to decide whether he would inspect it now, and then rode on directly to the Carleton House hotel.

HE WALKED the black down a side alley to a ramshackle barn in the rear of the hotel. He was leading the horse into one of the dusty, cobwebbed stalls when the fresh odor of manure reached his nostrils. Frowning, he walked up along the line of stalls until he came to one where a horse had recently been tied. The droppings were not more than half a day old.

Tying up the black, he went out into the barnyard again and stared up at the rows of sightless windows in the Carleton House. Tatters of shades flapped in two of the second floor windows. There was a rear door leading into what Logan took to be the kitchen. He went through this door, stepping over piles of rubbish, and entered the main lobby.

There was a bar off to the right with a broken mirror backing it. Card tables and broken chairs lay about the big room. Logan grinned at himself in the dusty mirror as he walked past the bar toward the staircase. Strips of red carpeting still showed on several of the steps.

Second floor, room seven, Logan thought. Third board back from the window.

He was on the fourth step up from the bottom of the stairs when a gun cracked out in front of the building. He heard a man gasp and cry out as boots sounded on the porch.

Frozen, his hand on a heavy Navy Colt, Logan Starr waited and listened. He heard a man staggering against the wall of the hotel, and then saw a hand grasp the top of the batwing doors. A moment later a body fell through as the doors swung open.

Logan caught a glimpse of the face, blood streaming down from a bullet hole under the left eye. The dead man could have been in his fifties. His hair was gray and he had a short, grayish beard. As he went down, his hat fell to the floor, revealing a bald head with a fringe of gray hair. He was shabbily dressed and could have passed as a prospector. His boots were worn, down at the heels, and he had on a patched gray flannel shirt.

Without moving a muscle, Logan waited for the next act in this little drama, no emotion showing on his lean, browned face, eyes faintly quizzical.

A thin-faced man came through the door, gun in hand, his mouth set tightly. He had a high, hooked nose and a pair of bleak blue eyes. For the first time Logan noticed that the dead man was not armed, while the man in the doorway held a short-barreled Smith & Wesson in his left hand.

Deliberately, Logan shifted his weight on the stairs to make them creak. The lean man in the doorway whirled on him like a cat, his mouth opening in surprise and fear, yellowish teeth bared in a snarl, like an animal caught in a trap.

The Smith & Wesson spun around, leveled and Logan saw death in the stranger's eyes. He fell back against the wall as the Smith & Wesson roared again and felt a slug tear through his vest.

He drew the Navy, swiftly, almost without effort, fired once, aiming at the second button on the killer's shirt. The button vanished eruptively and the thin-faced man fell back against the door sill and slid to the floor, his mouth working spasmodically, his light blue shirt staining red.

Logan Starr went down the steps in two bounds and broke out on the porch, gun in hand. The street was empty, bathed in the late afternoon sunshine. The dead men's horses

were nowhere in sight—yet the two could not have materialized out of thin air.

The nape of his neck tingling, Logan stared up and down the street, and then from an upper window of a building some distance to his right, he saw a puff of smoke. A slug embedded itself in the porch pillar a few inches from his head. Another gun opened up on him from the doorway of the building, and he caught a glimpse of a man's hat.

He fired a fast shot toward the door and then jumped back into the hotel lobby. Leaping over the murdered man, he raced through the kitchen and out into the stableyard. He could hear a voice calling up the street—a voice without words. A third gun had come into the play and they were placing shots through the hotel windows and over the batwing doors, thinking he was putting up a fight from that point.

Logan led the black out behind the barn, mounted, and galloped down another weed-grown back street, away from the gunfire. At the far end of town he made a wide circuit, heading for the pass which had brought him here.

Silence took over behind him—a thick, ominous silence—and he could not rid his mind of the heavy thought of the two dead men lying in the lobby of the Carleton House hotel.

There was no pursuit, yet he was convinced that the men in Carnival City had watched him make that circuit and ride out. There was no other way out of the valley, unless a man wanted to climb the ridges up beyond the miners' cabins and the pass was clearly visible from the main street of Carnival.

HE CUT left abruptly, made a mile circle back toward the valley. It was almost dusk when he crept up to the rim of the ridge and looked down on Carnival City for the second time that day.

Nothing moved, but he saw a light beginning to glow in one of the windows of the Carleton House. He watched the light thoughtfully, knowing now that the little mission on which he'd come was not going to be as simple as he'd thought. Two dead men already complicated the matter, and one of them he'd killed. In any land that would make him a marked man.

Crawling back from the ridge, he lay on his back in a grassy hollow and smoked a cigarette. He had one point in his favor. They had not gotten a close look at him. The only man who had seen him clearly was now dead. But the others, by now, would be wondering about his business, and Logan Starr, watching the smoke curl up from his brown Mexican cigarette, realized there were a few things about which he had to wonder him-

self. There was only one thing of which he was positive—he would never leave until his mission was accomplished.

Another thing of which he was fairly certain was that the ghostly inhabitants of the dead town would be watching and waiting for him this time—and they'd shoot to kill.

Mounting the black, he rode east with the long shadows following him like giant hands down the slopes. He came out on range land thirty minutes later and saw the lights of a ranch house flickering across an open stretch of plain.

Even back in the mountain valleys he'd spotted small herds of cattle grazing on lush grass. He'd read the brand—an A with a hook on its left leg, possibly meaning JA.

Logan watched the ranch house lights for a few moments in silence and then made up his mind. A roaming rider was always an object of suspicion, but a puncher riding for a recognized outfit became very soon a nonentity. And it might take weeks before the men in the valley relaxed their vigilance.

A horseman angled down a slope a half mile distant, approaching Logan from the right. Penned cattle were bellowing from a corral directly behind the ranch house and then the cook started to hammer on an iron triangle, calling the hands in for chow. Logan remembered that he hadn't eaten since high noon, and it was now probably seven o'clock in the evening.

He kept riding toward the ranch, watching the oncoming rider forming out of the dusk, then raised a hand then in greeting.

"What outfit is this?"

"Henhouse," was the laconic answer.

Logan grinned in appreciation. The letters J and A forming the brand mark did resemble a henhouse. He got a better look at the man when a match flickered in front of an old face. A pair of pale blue eyes studied him carefully, measuring him. Logan figured the man to be in his late forties. He had a seamed, mahogany-colored face and a broad, snub nose.

"Name's Caldwell," the old puncher observed. "Ridin' through?"

"I could stay," Logan told him.

The puncher studied him grimly for a few moments. "Bad outfit to work for, friend," he said then and rode down toward the ranch house, Logan following him slowly, weighing the remark.

Dismounting outside the barn, Caldwell pointed toward the ranch house porch, and Logan saw two people sitting there in the semidarkness. He walked toward them, leading the black horse.

He could not see them too clearly as he put one boot on the porch steps and asked the figure on the right: "Taking on hands?"

"Take off your hat when talking to a lady,"

the man in the next chair told him coldly. Reddening, Logan slipped the hat from his head. Looking more closely at the occupant of the other chair, he saw white teeth flash in a smile.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said quietly. He thought, *So that's where the Henhouse comes from. The ranch is owned by a woman!*

"We could use hands," the woman said. "Tell Riordan you're hired."

Logan nodded. He was putting on his hat and turning around when she called after him. "Where are you from, cowboy?"

Logan Starr moistened his lips. "South," he said. He heard her soft laugh, an admission that she'd been wrong in asking the question.

"The south is damned big," the man on the porch said irritably.

"Not too big to ride away from," Logan said softly.

Someone lighted a lamp in the house parlor, and the yellow light spilled on the porch. Logan calmly studied the big man in the porch chair—the heavy chin, the straight, thin-lipped mouth, hooded, hard eyes.

The man said as softly as Logan, "You can learn to be civil."

The woman got up from her chair. She was young, not more than twenty-two, he figured, tall, dark-haired, very sure of herself—a quality Logan had never seen in her sex before.

She smiled easily, "Let's not get excited, Clayton."

The big man laughed grimly. He stood up also and the lamplight streamed through his blond hair. There was a latent strength in his cat-like tread as he walked to the porch rail and tapped dottle from a cold pipe.

"Might be safer, Jessie, if we knew a little more about our riders."

Logan Starr took his foot from the porch step. "I figure I'm takin' my chances, mister, not knowin' who I'm ridin' for."

Before Clayton could say anything, the girl put in quickly, "Have your supper, cowboy."

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Name

IN THE bunkhouse he found three men at a table which would have seated at least a dozen. Caldwell, the old puncher, sat alone at one end.

Logan pulled in opposite Caldwell and slid one leg over the bench.

"Where's Riordan?" he asked.

Caldwell snorted. The other two men were watching Logan, but neither said anything. Mentally, Logan labeled them as typical cowhands, doing their work, getting drunk on Saturdays, and satisfied with their lot. They

were not too imaginative. Caldwell was a little different.

"Riordan ain't come in," Caldwell said finally. He lapsed into silence then.

Logan piled a heap of hash on his plate. A surly, fat-faced cook came in with the coffee pot and filled his cup, spilling some of the coffee over the table. Logan smiled patiently and shifted his position. The liquid had started to trickle down the table and drip over the edge.

"Wipe that up," he said to the cook.

"Why, damn you—" the fat-faced man exploded.

Logan swung both boots over the edge of the bench and leaned forward, still smiling, ready to get up.

"Wipe it up, brother," he said again.

The cook moistened his thick lips. He was a fat man with small, pig-like eyes and a bulbous red nose. He opened his mouth to say something, changed his mind, and walked back to the kitchen, muttering under his breath. He came back with a dirty washrag and mopped up the coffee.

Logan saw Caldwell staring across the table at him, grinning. The other two hands were also watching Logan with a little more interest.

Logan shrugged and went on eating. He knew the unwritten code of the bunkhouse. If a man gave in once he was through. He'd be ridden until he quit. He ate in silence and by the time he'd finished the two cow hands at the other end of the table had gotten up, made smokes, and gone out into the night. Caldwell still sat where he was, chewing an unlighted cigar now, watching Logan down his second cup of coffee.

He was waiting for the new man's questions, and Logan Starr knew it. Still, Caldwell seemed to be out of place at the Henhouse ranch, and Logan was definitely surprised when the older man said suddenly, "I'm the oldest damned hand on this place, mister. Anything you want to know you kin ask me."

"Figured Riordan was ramrod of Henhouse," observed.

"I been here before Riordan," Caldwell growled. "That damned Clayton Boyd got Tim Riordan in here."

Logan Starr raised his eyebrows in interest, giving the talkative Caldwell an opening.

The old rider went on grimly, "Boyd an' Jessie Arlen kind o' plan on gettin' hitched in the fall, an' Boyd gives out advice kind o' free now. Riordan was one o' his riders up till last year."

"How long has Miss Arlen owned Henhouse?" Logan asked to keep him going. The politics of this particular bunkhouse were not very important to him, but he had to show interest in the layout for appearance's sake.

"Joe Arlen passed away three years ago," Caldwell figured, "an' Jessie took over soon as she come home from school in the East."

"Easterner?" Logan said.

"Hell no!" Caldwell scowled. "Jessie's all West. Old Joe sent her there to school, but she come runnin' back here soon as she could. Only one thing wrong about Jessie—Boyd's got her goin' in circles."

"Who's Boyd?"

"Owns Circle B," Caldwell explained, "maybe half as big as Henhouse, but he's got a lot to say in this country, mister. He's that kind."

From there on Logan half listened. He learned that this was good range country, in the foothills of the mountains. The intervening valleys between the ranges grew the best grass to be found. Logan lighted one of his last Mexican cigarettes and leaned both elbows on the table. He saw Caldwell eye the cigarette with interest.

"Texas?" the older man asked.

"That could be," Logan agreed.

"You're a long way from home," Caldwell said. "Tread easy."

Logan Starr smiled. The older man was through and it was his turn. He took it in a round-about way.

"Nice country up here," he observed. "I came up through the mountains, swung off to the east by that old mining town."

"Carnival," Caldwell told him. "That was a hot spot durin' the Civil War. Carnival City mines just about supported the North. They must o' taken a billion dollars worth o' silver out o' them shafts afore the veins petered out."

"Anybody there now?" Logan asked. He flicked cigarette ash into his cup.

Caldwell grinned. "Ain't a soul lived in Carnival fer the past fifteen years."

Logan nodded. He had one more question.

"Whose range is the old town on?"

"Henhouse," Caldwell told him. "Joe Arlen got a clear claim to Carnival City valley though it ain't worth a damn to anybody. Silver's gone, an' there ain't enough grass in it to feed a burro."

Logan heard the horses coming up outside. He was facing the door and he made no move.

"That'll be Riordan," Caldwell said. "Where he's been I don't know. He does too much ridin' for this spread."

"You paid well?" Logan asked.

"That ain't it," Caldwell said tersely. "A man works fer a brand. That's his outfit. I ain't old enough to be sent in to town to pick up mail while these new riders are workin' Henhouse range."

"New riders?" Logan asked.

Caldwell nodded. "Since Tim Riordan took over we got damn near a whole new outfit. Other boys all quit or got fired by Riordan."

A red-haired, squarely-built man strode through the door a moment later. Riordan had colorless eyebrows and a pair of sea-green eyes. His arms were short, with tremendous wrists. He had a nose with a very definite break in the bridge.

He saw Logan and said to Caldwell, "Who in hell is that?"

"Ask Miss Jessie," Caldwell snapped. "She hired him."

"I told her we had enough range bums on this outfit!" Riordan stood across the table from Logan, heavy jaw thrust out. Five other men filed in behind him.

"Black horse in the barn, Tim," one man said.

A passing thought flickered across Riordan's features. He opened his mouth to say something, and then changed his mind.

"I'll see Miss Arlen," he muttered and walked to the other end of the table.

LOGAN got up and walked to a bunk which was obviously not used. He sat down here, stretching his long legs, still smoking the brown cigarette. Caldwell remained where he was at the end of the table, alone. He'd taken a greasy packet of cards from his bunk and was setting them out, solitaire fashion. Logan wondered what kept the old man around Henhouse when Riordan evidently had no use for him and was trying to force him out of the way.

He saw Riordan speak a few words to a tough, sandy-haired man sitting at his left. The sandy-haired man nodded, and Logan felt the tingling sensation running up and down his spine—a feeling which presaged a fight.

Caldwell, dealing out his cards, let one fall on the floor near Logan's bunk. He got up from the chair and bent down to pick it up, at the same time whispering, "They're settin' you up, friend."

Logan snubbed out his cigarette on the wood of the bunk. He rearranged a blanket, setting it up as a pillow, and lay down. He heard the bench scrape on the floor at the other end of the bunkhouse, and then Caldwell whispered from the table, "Count on me, kid."

Logan Starr lay on the bunk, looking up at the boards above him. A man was walking toward him, unhurriedly. The footsteps stopped at the bunk, and Logan looked up calmly.

The sandy-haired man, to whom Riordan had whispered, was standing at the foot of the bunk, rubbing his hands gently. He was slightly shorter than Logan, but heavier in the shoulders. There was a deep cleft in his chin, and his eyes were black in strange contrast to the lightness of his hair and eyebrows.

"My bunk," the hand grinned. "Pick another one, friend."

Logan smiled up at him. "Nobody slept here last night," he said.

"I'm sleepin' there tonight," the yellow-haired man chuckled. "Get out."

The other Henhouse riders were watching from the far end of the table. Caldwell had stopped his game and half turned. The older man wore a Colt six-gun on his right hip. Logan saw him take the gun from the holster and place it on the table in full view of Riordan and the others. The action was very obvious. Caldwell continued then to lay out his cards, seamed face expressionless.

Logan came up on his elbows. He said casually. "You're draggin' trouble out of its hole, bucko."

He drew his right leg back, shot it out again, catching the yellow-haired man full in the stomach and knocking him six feet across the room. He came out of the bunk like a big cat, plunging after his man. The Henhouse rider cursed, and swung at him with a hard fist.

Logan let the punch ride past his head. He hit low, just above the belt and got in four fast punches.

He took Whitey by the shirt front, yanked him forward and swung from the waist. He felt the man sag. There was no fight left in Whitey, and he let the rider down gently on the bench nearby.

Whitey sat there, rocking, a thin trickle of blood flowing from his cut lip. He'd evidently bitten the lip when Logan's fist closed his mouth abruptly.

Riordan came down from the end of the long table and stood a few feet from Logan, looking from him at the dazed Whitey.

"Pretty tough," he said grimly.

"I get by," Logan agreed.

Riordan nodded, sea-green eyes narrowing. He had both thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. "You'll have to be tougher to stick around here, friend," he observed and walked back to the Henhouse riders.

Whitey got up, shaking his head, rubbing his stomach gingerly. He looked at Logan, cursed and went back to his supper.

"Eat hardy, Whitey," Caldwell called after him softly.

Whitey stiffened, but he kept going without looking back. Logan saw Caldwell slip the six-gun back into the holster.

He said to the older man, "Thanks, Jack."

"The name's Ben," Caldwell murmured.

Logan picked up his hat and went out to the barn. He got his blanket and warbag which he'd hung up near the saddle on a peg, then located a pump and brought in a pail of water for the black. He was going back to the bunkhouse when he heard Riordan's voice from the

bench. The foreman was talking to Jessie Arlen, and Logan picked up only a few of the words. They seemed to ring a bell inside him.

"Bat Fisher rode out on us," Riordan said.

"Reckon he jes' didn't like this outfit."

"Where did he go?" Clayton Boyd put in.

"West," Riordan stated.

Jessie Arlen said something, but Logan, walking quietly in the shadows of the bunkhouse, didn't hear it. Some of the wonder he had felt anent Carnival City was beginning to clear.

BEN CALDWELL was still setting out his cards when Logan walked past him and dumped his warbag on the bunk. Whitey came up to him, rubbing his stomach, his face tight.

Whitey said grimly, "I never had a man beat me like that before, friend, an' it'll never happen again."

"Not if you keep your nose where it belongs," Logan told him.

"I want you to know," Whitey went on, ignoring the remark, "that I have no use for you in this bunkhouse, an' if there's any more trouble between us it won't be settled with fists. Remember that."

"I'll remember it," Logan nodded. When Whitey started to walk away, he called after the man, "Stay out of dry gulches, Whitey. Don't ride too close to heavy timber."

Whitey spun around quickly, his eyes wide, and Logan knew he had the man worrying. He returned Whitey's stare without expression.

The five Henhouse hands started a poker game at the other end of the table. Riordan came in a few minutes later, watched Logan empty his warbag, and then joined the game.

Logan picked up an old newspaper, glanced through it, and then strolled over to the table where Caldwell was sitting. He looked over the man's shoulders for a few moments, watching him count off his cards.

He said finally, "I once knew a man named Fisher." He paused. "Heard you had a rider by that name. What does he look like?"

"Thin man," Caldwell said, "With a lot of nose. Used a fast left-hand draw to back it up." He looked up. "Know him?"

Logan shook his head slowly, thinking of the man he'd shot in the Carleton House in Carnival City. The description tallied.

"Coldest damned fish I ever run across," Caldwell was saying. "I figure on hookin' up with him one o' these days."

"You won't," Logan said, and he walked back to his bunk thoughtfully. He didn't know Riordan's game, but he was positive now that the foreman was not playing straight with Henhouse. When a man lied about one thing he was usually covering up other matters.

No business of mine, Logan told himself. I'll ride into that ghost town when Riordan's not in it, and I can be on my way in another ten minutes. Texas bound.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghost Town Reveille

IN THE morning Riordan ordered two hundred head of stock to be taken to the railroad in Junction. Logan had seen the bunch in one of the big pens behind the ranch house. Riordan rounded up all the hands for

the trip, and Logan watched them long and thoughtfully.

Jessie Arlen came down to the barn as he was saddling the black and Logan got his first good look at her. She nodded and smiled, her quiet brown eyes approving the horse.

"Some Arab in him?" she asked.

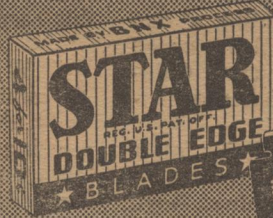
Logan nodded. The black was not big, but its shoulders were well sloped and the back short and strong. Lean, clean limbs ended in small feet. The Arab showed in its wide forehead and intelligent eyes.

"He's come a long way," Logan grinned.

"South?"

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Without expecting an answer she went to a gray gelding one of the hands had saddled for her. She rode down past the corrals, and then took the road to Junction.

Caldwell and Logan rode drag on the herd, and by two in the afternoon the animals were safely corralled in pens at the railroad siding. Henhouse riders drifted into town. Logan and Caldwell stopped in at the Indian Head Saloon for a glass of cold beer, with Caldwell still cursing under his breath. The older man was still choking from the drag dust.

"We'll have it out one o' these damned days," the puncher grated.

Logan grinned. They'd had the tail of the herd all the way, though it was a time-honored practice to switch positions in order to give the drag riders a breathing spell.

"Drink it down," Logan said. He went out in the back after a while to wash his face in a rain barrel.

Returning, he saw Riordan standing at one end of the bar with Clayton Boyd. Boyd turned deliberately, but Logan crossed over to Caldwell. He ordered another beer and heard footsteps behind him.

He saw Boyd in the bar mirror. The latter was smiling thinly. Logan noticed something he hadn't observed the previous evening. Boyd sported a small blond mustache which was almost indiscernible at a distance.

He turned. Boyd studied him leisurely, contemptuously, as he lighted a cigar.

"I didn't fancy your language last night, my friend," Boyd said coolly. "I heard you made more trouble later at the bunkhouse."

Logan saw Riordan take his place at a card table, watching both of them, and grinning broadly. Logan wondered at that grin. It was evident that Boyd was deliberately picking trouble, and Riordan had the utmost confidence that the big man could take excellent care of himself.

Logan set his glass down at the bar. He said softly, "What is it you want, Boyd?"

Boyd deliberately blew smoke in his face. He stood a yard away from Logan, hands in his pockets, the cigar tilted jauntily toward the ceiling.

He said slowly, "In this country we're careful about range bums. There's been too much stock lost on this range." Once again he blew out a cloud of smoke, sending it directly at Logan's face.

Logan Starr moved only his right hand, bringing it up sharply toward Boyd's face. The fingers brushed Boyd's lips, catching the cigar, and knocking it across the bar.

Clayton Boyd's reaction caught Logan completely by surprise. The big man stepped forward with amazing speed. His left hand flashed out and he slapped Logan's cheek loudly enough for the whole saloon to hear it.

Logan heard Ben Caldwell gasp. Boyd had stepped back again, and he was smiling coldly, his coat swinging open.

"I am unarmed," Boyd murmured.

Logan nodded. He could still feel the tingle of that slap and he was boiling inside. Without a word he unbuckled his gunbelt, handing it to Ben Caldwell.

The bartender was calling urgently behind them.

"Don't bust up my place, boys. Take it outside."

Logan again saw Riordan getting up from the card table, waving to some of the Henhouse hands.

Boyd smiled, "Will you step outside, friend?"

Logan strode past him grimly. He'd seen big men before, filled with confidence in their own strength. Boyd seemed to be one of these. A few stiff jolts to the stomach usually took this assurance out of them.

IT WAS hot in the street, the heat devils coming up from the four inches of dust in the road. Logan went down the steps, hanging his hat on the saddle horn of the black as he passed by. He turned around in the middle of the road and waited for Boyd.

The crowd was spilling out of the Indian Head Saloon. Shoppers in the various stores along the street left their purchases and raced down toward the saloon.

Very coolly, Boyd took off his coat and hat and rolled up his sleeves. His wrists and forearms were powerfully developed. Logan figured him scaling in the neighborhood of two hundred and ten pounds, with few soft spots.

Boyd pulled up about ten feet from Logan and waited, hands at his sides. Logan stared at him curiously. He knew one way of fighting, and that was to drive in and hit until his man quit. He had the power in his arms and shoulders to hand out punishment, and he was sufficiently fast on his feet to keep on top of his man every second.

He moved in fast now, aiming for Boyd's jaw, and was surprised when he missed by a fraction of an inch. Boyd's counter dug into his body, very hard at the break of the ribs, and then a fist caught him on the side of the mouth, hurting him and spinning him half around. He heard a man yell jubilantly, and he knew it was Riordan.

Straightening, he faced Boyd again. The big man was moving in front of him, loose and relaxed, and Logan recognized the style. In San Antonio he had once seen a fight between two professional pugilists, and they operated exactly as Boyd.

Grimly, Logan steadied himself, then lashed out again trying to pin his man against the hitchrack. Boyd easily avoided the trap. His

left crashed into Logan's nose, sending the blood down over his mouth. His right cut Logan's left eye, and Logan felt the ground under his knees.

The spectators had started to yell in the beginning, but watching Boyd work now they'd lapsed into silence. Slowly Starr got to his feet and watched Boyd circling him. The big man stepped in, slashed with his right, and when Logan tried to block the punch, he came in very fast with a left, hitting Logan in the mouth. He hit again a half dozen times as Logan floundered, swinging wildly.

Ben Caldwell caught Logan as he fell backward, holding him up.

The older man whispered. "Better call it off, son. That skunk tricked you into this."

Logan broke away and came in again. He nearly hit Boyd with a swinging right hand, but he took several more cutting blows in the face. He could feel the blood dripping from his chin, and a woman across the street began screaming for them to stop it.

A short right to the jaw knocked him down again. He sat on his haunches for a moment, shaking his head, one thing very clear in his mind. He must not stay where he was. He got up and came forward, his left eye swelling up and blocking out his vision. He peered out of the one good eye and lunged at Boyd savagely.

Boyd had not been expecting so much energy from his beaten opponent, and he moved a little slower than he had been. Logan's right fist crashed against the side of his jaw, knocking him back a full eight feet. As he went down his head smacked against the hitchrack and he lay still—unconscious.

Logan looked down at him for a moment, and then walked grimly toward the salon. Going up on the walk, he met Jessie Arlen standing behind the crowd. She caught his arm.

She said quietly, "He had no right doing that. It was unfair."

Logan grinned with his swollen lips. "Between you an' me an' that hitching post—he should be wakin' up to that any minute now." He walked through the saloon with Ben Caldwell at his heels, and he went out to the rain barrel again. Caldwell helped wash the blood from his face.

When he was done, Logan observed, "He's a pretty hard man to whip with fists."

Caldwell nodded. "But you done it. An' there's other ways—damned side more permanent ways."

BACK in the saloon Logan saw the Henhouse hands lined up at the bar. He counted them swiftly as he walked toward the door with Caldwell. The whole outfit was present. He saw Whitey Ames watch-

ing him morosely, a glass in his hands. Clayton Boyd was not in sight.

Outside on the street, Caldwell said, "You could stand a haircut an' shave."

"Not now," Logan told him. He looked at the black horse standing at the rail. "Where's the best blacksmith in town?"

Caldwell nodded down the street. Logan saw a sign pointing down an alley.

"See you," he said and walked to the rail to untie the horse. Feeling his battered face gingerly, he walked down the street toward the alley without looking back. He went down the alley, still leading the black, walked directly past the open door of the blacksmith shop, and then climbed into the saddle.

He rode due west at a fairly fast pace, paralleling the trail they'd taken during the morning from the Henhouse ranch, but a half dozen miles from the ranch house he turned toward the mountains. He let the black run, going up into the foothills, and the Arabian loved it.

They scrambled through a tiny, pebbly brook running down through a defile, and Logan dismounted to bathe his face again. His eye was still badly swollen, almost closed, and he knew he would have difficulty eating tonight with the battered mouth.

On the ridge above Carnival City he dismounted, tied the animal to a dwarf pine. Lying flat on his stomach he stared down into the ghost town for fully ten minutes, watching the shadows of clouds flying overhead. In another hour and a half it would be dark. The late afternoon sun, dropping down behind the western slope of the valley, gleamed red on the few remaining window panes in the buildings. A coyote trotted down the center of the main street, looked into an open doorway, and then kept going in the direction of the mine shafts.

This eastern slope of the valley was precipitous, but not difficult for a man on foot to descend. He went down rapidly, sliding among the loose shale until he reached the first of the miners' cabins. He had protection here from anyone watching below, and he felt better as he walked down the twisting alleys, in and out of the piles of rubbish between the cabins.

He approached the Carleton House from the rear this time and, gun in hand, stepped through a back door. He made his way carefully toward the front of the building and looked over the batwing doors to the street. It remained empty.

Reholstering his gun, he took the stairs to the second floor two at a time. The metal numbers on the doors were tarnished with age, but he found No. 7 at the end of the corridor. The door was ajar.

Furniture was piled about the room, chairs overturned; a four-poster bed sagged in one

corner. A single window overlooked the main street, the late afternoon breeze sweeping through its smashed panes.

He crossed to the window and tore up the stained blue carpeting on the floor. Counting back the third board from the window, he tried to lift it up. The rain coming through the open window had warped the boards and he had a little difficulty before he could loosen it.

Finally it gave. Putting his hand down through the opening, he came up with a dusty cigar box. There were yellowed papers inside, and he glanced through them carefully before putting them inside his shirt.

Very distinctly, down below, he heard a board squeak as a boot came down on it. Sliding the gun from the holster, Logan stepped to the door. He hesitated one moment, then yanked open the door and stepped through the opening. Looking down the short corridor, he had a full view of the stairs.

Whitey Ames stood on the lower step, gun in hand, blinking in surprise. Only half of his body could be seen from Logan's position. The light-haired man drew his lips back in a snarl. His face started to stiffen. Logan leaped for the protection of a doorway as Whitey's gun roared. He was a little too late. The bullet smashed through his left arm, just below the elbow, rendering that arm useless.

He fell through the doorway, staggered, then went reeling through, knocking over furniture, then lay still against the wall, near the window. He breathed heavily, gasping a little, his gun covering the door.

After a while he sat up with his back against the wall, the gun barrel resting on his knee. The injured arm began to ache now. He watched his blood trickle down to the floor, but made no move.

Minutes passed, with no sound from below. Then a board squeaked below, and he smiled coldly. Ames was taking the bait. He heard another sound, and then came an interval of silence, while the yellow-haired man listened carefully.

At the head of the stairs Ames paused again, then came forward slowly. Then, very suddenly, he stepped into the doorway, mouth open, the gun wavering. Logan's weapon was centered on his chest. When his eyes located Logan sitting against the wall, the fear of death came into them. He let out a short scream and he shot wildly a fraction of a second before Logan pulled down on the trigger.

Ames' slug went through the open window behind Logan, and Logan's slug took Ames in the chest, knocking him back through the door against the opposite wall. He stood here for a moment, clutching at his wound with his left hand, then he slid to the floor, the gun drop-

ping from his lifeless fingers. He lay still.

LOGAN got to his feet and went out into the corridor. He went down the steps and into the kitchen, heading for the back way out. A man's figure was framed in the door, the sunlight behind him.

Logan whipped out the six-gun again and leaped for the protection of the bar. He heard the other man scrambling over rubbish just outside the door.

Crawling back behind the bar toward the front entrance, Logan poised himself for the dash across the intervening space, when a man called from the rear, "Logan?"

Logan stood up, grinning. "All right," he said, and Ben Caldwell came through the door. "Didn't recognize you, Ben," he smiled. "You come damned near getting lead thrown at you."

Caldwell grimaced. "Where's Ames?" he asked. "I followed him here from Junction when he set out on your trail." He noticed the blood on Logan's shirt sleeve then and his eyes widened.

Logan glanced toward the staircase. He said quietly, "Don't worry about Whitey any more, Ben."

Caldwell nodded. "Heard them shots up on the ridge," he said. "I kind o' lost Whitey's trail because I didn't know where in hell he was goin'. Found his horse up on the ridge near yours so I figured you were both down here." There was still a question in the older man's eyes, but before Logan could say anything more, both of them heard the horses hammering down the main street.

Caldwell rushed for the batwing doors and looked over them. He shouted, "Riordan!"

Logan could see the riders come into sight, Riordan in the lead. Clayton Boyd was with them. There were five other Henhouse men.

"In there!" Riordan called sharply. A gun banged as Logan and Caldwell made a dash for the rear door.

"They figure Whitey got it," Caldwell panted as they raced across the yard in the rear and up an alley.

Logan paused once to send one shot toward the rear door. A Henhouse man about to come out, ducked back to safety.

"We'll never reach that ridge," Caldwell muttered. "Reckon we'll have to hole up somewhere in this damned town, Logan."

They turned into another street out of the alley and ran up this street, going in the direction of the mine shafts. They went past an abandoned stamp mill, scrambling over the ruins of a brick chimney which had tumbled down across the road.

Horsemen were riding parallel with them on the next street, and crossing an alley Logan saw them. A wild shot missed him.

Straight ahead of them, in the gathering dusk, Logan saw the opening of a mine tunnel. Abandoned ore cars lay about the entrance, along with piles of heavy tunnel timber. A sign had been erected over the entrance: **GLORY HOLE.**

He headed for it just as Henhouse riders came into the street behind them. Ben Caldwell knelt and fired twice at them before following him. A fusillade of shots answered him, one slug striking the signboard and dropping it with a clatter.

Logan stumbled into a small ore car and fell down behind it, about twenty-five feet inside the tunnel. He leveled and fired at a man running across the street outside. The Henhouse men had dismounted and were creeping up toward the mine entrance, keeping behind the piles of lumber outside. Lead began to ricochet from the rock walls of the tunnel.

"That lead," Caldwell observed, "is hittin' a wall right behind us, Logan. Might be a sight safer around the bend in the tunnel."

"Start crawling," Logan told him. Keeping the ore car between them and the tunnel entrance, they wriggled back along the narrow gauge rails of the carline, and Logan noticed that the rails turned quite abruptly to the left when they were another thirty feet inside the passageway.

Logan Starr heard the older man ejecting spent cartridges and putting in fresh charges. He reloaded his own gun and sat with his back to the wall then, while Caldwell tore strips from his shirt and worked a make-shift bandage for his wounded arm. Outside they could hear Henhouse men calling to each other.

Riordan shouted down the tunnel entrance, "Better come out, boys."

Caldwell laughed grimly. Then, to Logan, he said, "I ain't asked you questions yet—but when I play games, I like to know the rules."

Logan grinned. "Fair enough. My father used to be sheriff of Carnival City, back in the

sixties. He was trailing two killers all the way to Texas when the big crash came in Carnival. He got his men, but they hit him a few times, laying him up in a Dallas hospital for six months."

"Jackson Starr," Caldwell murmured. "I heard folks speak o' him over in Junction. He was supposed to be pretty tough."

"The Carnival mines had been going from bad to worse," Logan went on. "While my father was in I was the people of Carnival heard of the big strike up on Long River. Carnival emptied in a month, and my father decided to stay in Texas and sent for my brother and me. I was a year old and my brother three. We were raised in Texas."

"Somethin' brought you back here," Caldwell said.

"My father is running for state senator," Logan explained, "and the opposition have started a damnable campaign to vilify him. He wanted his old papers to clear himself. They were in Carnival City. I came to get them." He ended by telling of his first visit to the dead town and the twin killings.

Caldwell whistled softly. "You get a look at the man Fisher killed?"

Logan nodded. "An old man," he said quietly. "Could have been a prospector. Bald, with a fringe of gray hair and a gray beard."

"Sounds like Baines—Old Man Baines," Caldwell muttered. "Ain't seen him around Junction in quite a spell. Does—or did—a lot o' prospectin' in these hills. Had a crazy idea he could find the lost silver vein an' make Carnival boom again."

"Why would Fisher shoot him?" Logan asked.

Caldwell sniffed. "That damned Fisher would shoot most anybody," he growled. "Reckon he must o' had a reason, though." He paused. "What in tarnation were they doin' in Carnival?"

The old man lay flat on his stomach and stared around the bend of the tunnel, gun in poised. "Quiet out there now," he observed.

**TOPS
FOR
QUALITY!**



"Reckon they figure on pinnin' us in here till we come out. They ain't takin' the chance o' comin' in after us."

Logan sat for a while in thought. Suddenly he said, "Crawl back a bit, Ben, and see if you can get a fire started. There should be enough scraps of wood around."

CHAPTER FOUR

Glory Hole

LOGAN heard him crawling around on the tunnel floor, feeling with his hands, cursing when his head came in contact with the opposite wall of the tunnel. A few minutes later a match flared, and Caldwell nursed the little flame of kindling wood he'd cut with his pocket knife. He fed a few heavier pieces to the flames and watched the fire build itself up.

Logan got up and walked back. He picked up a burning stick from the fire and started down the tunnel, Caldwell following him.

The big timbers supporting the tunnel roof were still intact, but there had been several slides from the walls. Several times they had to clamber over piles of dirt which had fallen over the car tracks. Once Caldwell pointed to a place where the dirt had been cleared away.

"Somebody's been in here, Logan," he said quietly, "since this dirt came down."

Logan didn't say anything. The tunnel twisted often past hard rock. There were several smaller, cross-cut tunnels, which ended dead. Back in the main shaft they proceeded another hundred yards, the air still being very good although the heat was becoming oppressive.

Caldwell stood by one of the air vents for a few moments, cooling himself off. Logan saw the new mound of dirt straight ahead of them. Picks and shovels lay around here, and the instruments were quite new.

Caldwell swore softly and Logan examined the wall.

He said, "Reckon somebody's been tryin' to find the vein again. All the operators in Carnival figured the ore had run out."

Logan pulled up beside another digging. A big section of the wall had been dug out, clear to the top ceiling timbers, and fifteen feet in length. Where the dirt and rock had been dug away the wall was black, crumbling to the touch.

Ben Caldwell picked up a handful of the substance which had crumbled to the floor. His mouth was open and sweat gleamed on his face in the light of the burning torch.

"That's silver, Logan!" he gasped. "The lost vein—more'n ten feet high, an' nobody knows how far it'll go back into the mountain. Them Carnival mine operators missed it by a

foot an' they gave up with millions o' dollars worth o' ore right next to 'em."

"Riordan and Boyd know about this?"

Caldwell exploded, "Riordan's been tryin' to buy up this part o' Henhouse range. He's been tellin' Miss Arlen he wants to run a few head o' cattle on his own. Carnival City is on the range he's after."

Logan sat down on the pile of dirt and stared at the black wall.

"Baines must have prospected this," he said slowly, "an' Riordan or Boyd got on to him some way. They kept Baines here as a prisoner while they worked in the tunnel trying to see just how valuable the vein was."

"An' when you rode in, Baines saw a chance to make a break—mebbe expectin' you to help him. Bat shot an' you shot Bat!"

Logan walked past the silver vein, stopping when he came to a rock wall. This was as far as the Carnival City mine operators had decided to go. They'd no doubt been running into the red pushing the tunnel this far, and all the while they'd been drilling parallel to the real vein.

"Glory Hole," Logan muttered. He seemed to remember hearing or seeing those words before, and quite recently.

THEY went back along the tunnel to the fire Caldwell had built. The older man threw a few more pieces of wood on it and then crawled to the bend to look around. He came back shaking his head.

He growled, "Riordan's boys kin hole us here fer a month if they want with nobody ridin' into the valley."

Logan sat down on a fallen timber, still trying to remember where he'd heard the name, Glory Hole. The memory was distinct, and with it was a sensation of relief—almost as if, if he could place it, it might help them now to freedom.

Caldwell went back to the bend and fired two shots toward the entrance. Four six-guns answered him and he came back grinning.

"Just to let 'em know we ain't left," he chuckled. He kicked the burning embers together. "Reckon we could git to work with them picks an' shovels, Logan, an' dig our way through to the other end o' this mountain. Might take a hundred an' fifty years—but diggin' through silver we'd be rich besides."

Logan, rubbing his chest thoughtfully, felt the wad of papers inside his shirt. He took them out very quickly, Caldwell watching him. The marriage certificate was on top, but there were other papers—shares of stock. Logan saw the name on the shares—Glory Hole Mine.

There were other papers pertaining to the mine, including a yellowed map of the tunnel. Breathing a little faster he unfolded it. Caldwell came over and looked over his shoulder.

With his finger Logan traced the course of the tunnel. There were four cross-cuts running off from the main stem, and then a line which all but touched the second cross-cut tunnel at one point.

Under it was the legend: TUNNEL FOUR—LUCKY SEVEN SHAFT.

Caldwell breathed, "That shaft ain't more than a foot or two from our cross-cut. I recollect now them operators were always breakin' into each other's tunnels an' causin' a hell of a lot o' fightin'."

Logan nodded grimly. "If we can break into the Lucky Seven mine," he said slowly, "we'll be able to go out that way with Riordan and Boyd still waiting for us back here."

They went back to the cross-cut, Caldwell carrying a pick and shovel. They gathered enough loose wood to make another fire, lighting up the smaller tunnel. Logan studied the map carefully before pointing to a certain section of the wall.

"I'd figure here," he said slowly. "Good luck, Ben."

He tried to help with the shovel, using it with the arm, but it was hard work. Caldwell, stripped to the waist, went at the wall determinedly. After an hour's digging, he had a hole two feet into the wall. Perspiration streamed down his body, and he stared at Logan grimly.

"Could be the space between them damned tunnels is ten or fifteen feet," he said tersely. "You couldn't tell from a small map like that."

Logan shook his head. Twice he'd gone back while Caldwell was digging to fire his gun toward the entrance of the main tunnel.

Riordan had laughed derisively. "Better save those shells, friend."

Fifteen minutes later the pick went through the wall, knocking down a small avalanche of dirt. Cold air shot through the opening and Caldwell let out a triumphant yell. In a moment he'd cleared a hole wide enough for them to crawl through.

Logan held the torch up to the hole. He could see the timbers and the ore car tracks of a tunnel. They followed these for seventy-five yards to the main tunnel, which led up an incline. Logan saw stars shining dead ahead. They came out into the night a few minutes later, crawling over piles of lumber in front of the Lucky Seven entrance.

Keeping to the back alleys they crossed Carnival City and climbed the ridge to where the horses were tied. Whitey Ames' mount stood in the darkness nearby, and Caldwell untied it, sending it into the hills with a slap on the flank.

The older man paused before mounting. He looked at Logan carefully.

"Reckon you got what you came for, Starr," he said. "You headin' fer Texas now?"

Logan smiled grimly and shook his head. "Thought I'd see this through," he stated. "How's the sheriff in Junction?"

"Ed Barnhart is a pretty good man."

Logan scratched his chin dubiously. "What charges could he bring against Riordan and Clayton?"

"Baines, the prospector, was killed, for one thing," Caldwell pointed out. "Even though Fisher handled the gun on that one, we kin ask Barnhart to come down with a posse to see what the rumpus is. I'll ride in to Junction. You better head back to the house an' tell Miss Arlen she's hit it rich."

Logan rode up to the Henhouse ranch forty-five minutes later. He found Jessie Arlen at the cook's door, trying to locate the hands. Logan waited till she came back to the porch, and then he stepped from the shadows.

"Miss Arlen," he said softly, glancing toward the cook's kitchen.

Jessie Arlen spun around.

Logan said quietly, "I want to see you alone."

"Come inside," the girl told him. A sharp alarm came into her eyes when she saw Logan's arm and the blood-stained bandages crudely tied around it. She asked no questions while she procured a basin of water and fresh bandages, but Logan told her the story while she dressed the wound.

"I—I'd like to go back to Carnival," the girl murmured when he had finished, "and see this for myself." She bent her head over Logan's arm so that he could not see her face. Her next words came hard.

"We—Clayton and I—were supposed to be married next month," she said slowly, "but Clayton suggested that we wait a while longer until he'd straightened out some business transactions. He never had any intentions of marrying me after they got control of Carnival City."

"You didn't lose anything," Logan assured her with a grin. But there was a sympathy for her in him that was almost a pain.

AT ONE o'clock in the morning Ben Caldwell arrived with Sheriff Barnhart and eight men he'd rounded up for the occasion. Barnhart, Logan learned from Caldwell, had been a close friend of Joe Arlen, Jessie's father. He was a small man, mild-mannered, with iron-gray hair. Logan liked the looks of him.

They reached Carnival in another three-quarters of an hour. A crescent moon shone down into the ghost town, lighting up the empty streets. Fire burned outside the Glory Hole tunnel and men passing in front of the light.

"Reckon they're still waitin'," Caldwell chuckled.

Logan rode up to Barnhart as the group stood on the ridge. He said softly, "You have any plans, sheriff?"

Barnhart nodded. "We'll go down there on foot and get as close to them as we can. I want evidence that they're really trying to murder you two boys."

Logan moistened his lips. "It'll take Caldwell and me about fifteen minutes to get back inside the mine. We could hit them from both sides."

Barnhart grinned. He said, "I was a deputy of Jackson Starr in Carnival twenty-five years ago. Now I'm gettin' ideas from his son. Go on down there an' give 'em hell."

Logan slid down the incline with Ben Caldwell and drifted through the alleys to the Lucky Seven tunnel. Inside they found the glowing ashes of their first fire.

"Reckon Barnhart's right up behind 'em by now," Caldwell said softly. "Let's git up front, Logan."

Up near the mouth of the tunnel, Caldwell yelled, "We're still waitin' for you, Riordan. Come an' git it."

There was a moment of silence, and then Riordan shouted, "Gettin' hungry, Ben?"

Several shots followed immediately, but Caldwell was around the bend in the tunnel. He fired back and then reloaded.

"Send that damned range bum out," Riordan called, "an' we'll let you off easy, Ben. You got a horse an' you kin ride. Stay there an' we'll string up both of you."

Caldwell grinned. "What about the silver back here?" he shouted. "You keepin' all that?"

Clayton Boyd answered that one, speaking clearly and distinctly. "Either come out or we'll seal up this shaft so that you can't get out. We'll come in after you when you're too weak to lift a gun."

Sheriff Barnhart's voice broke in a little distance behind Boyd. "You wouldn't do that now, would you, Mr. Boyd?"

There was a moment of stunned silence and then Barnhart said. "All you Henhouse boys drop the guns. You're covered from every angle."

"Let's go," Logan whispered. He started up the tunnel then, stumbling in the darkness, running toward the stars shining in the sky. He had his gun gripped tightly in his hand as he broke out, leaping over several timbers which blocked the entrance.

Logan saw Riordan and Clayton Boyd standing in the shadows on the other side of the tunnel, not more than ten yards away. The firelight flickered on Boyd's smooth-shaven face.

Neither Riordan nor Boyd had seen the two men coming out of the Glory Hole tunnel, when Riordan sent one quick shot at Barnhart

and made a fast, running break for the horses.

Caldwell yelled, "All right, Tim."

Riordan spun around, his face tight. His gun cracked again, a second after Caldwell's. Logan Starr saw the Henhouse ramrod buckle in the middle, clutch at the saddle horn for support, and then crumple to the ground.

Clayton Boyd had started running with Riordan's first shot. He pulled up now, swinging his gun very fast, and Logan heard the lead bang into the rock wall to his right. He leveled his Navy on Boyd's middle and let go twice. The big man pitched forward to the ground, rolled as he hit it, and came up still trying to line his weapon.

From the expression on the rancher's face, Logan realized another shot was unnecessary. Boyd pulled trigger once, then lowered his head and rocked backward. He made no further move.

The other Henhouse hands threw down their guns. Logan saw Jessie Arlen coming into the firelight a few moments later. The tears were streaming down her cheeks, and Ben Caldwell said softly, "It ain't easy to learn the man you figured you loved is no damned good."

Logan silently watched the girl look down at Boyd, and then head back up the street without a word. He sheathed his gun and moved after her.

She didn't look at him at first as they climbed the ridge together.

"Not the best thing to ride back alone to-night," Logan told her. "Figured I'd go along."

Jessie Arlen didn't say anything as they mounted and started back for the ranch. When they saw the lights ahead, she asked quietly, "You—you'll be heading back for Texas now?"

"In the morning," Logan said. They rode again in silence and then he said, "You figure on going into the mining business, Miss Arlen?"

"No," she said slowly. "I'll lease them out and get back on my feet with the ranch. I can do a lot of expanding with the money coming in from the mine. I have some ideas I'd like to work out."

Logan hesitated. He said finally, "Texas is a long way off, Miss Arlen. Any objections to my riding up here in the spring?"

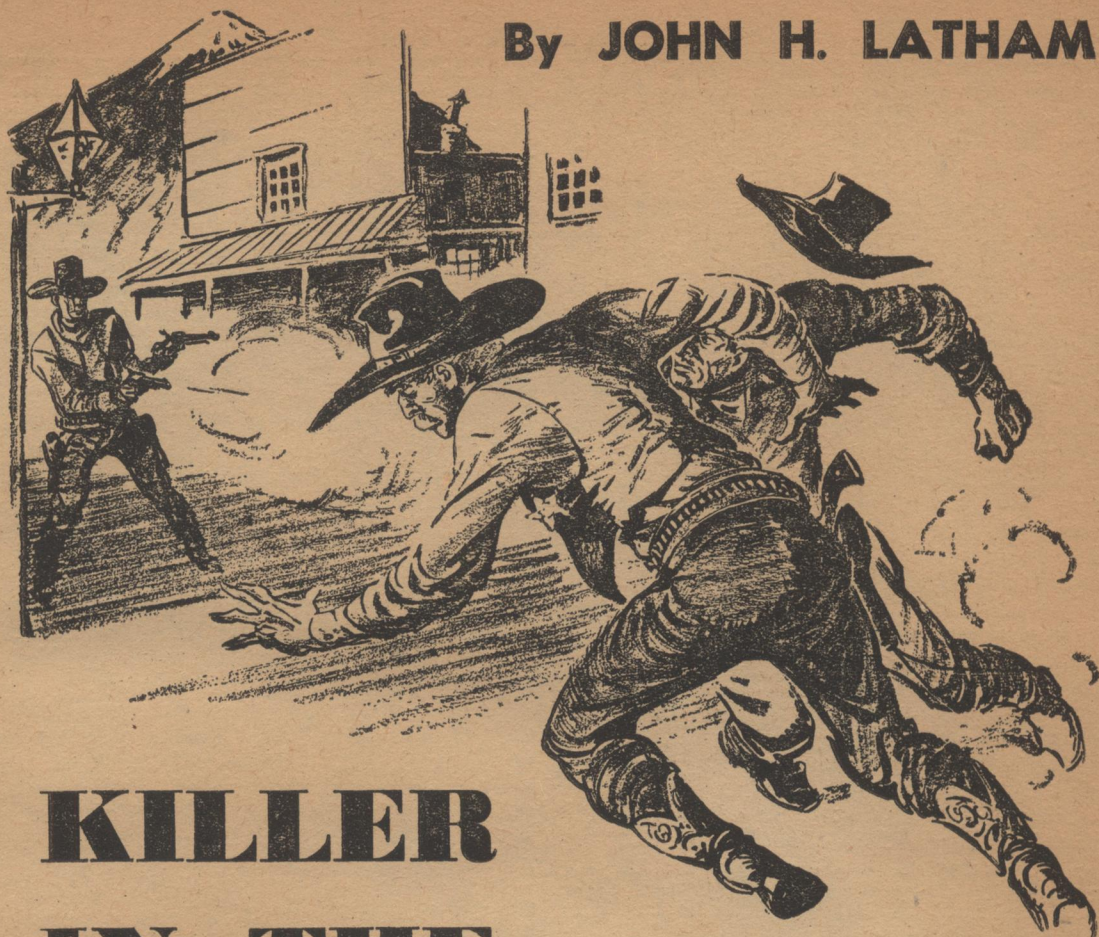
"We—we'd be glad to see you," she said. "A man must have a good reason for riding eight or nine hundred miles."

"Reckon I have that reason," Logan told her. He stared straight ahead toward the distant lights.

"You'll always be welcome at Henhouse, Mr. Starr," Jessie Arlen murmured.

"That's enough reason for me," Logan smiled. He watched her push the horse up ahead, and he grinned a satisfied grin.

By JOHN H. LATHAM



KILLER IN THE SUN

He came up against the marshal, knocking him down with his shoulder. . . .

HENRY NOLL wore a troubled expression when he entered the marshal's office. "Wilhoit's bunch is in Howlett's saloon," he said. "The bets are two to one you don't show up, Ed." He stood in the door and looked carefully at the old man sitting alone at the table.

The room was dark and 'dobe cool and held a faint smell of dust and gun grease and sweat-soaked saddle gear. There was a cot in one corner and Marshal Ed Dowling used it for his living quarters. He had not been out of the place for a week.

He said, "You make a big man framed there in the door, Henry," and his tired face showed wonder at the thought.

A small hot wind pulled sound in from the street—Buck Janoski's hammer beating thin echoes from the blacksmith shop, the jingle of bit-chains as a rider passed, the steady flow of noise from Howlett's saloon. Henry Noll looked at the rider in the manner of one treading the thin edge of danger, and

"I'll give you my guns and my life, nester, but I won't shake hands with you — till there's a gun in yours!"

moved fully into the room. He was a man in his middle thirties, bearing the unmistakable stamp of a plowman. Right now his eyes held a sullen temper.

"They're priming Frane to fight you again," he said. "The whole cow crowd is over there egging him on." He sat down in a rawhide-backed chair and worried his hat with blunt fingers. "It makes me ashamed of the human race!" he ground out.

"Hear you had trouble on Cow Creek Flats," said Dowling.

"Wilhoit burned out McKay and Gustafsen last night." Noll answered. "He's run every nester off the Flats except me and Wes Tanner." He added, "McKay's dead," and considered that sufficient, for no man knew the country and its troubles more intimately than Ed Dowling.

The old marshal sat low in the chair, hat pulled down over his eyes. He was quite a long man, bent a little and weathered by sixty years of hard living. A gray mustache drooped over the corners of his mouth and a scar lay very new and very white across the bronze ruddiness of his forehead. He touched it with a bony finger and his gray eyes seemed pinched from the pain of it.

He said, "A man fights for what he thinks is right, Henry," and did not look at Noll.

The farmer glanced down at his hands, moulded to the grip of line and plow. He could not imagine himself standing against a killer like Frane, taking a life in the bright heat of anger. A chill rode up his spine at the thought of his own life and the welfare of his family in balance on a gun duel.

"I have a wife and two kids," he said. "What good would it do me to fight? I would only end up like McKay." In that moment he could see himself and his kind pretty clearly as the cattle faction did, and the insight made him bitter. He was a fiddle-footed hoeman who turned under the grass but would not stand and fight for the land; he was one of a breed that would break and go over the hill under pressure.

"A man fights for what he thinks is right," Dowling repeated. He gave Noll one of his rare, slow smiles. "I remember once when this was all new, before a stalk of corn grew on Cow Creek Flats. Press Wilhoit and I went out there one summer. The antelope were running and we killed a couple about where McKay's cabin stood. It was fine country, then, with the grass stirrup-deep in the coulees and the wind blowing out of places a man had never seen. It was free country, and wild."

His glance softened as he turned it back in time, and his smile held a slow regret. He took the makings from his pocket and shaped a smoke, struck a match on the table,

not offering the tobacco and papers to Noll. This was a slight the nester was quick to feel.

The weight of it lay on Henry Noll to turn him sour, and he looked at the marshal with the black reports of the past week mirrored in his eyes. He wondered if Frane's bullet had achieved what men like himself so dreaded—broken the old man's spirit. Could Dowling go up against Frane again and beat him in a gun fight? He was their only chance, Noll knew.

For Ed Dowling was the only man in the country who could hold big cattle outfits like Press Wilhoit's in check. He had sided the nesters from the time the first plow turned under the sod of Cow Creek Flats, and the cattlemen's respect and his prowess as a gun-fighter had kept peace up to now. Now Dowling's supremacy was being challenged.

Linn Frane had suffered a broken arm in his first encounter with Dowling, but his own bullet had left its searing mark over the marshal's eyes. And men like Henry Noll were fearful that the scar went deeper.

Dowling said, "The antelope are gone from Cow Creek Flats, but Wilhoit can't see the meaning of that." He looked down at his hands, as if struck by some odd notion, then threw away his cigarette and nodded to the nester. He said, "We will go across to Howlett's," and rose to take Henry Noll's arm.

THE town was small, built along a single dusty street that ran its crooked course from the whitewashed cattle pens to an out-scatter of shacks along the river. A wind ran through the street, spiced with the smell of sage and sun-cured grass. Heat lay heavy over the town.

The two men crossed the street and turned toward Howlett's, with the marshal's hand firm on Noll's arm. The broadwalk gave out hollow echoes of their passing. When they came to the door of the saloon, the nester drew a deep breath and felt the old current of dread crowd him.

The stale smell of whiskey and beer and tobacco smoke made a stagnant deadfall in the air in front of the saloon. Dowling shoved open the door and stepped through and for the space of a single breath there was no talk in the place and no sound except that sucked in backwash from the street by the swinging door.

Wilhoit's bunch was here and a scattering of riders from other outfits, making the saloon quite crowded. Yet men moved back to give Ed Dowling room. This was the magic of his name and the legend built around his prowess as an honest gunfighter. He stared straight ahead. He said, "Frane?" and turned at the sound of the gunman's sudden, disturbed breathing.

In this range of big men, Linn Frane was small and dark and wholly virulent. He had made his reputation in the Lincoln County war in New Mexico, and he carried himself with a kind of salty arrogance. His right arm was in a sling, but he wore two guns and it was rumored that he was deadly with either hand. He came around from the bar with a pale fury forming on his cheeks, stung to the core by the command Dowling had over the situation.

Dowling said in his dry old voice, "You have until an hour of sundown to get out of town." He drew up his shoulders and repeated the order in softest voice, "An hour of sun." He turned on his heel and caught Noll's arm and started out of the place.

Press Wilhoit's brittle voice stopped him. "This town and this range are free. My men can come and go as they please."

Wilhoit was short and broad and there was an overbearing assurance about the man that showed he was used to having his way. He hated any man who challenged his authority. That hatred was reflected in his small-drawn eyes and the hard roll of his heavy lips as he looked at Dowling. He made an angry gesture with his hand.

"You can't order my men around, Ed. I won't stand for it."

The marshal turned his back on Wilhoit, maintaining a tight-lipped silence, and Henry Noll thought for a moment the rancher was going to draw and shoot Dowling in the back. The murderous impulse was plain in his eyes; it was something a man couldn't mistake.

Then they were on the walk again, and relief was like a chill wind blowing against the sweaty heat of Noll's face. Fear had touched him there in the saloon, and something very near death had rubbed his nerve ends in warning; the memory of it left him weak from shock.

"I must take care of my team, Ed," he said, turning away from Dowling. "I will be over at your office in a minute."

The marshal took a single step from the sidewalk, stumbled and reached for some support. It was an odd, groping movement, and the nester felt a chill ride down his back. He swung quickly and caught Dowling's arm. He stood stock-still in the street, gripping Dowling's arm, and a thin overlay of sweat began to glisten on his face and he knew in that moment the secret that the old marshal had been so carefully concealing from the country.

Ed Dowling was blind!

"**M**OVE on, you fool!" the marshal whispered urgently, and Noll knew unfriendly eyes were watching them from the saloon. He straightened with an effort and crossed the street's yellow dust. He walked mechanically, still stunned by the unexpected and awful revelation, and his most apparent feeling after the first shock was one of awe. It was clear to him now just how much Dowling had been prepared to sacrifice, and the insight he had into the old man's character left him with a sense of deep shame for his own part in this struggle.

He began, as soon as they were back in Dowling's office, "My God, Ed—"

"Frane's bullet did that," the marshal answered, tiredly. "It was worse at first. I could see nothing. Now things are beginning to take shape again. I could see you outlined in that door. That's why I've been cooped up here for a week, staving off another meeting as long as possible.

"But I can't put it off any longer," he finished. "Let Wilhoit get started up Cow Creek way and no farmer in this country will be safe. The other ranchers are just waiting to see how this comes out." His gray eyes looked pain-seared as he stared into space. "I'm sure I can beat Frane—if I can just see him against the sun."

"So that's why you gave him until an hour of sundown," Noll muttered. "If I could just handle a gun!"

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Dowling smiled. "Every man to his trade," he said. "You're a farmer, not a gunfighter." The marshal turned, busy with his own thoughts.

Ed Dowling was a cattleman, had been for fifty years, and his sentiments were all with that faction. But his sense of fairness would not let him stand idly by and see the nesters persecuted.

But his inner feelings were made apparent when he rolled another smoke and returned tobacco and papers to his pocket, without offering them to Noll. This was a courtesy he never denied a cowman—and again the unconscious gesture slashed at Noll's self-respect like a knife.

The day waned and Dowling rose and hitched up his gunbelt. "It's time," he said, and looked at Noll for a deliberate interval. "Leave the country with your wife and kids if this doesn't come out right. A family is no good without a father."

He gave Noll a tight smile and stepped through the door.

THE word was about. The quietness of the town was a thing that tugged at nerve ends. No man stepping into the street could mistake its meaning. Henry Noll had a sick, helpless feeling as he followed the old marshal out into the glare.

A knot of men came out of Howlett's and at once turned back into the saloon. Panic struck Noll. Could Dowling see Frane against the sun? Everything depended on that.

Sunlight slanted in from the west and the street's ruffled dust made sifting patterns in the light. Frane and Wilhoit came out of the saloon and Frane turned at once toward them, a slim, stiff figure seeming very formidable to Noll at the moment. He walked slowly, carefully, and even at that distance Noll could see the twisted malevolence of his dark face.

Noll murmured, "He's smack in the middle of the street," and watched Dowling peer through the haze that shrouded his vision, trying to locate his enemy. The marshal's face looked strained and scrubbed of color.

Noll moved to the sidewalk. He saw Press Wilhoit watching him across the intervening distance, still hard-held by the rage that had gripped him in the saloon.

Dust and the smell of scorched earth was in the air, but there was a coolness inside Henry Noll as Frane halted. Then a clammy hand seemed to grip his heart and squeeze it dry. For Frane had halted in the only shadow along the street.

Noll slanted a quick look at the marshal and saw the sudden puzzlement that came to the old man's squinted eyes. He looked back at Frane, and in that instant he understood

the sureness that came to the man's eyes.

Frane knew, or had guessed, that something was wrong!

Noll yelled, "Dowling!" and spun from the sidewalk and came up against the marshal with his shoulder, knocking him down. Frane's first shot split the air between them and then Frane was moving in for the kill. Noll grabbed the marshal's gun and came erect to take a smashing blow in the left side.

The ripping, sickening impact of the slug knocked him half around and drew a black veil in front of his eyes and completely unsteady him. It seemed a long, long time to the nester before his vision cleared and showed him Linn Frane striding in with a smoking six-shooter in his hand. He had one hand in the street's dust and he lifted the gun and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot seemed to take all purpose from Frane. He came up on his toes, very slow, and stood stock-still for a paralyzing run of time, with his leaden eyes continuing to burn at Noll over the sights of his leveled gun. Then he broke at the knees and neck and waist and went down.

Press Wilhoit came away from the saloon wall, his eyes wild and unsteady. He ground out, "By God, a nester!" and went for his gun. Noll shot him dead just as Wilhoit's gun cleared leather and sent its single, thunderous blast into the dust at his feet.

The steady racket of the shooting flattened into the town's silence and was lost in echo. Noll said, "It's over, Ed," and his voice had a flat, faraway sound in his own ears; his hands seemed ten thousand miles away, and his breathing was ragged from what he had been through. He knew a dull wonder that he was still alive.

"Wilhoit, too?" Dowling asked, trying to pierce the darkness that hemmed him in.

Noll said, "Yes," and dropped the gun. He did not know that he was falling until he hit the ground. Everything was hazy.

Then old Doc Sommers was kneeling at his side, probing at the wound.

"You'll be up and about in a few weeks," the doctor assured him. "You've got a couple of smashed ribs. But it's not too serious."

Dowling put a twist on his brown-paper quirk, speaking from an old man's hard-earned wisdom. "A man can take his troubles over the hill, Henry, but he can never run away from them. They are always there, in his heart." He smiled wryly. "I should know. It took me sixty years to learn that I couldn't run away from myself."

He bent and put the cigarette between Noll's lips, and that simple gesture of equality and understanding meant more to the nester than words. There was a great pride in his eyes when he looked up at the marshal.

(Continued from page 6)

take his pencil and write down the answers to that list, and see how HE scores. Maybe it will "learn" him something. The answers will be given later, but don't let him peek. If he can answer them as well as he requires in his list, I apologize, humbly, and yet they were as common as dirt in the frying pan.

Now I am going to give the REAL MEANING—or should I say the unadulterated meaning—of his 20 examples, and you will see how they have been degraded over the years by "Wabblers."

1. Failing to do or accomplish something absurdly easy. As in all other walks of life, there are those who simply cannot do things as they should be done, or always the difficult way. There were cow hands who could never get the hang of saddling a horse without making the horse nervous or rebellious; couldn't drive a bunch of dogies without them scattering; couldn't stand herd without making the herd uneasy and couldn't drive a critter into a corral without raising all hell, etc. A poke who couldn't drive a fence staple without bending a dozen or so and perhaps busting his thumb in the process, was the man who "Couldn't drive a nail in a snow ball."

2. As used, it is a misnomer. The term was "frog-sticker." However, both the term frog-sticker and its significance, applied to Texans and the south country, since the northern range did not go for or seldom owned a frog sticker. (A hunting knife of "Boy-knife"). Knife fighting in the north country was gravely frowned upon and the knife slinger was not tolerated. "Toothpick?" Nonsense.

3. No, there is no difference between a brand blotcher and a brand blotter—with this exception—hardly worth mentioning: a brand blotcher was a round-up term for a man who made a mess of a brand, so much so that you couldn't tell what brand it was supposed to be, by failing to hold the iron still on the hide

and burning the brand deep and clear. THAT was a **BLOTCHER** or **BOTCHER**. A brand blotter referred to a rustler; one who blotted out the legal brand and made it look like something else entirely.

4. Yes, a "calico pony" is a spotted pony in some sections, but a "pinto" is *not* a calico, and a "piebald" pony is a horse with odd colored eyes, say a glass and a brown eye.

5. A "yack" or "hack," was not used as a term for "foolish or stupid individual." We had an entirely different term for such people. (What was it? Challenge!) The terms yack or hack were invariably applied to a no-good cowboy; one who could not be depended upon to do the right thing under any circumstances.

6. You guessed wrong. "Climate fever" had but one meaning, no matter who used it—bad man or trouble maker. When the climate is bad for a person's health—they move—and fast. It meant that troubles had reached such a stage that it was no longer healthy to stick around in that locality. "Ague" was simply the "Shakes" or "Shivers." This also, was a matter of location—*South*, never in the north country.

7. Very infrequently was a bunkhouse ever called a "dice house" and then only when the speaker had a game of dice in his mind. As always used and understood, a dice house was a gambling joint. While a bunk house was called a "louse cage."

8. Hurrah for us! Almost right. A "draw" or "swale," while certainly *not* a small canyon (except to an ant), is a depression between low hills in undulating country, down which rain water flows, whether or not grassy or gravelly, and whether or not there are trees. A "gully" is something bigger and a "gulch" is something still bigger, while a "canyon" is the BIG slit, with no further limitations. A "coule" meant a rather low, flat draw, but wide and flaring where it opens out upon the flat country. Usually with water or marshy.

(Continued on page 54)

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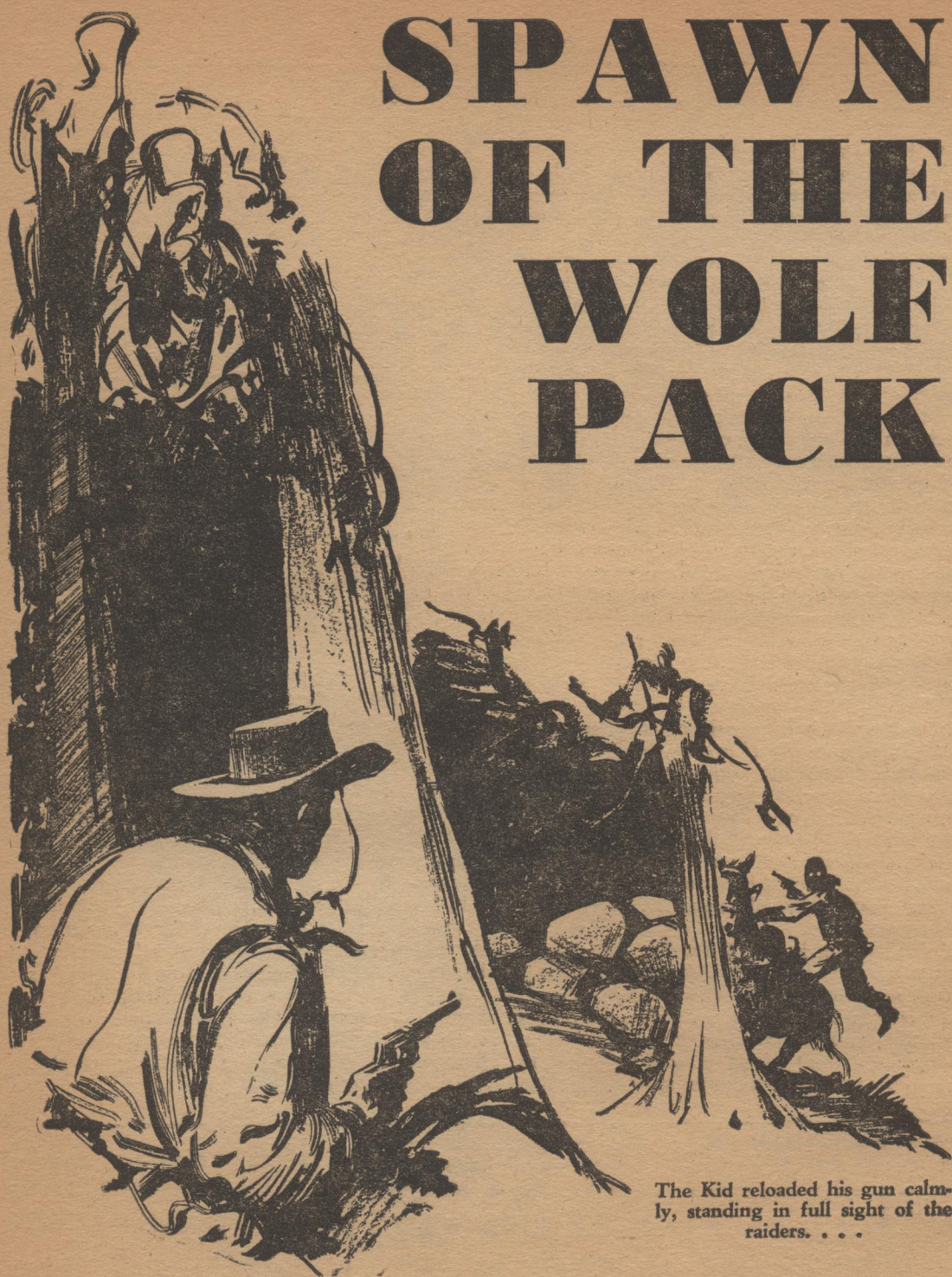


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SPAWN OF THE WOLF PACK



The Kid reloaded his gun calmly, standing in full sight of the raiders. . . .

By **THOMAS THOMPSON**

*The Arizona Kid started out where most men
leave off—with his back to a rock and shoot-
ing it out with the law!*

THE guns made a snarling, angry sound from down in the clump of live oaks at the bottom of the draw and the thin blue flags of smoke curled contemptuously in sneering challenge. Old Wolf Sorenson laid down his rifle and dabbed feebly at the blood that was soaking his shirt front.

"That's all there is for me, son," he said to the Kid. "You make a run for it, and while you're running you run clean out of this life."

The Kid levered a shell into his Winchester and rested the rifle across his knee. "I reckon I'll be staying close here," he said. "You've sided me ever since I was a shaver and I don't aim to run now that you need me."

The old man's eyes appraised him and he shook his head. The Kid was tall and straight—narrow of hip and broad of shoulder. His skin bore a natural darkness and his black eyes blended into the shadow of his face. His mouth was drawn thin in a bitter line, but there was a hint of an almost woman-like softness to his features.

The old man was gasping for breath now. "Have I ever steered you wrong, Kid?" the old man asked.

"Never. That's why I'm going down there now and wipe out that bunch of bounty hunting—"

Wolf Sorenson fought for breath. "They're just doing their job. We knew this would come some time—we've talked about it before, you and me. When you live the way we've lived winding up with your back to a rock and a bullet in your chest is part of the game. But there's no sense doin' it afore you have to. That's why I want you to make a break while you can. There's a place in California—"

Wolf Sorenson's voice trailed off and there was a glazed light in his eyes. The Kid had seen death before, and he knew it was near now. The possemen in the draw cracked down with their rifles again and the lead chugged wickedly into the clay of the cutbank where the two outlaws were hiding.

"Will you listen to me, Kid?" the old man pleaded.

"I'm listening," the Kid said and lowered his rifle.

The old man said, "I'm a goner—". He looked down at the deep stain that was spreading over his shirt. "You got a cousin out in California. He's a lawman, son. You go to him and get a fresh start." Old Wolf Sorenson slumped forward and the Kid felt the loneliness of death creep into the hidden cutbank. He got to his feet then and ran for his horse that was standing ground-tied back of

the boulders at the edge of the cutbank. There were tears stinging his eyelids as he lashed the pony and headed for the cover of willows down along the creek.

IT WAS a new land the Kid rode into the early fall of that year. It was a land of rawhide ropes and center fire saddles—of broad valleys and rolling hills studded with live oak and knee high wild oat. The cattle were fat, and they grazed in a lazy contented way that seemed a part of this land. As he followed the course of the Santa Ynez the bells of the mission began to toll and the sound floated softly through the blue air of early evening.

It was a good land, and had it not been for the loneliness in his heart the Kid would have liked it here. He reined his horse in at a dobe house with a long porch and dismounted in the shade of a twisted sycamore. There was no friendliness on the face of the tall man who came to the porch.

"I'm a stranger here," the Kid said. "I wondered if I could buy a bait of grain for my horse." The expression on the tall man's face changed.

"Stranger, huh?" he said. "Get down and make yourself at home. Looks like you could stand a feed yourself. Been riding far?"

"Arizona."

"Come in, man, and welcome to El Rancho de los Tres Robles. Here, Marios!" he called to a Mexican who stood near by. "Take the stranger's horse and see that he is cared for."

The day was hot, but inside the big adobe a soft coolness spread like a mountain breeze, caught and held. Native Indian rugs covered the floor and in the dining room a long oaken table glowed invitingly through its hand-polished surface.

"I'm Carl McGinty," the Kid's host said, extending his hand. "Don Carlos McGinty some call me here. Sit down and I'll bring you some wine."

He had intended to stay but a few minutes, but under the hospitality of Don Carlos the day wore on into a soft cricket filled evening and for the first time the Kid tasted the life of men within the law, and he liked it. The girl, Barbara, came in just after dark. She was tall and straight and her oval face and olive complexion suggested to him that the warm blood of Spain was mingled with the aggressive strains of Irish in the veins of Barbara McGinty. He shied from her, for in his past there had not been time to know women and the life he had led was not one

that had needed the helping hand of a wife.

But the tang of barbecued beef and the glow of California wine at the long oak table dispelled his feeling of strangeness and loosened his tongue and he found himself wanting to stay in this country. In turn he told them of the wild desert stretches of Arizona, of a kind old man known as Wolf Sorenson—a man who owned a ranch and had many cattle, he said, for it seemed better this way. It was hard to explain the thin line that made some men call others outlaws.

After dinner the girl took him to a low hill in back of the house and there in the moonlight she pointed across the long valley and told him of the land grant of the Alamo Pintado and of the Padres who had built the missions. And as he listened to her soft voice and felt the fragrance of her close to him he knew that again Wolf Sorenson had been right. That from now on he would live a different life—a life on the side of the law—and he found himself anxious to meet Sheriff Hatch Lansing, this distant cousin who had chosen the safer path.

They went back to the house and the three sat on the long porch and talked of cattle, until the Kid wanted them to know more about him—wanted them to know that he was to be a man on the side of the law.

"How far in to Tres Alamos?" he asked and twisted a cigarette, hoping they would give him a chance to tell them more of himself.

"About ten miles," Don Carlos said. "You have business there? There's plenty of work here on the ranch if you need a job."

"I have some kinfolks there," the Kid said proudly, for this was the opportunity he had awaited. "Sheriff Hatch Lansing—sort of a cousin."

He noticed no change in the McGintys there in the darkness, for he could not see their faces, but he sensed a tenseness and could feel the chill that had swept across the porch with his words. There was a long silence and Barbara McGinty got to her feet and went into the house. She did not say good night and the Kid hoped she would come back.

"Marios will have your horse ready," Don Carlos McGinty said softly. "Ride the main road straight into Tres Alamos."

The Kid caught the edge in the man's voice and wanted to ask why, for an hour ago he had heard Don Carlos instructing a Mexican woman to make the guest room ready. But he felt it was best to say nothing about it, so he got to his feet and extended his hand.

"I want to thank you," he began. Don Carlos turned and walked down the porch. The Kid wondered if perhaps there in the darkness he had not seen his proffered handshake.

He went slowly toward the corral and found

his horse waiting. Don Carlos was not around and he mounted slowly and started to ride down the lane. The old Mexican, Marios, caught at his bridle and held him there. Looking down the Kid could make out the whites of the Mexican's eyes and when he spoke his even teeth were visible below his drooping moustache.

"It is perhaps better you know, señor," the Mexican said. "The friends of Sheriff Hatch Lansing are not welcome at the ranch—"

THE town of Tres Alamos bellowed a one block greeting to the night as it hunched there under its namesake, the three gnarled sycamores that stood proud and alone here in this land of oak. Through the swirl of dust kicked up by cow horses fighting the noise of the saloons there at the hitch-racks the kerosene lamps glowed dully, like wicked yellow eyes in the night.

The Kid thought of countless other towns he had seen as he dismounted in front of the Liberty and tied his horse at the rail. There was the same rush of garbled sound and smell of whiskey and smoke when he opened the door and there were the same array of bentwood chairs and green-felted tables. The tension of high stakes hung over a large table at the back of the room.

The Kid went to the bar and ordered whiskey, and as the searing raw liquid cut his throat he thought again of the peace of El Rancho de los Tres Robles and he thought of the softness of Barbara McGinty's voice and the liveliness of her eyes.

"Where might a man find Sheriff Hatch Lansing?" the Kid asked then.

The bartender looked him over for some time, appraised the gun on his hip and nodded toward the big table at the back of the room.

It was between hands and the men at the big table had tilted back in their chairs and were calling for drinks when the Kid made his way there.

"Which one of you gents is Hatch Lansing?" he asked and saw hands start toward gunbelts.

A small thin man with a green eyeshade took a cigar from his mouth and looked up. "That might be me," he said.

The first reaction to hit the Kid was one of amazement and the next was one of disgust. Sheriff Hatch Lansing was a dwarf of a man with a gnome-like misshapen face and a hideous gash of a mouth partially hidden by a heavy drooping moustache. His arms were toothpick thin and the skin was drawn across the bones like parchment where his arms showed below his rolled sleeves. He wore a black vest, open, and a short gambler's apron.

A Mexican at the table said, "Let's get on with the game," and the sheriff turned on him

so rapidly that the Kid could not follow the movement.

"They call me The Arizona Kid," the Kid began. "Wolf Sorenson said—"

The sheriff's face twisted into a deformed devilish grimace that the Kid took for a smile.

"It's all right, boys," the sheriff said, and his voice was a honeyed purr. "This boy's kin of mine and Wolf Sorenson was a man who outsmarted some of the best lawmen in the Southwest."

A feeling of rough comradeship made its way around the table. The Kid had felt it before, around smokeless fires down along the border. The Mexican did not join in the welcome. The Kid could see by his stack that he was probably the loser and he was anxious to get on with the play.

"What's the idea, Hatch?" the Mexican said. "Trying to break up the game when you're ahead?"

Hatch Lansing turned on the Mexican and there was still the same deformed smile on his face and still the same purr in his voice. "I don't like that remark, Ramon," he said. "Perhaps you meant nothing by it, eh?" And now the Kid sensed the nearness of gun-smoke.

"It would not be the first time you played your own rules," the Mexican said, half rising from his chair. The Kid could see the entire play. The Mexican had both hands on the edge of the table. He was armed, but he had made no move for his gun. There was a blurr of movement in the sheriff's chair, a crash of lead, and then the Mexican was sliding to the floor, a bullet through his head. Hatch Lansing blew the smoke from the muzzle of his gun before sliding it back into his belt. With the same twisted smile on his face but with a light in his eyes that was feverish he looked at each man around the table.

"Self-defense, no?" the sheriff asked, nodding to each man in turn. Then his eyes fell on The Arizona Kid.

The Kid looked at his lawman cousin a

long time, and he did not like what he saw. Slowly his eyes took in the other men at the table, and he could see that they were waiting for his answer. A slow revolt started burning within him. This was not what he had ridden the hard miles for.

He let his shoulders sag and his hand dropped near his gun. His eyes met those of Hatch Lansing, and when he spoke his voice was soft, but it carried to every man.

"Back where I come from we'd call that murder."

There was a ripple of silence went round the table and spread to the rest of the room. Sheriff Hatch Lansing appraised the Kid with his feverish eyes and his thin hands toyed with the gold chain that crossed his vest. The twisted smile did not leave his face.

At last he said, "But this is not back where you come from, eh, Kid? This is where you've come. And a man in a new country needs friends."

"It doesn't matter," the Kid said. "I don't aim to stay."

"I could use a good man," the sheriff said, bringing his hands to the top of the table. "There's been a lot of rustling and devilment going on around here." The Kid thought he detected a suppressed chuckle in the room. "I'd make you a special deputy."

It was then a foolish, romantic idea struck the Kid. Never in his life had he known anything but cool thinking and planned logic, but now for a moment all that faded away into a rosy dream of catching rustlers for Barbara McGinty.

He seated himself across from the sheriff. "Maybe I'm interested," he said, and the tension left the room as men called for drinks and the clink of coins mingled with the clatter of chips.

THE KID could not sleep that night and he saddled his horse and rode out along the course of the Alamo Pintado. The full moon yellowed the wave of wild oat and

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sent deep shadows fingering their lacy pools of darkness under the spreading oaks. He thought of Barbara McGinty and found it hard to keep his horse's head from turning in the direction of the sprawling Rancho de los Tres Robles. There was a well-traveled road cutting its rutted way across the valley, and he took this, riding slowly and inhaling the fragrance of dry grass wetted by the early dew.

As he topped a small hill he saw a man on horseback coming toward him. The man rode low in the saddle, as if pressed there by fear, and behind him came two other riders. When they passed through the oaks into the moonlight the Kid could see the glint of light on gun barrels. A flash of flame spurted from one of the saddles, and the lone rider wheeled his horse and made for the shelter of willows along the Alamo Pintado. For a second the Kid fingered the new badge on his vest and then he, too, made for the cover of willows, his gun coming smoothly into his hand as he rode.

He circled around, dismounted, then went on foot toward the spot where he had last seen the rider. After a moment he made out his man crouched low in the willows. He could see the man did not have a gun.

The Kid walked slowly forward, gun in hand, and asked, "Trouble, Mister?"

The man in the willows jumped to his feet, throwing his hands into the air. There in the speckled moonlight the Kid could see the terror on the man's face and took him for a Mexican—a young man, dressed in the fancy garb of the dons. He spoke in perfect English, and although his voice trembled his words were marked with hatred.

"You are satisfied now, I hope," he said. "Why do you not shoot? It is what you wanted."

"Not me," the Kid said easily. "I don't want you. But it looks like those two gents coming there mean business."

"Do not play with me," the young Mexican said. "They have burned my barn and driven off my horses. Now they have driven me into this trap—" he shrugged his shoulders—"I was a fool to stay," he said flatly. "I knew there was no hope." The two riders had reached the creek and had jerked their lathered horses to a sliding stop. They ran forward, now, guns out. One of the men carried a rope, and the Kid recognized them both as men who had been at the poker table earlier in the evening. When they saw his drawn gun they stopped short—then the taller of the two grinned.

"Hello, Kid," he said easily. "Didn't figure the sheriff would have you out on the job so early—"

"Just happened along," the Kid said softly. "What do you plan on doing?"

"Gonna string this Mex up, iffen we can find a likely oak," the man said grinning. "He's been causing a sight of trouble."

"Is it trouble when a man tries to protect his stock from thieves like you?" the Mexican said. "Go ahead, hang me. But you cannot whip the whole of California. Some time someone will come who will make you pay for this."

"Shut up," the gunman said, stepping forward. "Here, Keck, tie the *cholo* up!" The man called Keck came forward with his rope.

"I guess maybe we ought to have a trial or something," the Kid said, thumbing back the hammer of his pistol. "I figure I better arrest all three of you until we get this straightened out. Line up there."

For a split second there was no move, then Keck snapped the rope from his side and it settled around the Kid's arms with a jerk. It was so sudden and unexpected that the Kid had no chance to dodge, and he felt the rawhide biting into his flesh as the tall man knocked him down and Keck sawed tighter on the rope.

"I told the boss I didn't like the looks of this devil," Keck said.

The Kid waited until he felt Keck's weight leave his chest and then he lashed out. His sharp-toed boots found a mark and he snapped himself to his feet and kicked at Keck's startled face. There was a sickening crunch as the man went down and then the tall man was on him, pounding his face to a pulp. The Kid felt himself going under but just then the young Mexican closed in with a rush and a gun barrel squished against flesh. The tall man groaned and sank to his knees. There was a glitter of steel as the Mexican slashed the bonds from the Kid's body.

"Come with me, señor," the Mexican said. "I know where there will be a battle. That is why they chased me."

Fear and confusion dogged the Kid as the two horses thundered down the road in the direction of El Rancho de los Tres Robles. There was a sharp command in Spanish from out of the darkness and they pulled in their horses.

"It is all right," the Mexican said. "It is Manuel Estrada and I bring an officer from the governor."

"Pass, Señor Estrada," the voice from the darkness said. "Don Carlos will be happy—"

"Wait a minute, Estrada," the Kid said, but Manuel Estrada waved him to silence.

"There is no time, señor," Estrada said. "You will see that it is as Don Carlos said in the letter. The sheriff and his men will strike tonight, for they intend to win before you arrive from the north—"

They were at the long front porch now, and two armed men stepped from the shadows and

motioned them inside. Don Carlos was in the entry hall awaiting them and in the long dining room the Kid could make out the dark hair and oval face of Barbara. Don Carlos stopped short when he saw the Kid.

"Manuel," he snapped. "What are you doing with this man—bringing him here? Is it not enough that I have already been fool enough to let him see the place?"

"But Don Carlos," Manuel protested. "This is the officer sent by the governor as you requested." The Kid could see that Barbara had come from the dining room and was standing in the shadows. He wondered if it were true that he saw a glad look come into her eyes at Manuel's announcement.

DON CARLOS stepped forward and took the Kid's coat lapels in his hand. Deftly he flipped one aside and the deputy sheriff's badge caught the light and held it.

"Is this the badge of the governor's office?"

"Please, dad," Barbara McGinty said softly. "Let him explain for himself."

"There is nothing to explain, Miss Barbara," the Kid said softly. "I am not from the governor. I am Hatch Lansing's cousin, like I said, but after meeting that gent I don't aim to work for him. I wish you'd believe that."

"Lock him up," Don Carlos said. "We couldn't trust him."

A Mexican started toward the Kid and, as he did, the Kid shifted his weight and his gun came into his hand. He covered the room with it, and all the softness had left his face.

"I can't fight if I'm locked up," he said, "and I aim to fight. Tonight I'm gonna prove for once and all which side of this ruckus I'm on!" He backed slowly out into the night, off the porch, and alongside his horse. Once there he eased himself into the saddle and drove home the spurs. There was a wild babble of voices from the ranch house and then rifles spoke and lead whistled a death dirge around his ears.

It was near the willow-lined course of the Alamo Pintado that he saw twenty riders coming down the low valley between two hills. There were rifles across their saddle horns and some carried long poles with burlap bags wadded around the ends. They would be soaked with oil, these bags, the Kid thought. They made fine torches for setting off barns or fields of ripe wheat.

The sight of one man charging twenty caused the raiding party momentary hesitation and they deployed, ready for attack from other quarters. The Kid opened fire and made each shot count, then wheeled into cover himself behind a nearby oak. He had just time to reload when the party charged him.

He reloaded his gun calmly, standing in full sight of the raiders. He saw three men take aim, and felt the lead cut close to his body, but he remained unmarked. He laughed then, for a man could laugh when there were only seconds of life left. This had been Wolf Sorenson's prediction. He raised his gun, took his time about firing and saw a hooded figure sprawl awkwardly from his saddle. And then the shooting ceased and he saw one man dismount and come forward afoot.

He could not see the face, because of the hood, but from the slight stature and the peaked shape of the head the Kid knew he was face to face with Sheriff Hatch Lansing and that the sheriff had chosen to make it a personal fight. Lansing dodged behind a tree and his gun spoke. The slug caught the Kid in the shoulder and sent him spinning. He got to his feet just as another slug tore the ground where he had fallen.

Slowly the Kid started walking forward. Again the sheriff's gun snarled, and again the shock of lead dropped the Kid to one knee. But he could see, a flutter of cloth, now, and took careful aim, kneeling there, and saw the sheriff stagger out in the open, clutching his elbow.

The Kid could see him raising his gun and his shot and the sheriff's rolled into one. The gnome-like sheriff turned around before he fell to the ground.

Now other rifles took up the chatter and there were the wild yells of men and the soft high-pitched voices of Spain—the Kid ducked low as another band of horsemen poured up the course of the Alamo Pintado.

He never lost consciousness and, as two men carried him along, he found himself praying over and over that he was being taken to El Rancho de los Tres Robles. So that when he finally opened his eyes and found that it was Barbara McGinty who was bathing his face it was like the continuation of a dream. But the handclasp of Don Carlos was real enough, and in it the Kid could feel his passport to a new life. There would be no more twisted trails and smokeless fires.

"There will be a new sheriff appointed when the governor's agent arrives, will there not?" Barbara McGinty asked her father.

"Yes, there will have to be—"

"Had you thought of a likely candidate?" Barbara asked, and it seemed to the Kid that the touch of her hand on his forehead was more tender now.

"No," Don Carlos said, hesitating.

"I have," said Barbara McGinty. "And I usually get what I want." She deliberately pressed her finger against the Kid's nose.

And The Arizona Kid sighed contentedly. Some sheriffs did all right. Even married and settled down and had families.

TALES of the

by LEE

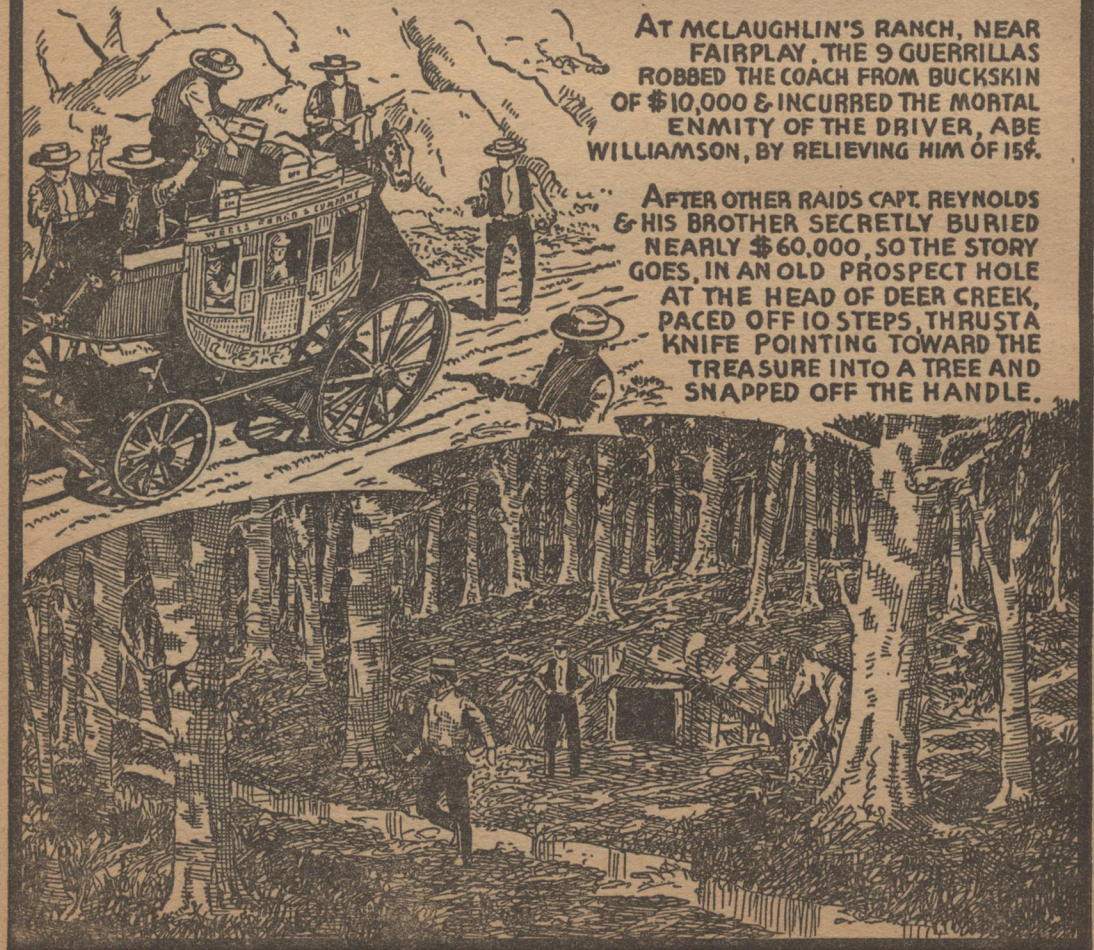
REYNOLDS' REBELLION

IN 1861 JAMES REYNOLDS, JAILED WITH HIS BROTHER JOHN IN DENVER FOR REFUSING TO SWEAR ALLEGIANCE TO THE UNION, ESCAPED & FLED TO TEXAS. BURNING FOR REVENGE & SEEKING TO EMULATE THE GUERRILLA LEADER, QUANTRELL, IN '64 JAMES, NOW A CAPTAIN, JOHN & 21 IRREGULARS SET OUT FOR DENVER.

ON THE SANTA FE TRAIL THEY BEAT OFF AN INDIAN ATTACK, THEN LOOTED A MEXICAN MULE TRAIN OF OVER \$42,000. DISSATISFIED WITH CAPT. REYNOLDS' REFUSAL FOR AN IMMEDIATE DIVISION, 14 DESERTED.

AT MCLAUGHLIN'S RANCH, NEAR FAIRPLAY, THE 9 GUERRILLAS ROBBED THE COACH FROM BUCKSKIN OF \$10,000 & INCURRED THE MORTAL ENMITY OF THE DRIVER, ABE WILLIAMSON, BY RELIEVING HIM OF 15¢.

AFTER OTHER RAIDS CAPT. REYNOLDS & HIS BROTHER SECRETLY BURIED NEARLY \$60,000, SO THE STORY GOES, IN AN OLD PROSPECT HOLE AT THE HEAD OF DEER CREEK, PACED OFF 10 STEPS, THRUST A KNIFE POINTING TOWARD THE TREASURE INTO A TREE AND SNAPPED OFF THE HANDLE.



— 'OLD' WEST



AT GENEVA GULCH, WHILE DIVIDING THE REMAINING GOLD DUST, A VOLLEY FROM A POSSE KILLED 1 RAIDER. ALL BUT JOHN REYNOLDS AND JAKE STOWE WERE ROUNDED UP AND ON THE WAY TO FT. LYON UNDER AN ESCORT COMMANDED BY ABE WILLIAMSON WERE LINED UP, BLINDFOLDED AND SHOT.

ONE, JOHN ANDREWS, CAME TO HOURS LATER, CRAWLED TO A DESERTED CABIN AND PERSUADED A TRAVELER TO TAKE A NOTE TO J.N. COCHRAN WHO SPIRITED HIM TO HIS HOME AND NURSED HIM BACK TO HEALTH.



ANDREWS, REJOINING JOHN REYNOLDS & STOWE IN SANTA FE, WAS KILLED ALONG WITH THE LATTER IN A RUSTLING ATTEMPT. REYNOLDS WORKED AS A GAMBLER THEN, WITH ONE ALBERT BROWN, TURNED ROADAGENT.

IN OCTOBER 1871 REYNOLDS WAS MORTALLY WOUNDED IN A CATTLE RAID. IN AN ABANDONED DUGOUT JUST BEFORE HE DIED HE DREW BROWN A MAP OF THE LOCATION OF THE GUERRILLA TREASURE.

BROWN, TEAMING UP QUITE BY CHANCE WITH J.N. COCHRAN, REACHED THE APPROXIMATE SITE OF THE CACHE ONLY TO FIND THAT A FOREST FIRE HAD OBLITERATED ALL MARKS OF IDENTIFICATION. FOLLOWING 2 MORE FRUITLESS SEARCHES FOR THE LOOT OF REYNOLDS' REBELLION, HE WAS SHOT IN A BARROOM BRAWL.



THIS

Jim Dixon knew all about guns—except that the way to a killer's heart is a bullet through a woman's. . . .

By JAMES SHAFFER



Jim brought into play his long-barreled Colts. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Killer's Town

THE train was still a few miles from Andover, when it ground to a halt. Jim Dixon gazed out the grimy coach window, and noticed that it was a woman who had flagged the stop. The conductor helped her aboard, and Jim Dixon sat up in surprise.

It had been three years since he'd seen Queenie Ralston. Then she'd been dealing faro in Mark Diamond's place in Denver.

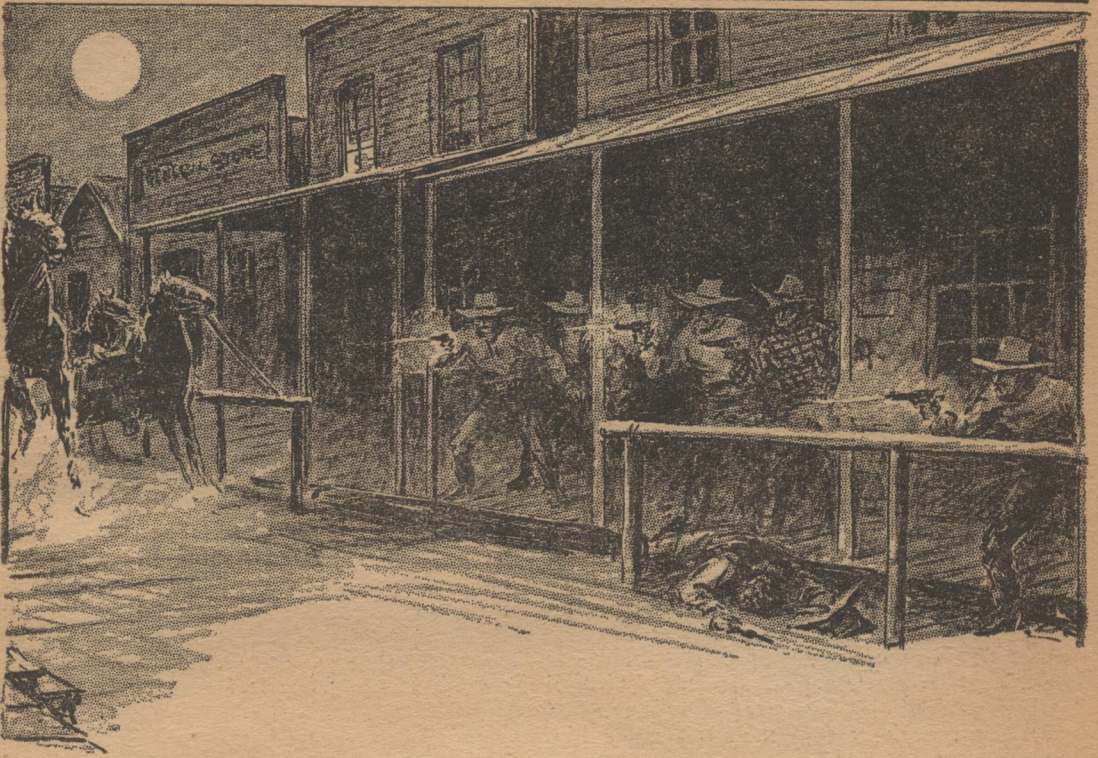
As she came into the coach he noticed that her age was beginning to show—she must be all of forty-five, he thought. Her eyes shuttled quickly over the passengers and came to rest on him. He slid over to make room for her.

"Jim!" she said. "Imagine running into you like this!"

He smiled politely and murmured a greeting, but in the back of his head was the thought that Queenie Ralston had known he'd be on this train. This meeting was planned; it was no accident.

"I was out riding and my horse picked up a rock," Queenie said. "I saw the train and decided I'd get back to town quicker this way. The horse will find its own way back."

BADGE FOR HIRE



It was a long explanation, and it was a lie, Jim thought. He'd seen the horse trot away, and it had not limped. But he kept quiet, knowing that an explanation would come in due time. They rode for a time in silence.

He had not known Queenie was in Andover. But wherever Queenie was, Mark Diamond would also be. He frowned. The summons he'd gotten from Andover had not mentioned names. But if Diamond was here, so was trouble.

"How's Mark?" he asked. For a moment an expression flitted across her face. It was gone in an instant, leaving him to wonder what it had been. Fear? Worry? He frowned. It could even have been hate.

She didn't reply, but touched the butt of one tied-down Colt. "Still hiring 'em, I see?"

The smile on his face was cold and bitter. "If the price is right."

And he could usually get his price, he thought, even though his services came high. His jobs never lasted long—he worked fast. Queenie would know how he worked.

She leaned over, so that the perfume she used was heavy in his nostrils. She laid a jewelled hand on his arm.

"I've got a thousand dollars, Jim. It'll be

the easiest thousand you ever made in your life."

"I'm listening."

"The thousand is yours if you don't get off the train at Andover. Just keep riding."

Jim pulled long on his cigarette; filled his mouth with smoke and blew it upward. He could feel Queenie's eyes on him; tense and expectant.

When he spoke, it was in a half musing voice, as if he were thinking aloud.

"The mayor of Andover sends for me to clamp a gunsmoke lid on the town. Tame it with a six-gun. And a few miles out of town, Mark Diamond's partner—" he slid over the word quickly—"offers me a thousand to keep on riding." He paused. "Mark must stand to lose plenty, if the town is cleaned up"

"You're usually pretty good at guessing, Jim," she replied. "But this time you're not even warm."

"No?"

"Mark Diamond is mayor of Andover," she said slowly. "He's the man that sent for you."

He sat up quickly, surprise breaking through the poker mask that usually veiled his features.

"Mark? Mayor of Andover?"

THIS news had him. He waited, tried to get his bearings, finally asked, "You and Diamond bust up?"

"No." She started to say more, but at that instant a man came from the rear coach. He was tall, and had the dignity of a prosperous banker or merchant. He saw Queenie and stopped.

"Saw you flag the train," he said. "Didn't like the long ride back to town?" He was speaking to Queenie, but his eyes were on Jim Dixon. They were probing, calculating eyes, sizing him up, gauging him. They were cold eyes, too, hard as granite, though set in a pleasant smiling face. Jim Dixon knew he'd been recognized, and he wondered if that meant anything.

"My horse went lame," Queenie smiled. "This is Ashton Blake," she told Jim, "one of Andover's leading citizens. And this is Jim Dixon, Mr. Blake."

"Not *the* Jim Dixon?" Blake said in surprise; and Jim got the impression that Blake was a little anxious to show surprise. "I've heard of you, Dixon—who hasn't. Going far?"

Again Dixon found himself in a situation he couldn't understand. There were things going on here that he couldn't figure out; an ugly undercurrent that was sweeping him into water that was over his head. He could feel trouble and violence ahead. He prided himself on being able to spot violence before it reached him, but now he couldn't, and it made him feel nervous.

"To Andover," he told Blake, and the man's face registered astonishment. Fake astonishment, this time—of that Jim was sure.

"Didn't know our town had need of a gun-sliding marshal," he said. "Andover has been right quiet and peaceful, since the boom days when the railroad was building through."

"Then my job should be easy," Jim said with a smile.

He reached up and got his bag from the baggage rack overhead. Ashton Blake said good-by in that pleasant way of his and moved toward the end of the coach.

"Have you forgotten the thousand?" Queenie asked. There was urgency in her voice; a pleading tone.

Jim grinned. "Maybe when I know what you're buying, I can get a better price."

She grasped his arm. "Just take the thousand and keep riding," she urged.

The train had stopped and the passengers were beginning to pour off. In another couple of minutes, the train would be moving again. A thousand dollars just to keep riding, he thought. Then he thought, *If it's worth that to keep riding, it must be worth twice that much to get off. A man isn't in the killing business for pleasure.*

"Sorry, Queenie, but—" he said with a half

grin, and put on his hat. He saw her bite her lip with anger, then hurry on out the coach. He followed more leisurely, stepping off the coach and setting his bag down on the platform.

Andover was half old, half new. There were a few, unpainted weatherbeaten buildings along the main street, and dozens of newer buildings. The railroad was still new in Andover, and these buildings showed that the town was still growing and expanding, as a result of the railroad's coming through. It bustled and hummed with activity, cattlemen and farmers shouldering one another aside as they went about their business.

Jim frowned. There appeared to be no animosity between the two groups; the ugly undercurrent of violence and hate that he usually felt when he arrived in a town, was missing. Andover seemed placid and peaceful, just as Ashton Blake had said it was. Then why had Queenie offered him a thousand to keep on riding? Was his presence in town going to cause trouble?

That didn't make sense. There was trouble here—he remembered Ashton Blake's probing eyes and the man's simulated surprise at his being on the train. He had the feeling that Blake had been on the train for the purpose of weighing him. And it was worth a thousand dollars to Queenie Ralston if he wouldn't stop in town.

He shrugged and picked up his bag. Blake had disappeared in the crowd. He could still see Queenie's hat. He pushed through the people on the platform, and started up the sidewalk toward the center of town.

He had taken but a few steps when someone caught up with him, and he turned with mild surprise. It was Queenie Ralston again. And his surprise became more complete when she slipped her arm through his.

"I'll walk you down to the hotel," she said, smilingly, and when he tried to draw away, she clung tighter to his arm.

"Keep walking," Queenie said, and there was husky fear in her voice. He stiffened a little, and with the half smile still on his lips, probed the street ahead with narrowed eyes. Then he saw it.

Guntrap. He'd trained himself to see those things. His life had depended on it in the past, and it was because his senses were quickened, that he spotted the trap. The two men further up the street, one on each side, who appeared to be lounging in the hot sun, were a little too taut, a little too watchful.

He saw the faint scowl on the big red-headed one's face as Queenie stayed close to him. The one across the street was short and stocky, and his hand dropped disgustedly away from his gun, as he and Queenie threaded their way through the crowd.

THINGS were beginning to fall into the old familiar pattern now, he thought, as they moved on up the street. There was one element in town that always resented his coming—he would remember these faces. He grinned crookedly—he had survived many such memories.

"Hello, Queenie. Someone said you came back on the train—your horse throw you?"

Jim Dixon stopped short at the sight of the girl who had spoken. She had been hurrying toward the station and now stopped squarely in front of them. Jim looked into the deep blue of her eyes, noticed the soft roundness of her throat, and the firm curve of her lips. Things, he realized, he'd never noticed about a woman before. The thought disturbed him.

"You better get off the street, Lucy," Queenie said sharply, and then stopped, suddenly aware that the girl was looking into Jim Dixon's eyes, and that their gaze clung a long moment, before reluctantly breaking away.

When Jim Dixon came out of it he told Queenie brusquely, "I can find the hotel all right," and took her hand off his arm. The red-headed man, he noted, was fifteen feet away, up the street. Jim started for him with long strides, keeping the short, stocky man in the corner of his eyes.

He saw the two men stiffen as they started to make their play, and his hands brushed the butts of his guns lightly, yet enough to assure him that they hung right for a quick and steady draw. The redhead saw the gesture and hesitated and he heard a quick flurry of light footsteps behind him. Queenie grabbed his arm.

"Fool!" she hissed. "You wouldn't have a chance. There's a third man in that doorway."

Dixon's eyes took in the third man, as they continued up the street. Half turning, after they had passed, he saw the stocky man across the street shake his head disgustedly and walk off. The man in the doorway shrugged and followed the lank redhead into a saloon. The danger was over for the moment.

"Who was that girl, Queenie?" he asked. "Lucy Manners," Queenie replied in a queer voice. "She sings in Mark's place."

"She's pretty," he said.

"And a friend of mine," Queenie said in a tone that made him stare at her. Silence fell between them, and was not broken until they reached the porch of the hotel.

"How about an explanation?" Dixon asked.

"What about that thousand?"

"You didn't take it—that's all there is to it," she replied.

He shook his head. "You could have let them spring that gun trap. It would have been the same as my not coming to Andover in the first place—"

"No."

"I've lived a long time by knowing what I owe my life to," he argued. "Who set that trap?"

"I don't know." And Jim couldn't tell whether she was lying or not.

"It don't make sense, and you know it, Queenie," he said harshly. "You offer me a thousand to keep out of whatever trouble is building up in this town—but you won't let someone else keep me out of that trouble—" She looked up at him, and for a moment there was stark tragedy in her eyes. Then she turned her head.

"I wish you'd taken the thousand dollars," she said. "But since you did come to Andover, I'd give my own life to keep you alive!"

She turned and walked swiftly away, leaving Jim Dixon staring after her.

He went into the hotel lobby. A tall, raw-boned hotel owner shoved the register over for him to sign, and for the first time, Dixon found what he'd been expecting to find. There was fear in the man's eyes; a live, tangible fear in the way his glance shuttled furtively toward the door, as if expecting someone, and dreading the visit.

He shrugged and went to his room on the second floor. He was unpacking his bag when the faint sound of angry voices reached him

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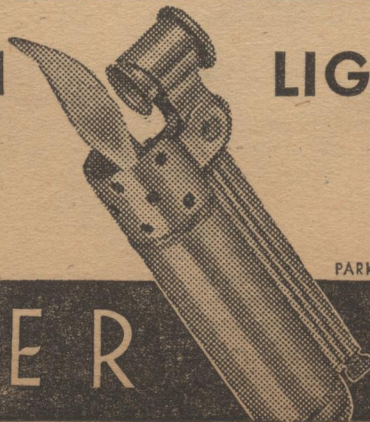
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from the lobby below. He let himself quietly out of his room and cat-footed to the top of the stairs, listening.

The hotel man's voice was ragged with desperation. "Five hundred and fifty dollars. I tell you I had to lower rates. I'd tell people the price of a room and they'd start to leave. I had to lower the price to get any business at all."

"Why argue about it?" another voice cut in impatiently. "Take our usual cut and leave 'im the rest."

"That's an idea. One fourth of eight hundred is two hundred. We'll take two hundred—"

"But I didn't take in eight hundred!" the hotel owner protested.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Deal

DIXON had eased down the stairway, and now he could see the little drama being enacted in the lobby. The hotel owner was standing helplessly against his desk, his face red and protesting, but stark fear in his eyes keeping him from doing anything except protest. Two men, guns slung low and tied down, were standing in front of the safe. They had scattered papers and records out of the safe on the floor. Both men had their backs to Jim Dixon as he came quietly down the steps. One man, a tall gent, was pawing through the hotel's records. The shorter man was watching the hotel owner, his hand resting suggestively on his gun butt.

"Two hundred cash," the tall man was saying, wetting his thumb and counting out a sheaf of greenbacks.

"That won't leave me enough to operate on," the hotel owner argued heatedly. "I've got my help to pay and other expenses."

"Shoulda thought of that before you lowered prices," the short man grunted.

Desperation overcame the hotel man's fear and caution. He lunged awkwardly forward, trying to snatch the roll of money from the tall man's hands. The short man moved swiftly, like a coiled spring unwinding. He lifted his gun and swung it down toward the hotel owner's head. The man saw the blow coming and tried to dodge, and the pistol barrel glanced off his shoulder. The short man snarled an oath and closed in.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

Jim Dixon's voice was soft, but it held a timbre that spun the three men around. The short man had his gun held high for a chopping blow. The gun muzzle dropped now, steadying squarely on Jim Dixon's midriff.

"On your way, stranger!" he rapped. "This ain't none of your concern."

Dixon's eyes shuttled swiftly over the two gunmen. They were not the ones who'd set that guntrap for him out in the street.

Dixon said quietly, "It's my business what price I pay for a room—and why."

The short man said, "We can fix you up with an undertaker, easy—if you don't like the hotel."

The short man's gun was not cocked, Jim noted with satisfaction—it was probably the first time he had been interrupted at his work, though it was the kind of work where errors come high.

He smiled. "Sorry I butted in," and struck.

It was a downward, chopping blow with the heel of his hand to the short man's wrist. The six-gun clattered to the floor.

The tall man behind the desk dropped the money and went for his gun. But he didn't draw it. Dixon hadn't stopped when he knocked the gun from the man's hand; he'd kept on moving, at the same time jerking the short man around in front of him.

I could kill them both, Dixon thought, *but I might be killing the men who hired me.* He stepped away from the short man, a tight grin on his face.

"Now make your play, mister," he told the tall man. "Get your gun out and start shooting—or drop that money and get out."

The short man moved out of gun range. Dixon grinned.

"Your pardner is checking the bet to you," he told the tall man. "Make your play."

But the tall man hesitated, then tossed the money on the desk, and moved towards the door. His partner followed him.

Dixon stooped and got the short man's gun off the floor. He let them almost reach the door, then called softly.

"Sam!"

The two whirled around.

"You forgot something," Dixon chuckled and tossed Sam's gun at him. The short man made a clumsy catch—then shoved the gun hastily into leather, as if it burned his hand.

Dixon turned to the hotel owner. "Who hires them?" His tone was contemptuous.

"Wish I knew!" the hotel owner exploded. "All we know is that us merchants have to pay—or else! An' scarin' them two won't do you no good, either." He looked at Dixon as if to wash his hands of him, too, and turned to stuff his papers and money back in the safe.

Finally he said, "When the railroad come through a few months ago, there were robberies and killings every night. Boom town wildness. We tried to organize against it, but the man back of it seemed to know our every move. Mark Diamond, a gambling man who owns the Crystal Palace thought maybe he

could stop it, so the town elected him mayor."

"Yeah," Dixon said sarcastically. "I reckon Mark Diamond could stop it."

The hotel owner looked at him sharply. "Reckon you think it's funny a town would elect a gambler as mayor, but we was desperate. And things did improve some, after Diamond was elected."

"How?"

"The killings and robberies stopped. They still collect from us, but that's not as bad as losing your life. Diamond has tried every way to stop the racket, but he's in the same boat as the rest of us."

The hotel man stopped, nervous and shaky at having talked so much to a stranger. But Dixon still waited and after a moment he went on.

"Diamond brought in two gun-slinging peace officers and both wound up in boothill—shot in the back. There was some talk of him bringing in another one—say, you ain't Jim Dixon? If you are, don't bank on your reputation. A backshooter don't worry about how fast you are."

Dixon grinned. "Got a good map of the back alleys? I don't mind using them myself—if it keeps me alive. How many tall red-headed gents in town?"

The hotel man pondered. "I think I know who you mean—but I don't know his name. He hangs around town with a short man—just about the same build as the short one that was in here."

"Where do your collectors hang out?"

"They don't—not around town. They come in."

JIM nodded. It was time to see Mark Diamond. He stepped quietly out on the hotel porch, started across the street, and then stopped as a man came up the sidewalk. Dixon stepped out to meet him.

"Howdy, Blake," he said.

"Well, Mr. Dixon," Blake said heartily. "And how do you like Andover—what you've seen of it?"

Dixon grinned. "A lively place you have here, Blake." The grin left his face. "On the train coming up, you said Andover wasn't having any trouble. Am I to understand that your store's not bothered by collectors?"

Blake's face lost its smooth friendliness. "Oh, that?" he grunted. "Yes, I am. But I'm willing to let well enough alone. Every time Mark Diamond has tried to bring a new marshal to town, the price has gone up."

"In other words—if I should get killed, the amount will go from, say a quarter of your profits—to maybe a third. That it?"

"Exactly," Blake snapped. "I'd still prefer that you left town without taking the job."

Dixon moved on. The explanation seemed plausible, as far as Blake was concerned, but

it still didn't explain Queenie's actions. He turned his steps toward the big, gaudy Crystal Palace.

He stepped inside and looked around for Mark Diamond, but the handsome gambler was nowhere in sight. The Crystal Palace was big and overflowing, even at this hour. He saw Queenie Ralston, resplendent in a black dress that glittered with spangles, presiding over a faro table. He nodded briefly and started to move that way, when he caught sight of the girl.

Lucy Manners was sitting by the piano, reading a sheet of music. Dixon had that queer, tight feeling in his throat again at the sight of her and involuntarily moved that way. The girl looked up as he drew close and her lips parted in a shy smile.

"Queenie told me your name, Miss Manners," he said. "I wanted to apologize for walking away so abruptly—"

Her smile vanished. "I understand. Queenie told me about it a few minutes ago, Mr. Dixon," she said softly. "You'd—you'd better go."

He said, "I feel like staying."

"Maybe I can see you later—some place else." Her eyes were shuttling past him, reading a message from someone. He half turned, and saw Queenie looking their way. Her face was chalk-white under her powder, and her eyes were stark pools of fear.

"I'll see you later," the girl said quickly and hurried away. Dixon frowned in annoyance, then moved toward Queenie's table. She saw him coming and turned her table over to another dealer. She sat down at an empty table and waited for Jim to sit down with her. A waiter brought a bottle and glasses and moved away.

"She likes you, Jim," Queenie said, pouring two drinks. "But the wife of a gunslinging marshal—she deserves better than that."

He choked on his drink. *Wife!* he thought. He hadn't thought of that; but suddenly he was shaken. He wondered if it wasn't time for him to settle down—if a gun marshal could feel as he was feeling now. He was too tense, too irritable—but he had never thought it would happen like this.

"I've got a fair-sized stake," he murmured. "Enough to get started on."

"Then don't wait," Queenie said urgently. "She'll go with you—as far as you want to go. Maybe she doesn't know it yet—but I'll promise you—"

"Why not right here in Andover?" Jim asked. "It's a growing town."

Queenie shook her head, her face growing pale again.

Jim grinned. "Lucy and a thousand dollars, too, Queenie?" he asked. "Maybe I can still get you to up the ante."

A man tapped his shoulder. "Dixon?" he asked. Jim nodded. "Diamond wants to see you. He's back in his office."

"JIM—" Queenie started to speak. The bartender at Jim's shoulder shot a quick, questioning look at her and she broke off. Dixon shrugged and left the table.

"Through that door on the right," the bartender said, and went back to the bar.

Mark Diamond liked big, fancy offices, and he had one here. The big mahogany desk must have cost a small fortune in freight charges alone, and the thick rugs and other furnishings represented a heavy investment. As usual, Jim noted, Mark Diamond was doing all right.

The gambler stood up as Jim entered. He was as tall as Jim, but slimmer and more graceful. His clothes were expensive. Jim noticed a tinge of gray at Diamond's temples, and thought idly that Diamond was as old as Queenie, but as yet not showing his age. The gambler's lips curled back and revealed white teeth in a mechanical smile.

"Didn't know whether you'd come or not, Dixon," he said.

"That why you didn't sign your name?"

Diamond shrugged and poured two drinks from a bottle. He handed one glass to Jim; the movement of his arm making his coat fall open; revealing the pearl handles of the two derringers he carried in his vest pockets.

"If I'd signed my name, you would have thought the play was crooked."

"I still do," Dixon said quietly, and watched Diamond's face turn beet red. "No one could make you pay tribute and you not know who it is, Mark. My money says you're getting your cut."

"Maybe you'll change your mind—realize I'm on the level, when I tell you what's expected of you."

"If I take the job, you mean," Dixon countered.

"I want you to clamp a no-gun law on this town," Mark Diamond said. "And," he added, "if you see any men collecting tribute around this town, you've got my permission to shoot. Does that sound like I'm in cahoots with the leaders of the extortion crowd?"

Dixon was silent a moment. Then, "You could be hiring me as a cover-up. To make the people of Andover think you're honest and that you're trying to break up that racket."

Diamond shook his head. "If I was getting my share of the money, I wouldn't care whether the people thought I was honest or not. I'd just see that I was well protected, that's all."

Dixon twirled his whiskey glass and frowned into the amber liquid. The set-up still had him baffled. There was Queenie—and Lucy Manners. There was Ashton Blake.

And he still didn't know about Mark Diamond.

"Why do you think a no-gun law would clean up Andover?" he asked Diamond. "There are hide-out guns you know."

"Not with you around—they can be seen a mile, as you well know," Diamond countered.

Dixon drummed on the big mahogany desk with his fingers. What Diamond was saying made some sense and he knew it. But there was a joker in the deck somewhere, and he couldn't figure out what it was.

His mind gathered the facts and sorted them. Mark Diamond was sincere in wanting to hire him as marshal, of that he was sure. Diamond needed him—for what, he still couldn't tell.

"I'll take the badge, Mark," he said. "But if I find out you're playing a whipsaw game—" He let his words trail off.

Diamond grinned slightly, relieved. "The pay is five hundred a month."

"My price for clamping a no-gun law on Andover—and making it stick," Dixon said, "is two thousand dollars."

"Wa-ait a minute," Diamond said slowly. "What kind of money—"

"Take it or leave it," Dixon said slowly, watching the gambler. The price was higher than any honest man would pay, Dixon knew. If Diamond met the price, it would be because it was worth much more than that to him to have Andover disarmed.

"It's high," Diamond said wryly. "But it's a deal. I'll expect you to have Andover disarmed by tonight."

Dixon nodded. He got up and moved toward the door. He had turned the knob, when the gambler called him back.

"One more word, Dixon. The girl—Lucy Manners. No dice."

A sharp stab of anger shot through Dixon, but his facial expression remained wooden.

Dixon said mildly, "My deals never included women, so far. You can take that as you find it, Mark."

He went out.

CHAPTER THREE

Showdown

DIXON pinned the gold badge to his coat and stepped out into the main room of the Crystal Palace. Someone spotted the badge, and he could hear the hushed whisper that ran through the place. The noise died away, and the Palace became quiet as a church as he strode through. He glanced around; but neither Queenie nor Lucy Manners were in sight. He walked through the lane the crowd made for him and into the street.

The next two hours were busy ones. He had

clamped no-gun rule on towns before, and he knew how swift, how ruthless, how bold you had to be to put it over. Any sign of hesitation, any hitch in the initial plans, and the whole scheme would blow up. Then there would be hell to pay. He found a printing shop.

"I want fifty posters printed—big ones, with this message," he told the printer and hurriedly wrote down what he wanted on the posters. "I need them in two hours. Can you do it?"

The printer read what he'd written on the paper, and his Adam's apple bobbed a couple of times.

"I c'n do it," he said. "But I won't tack 'em up for you."

Dixon laughed. "I'll do the nailing. Only one thing. Don't let anyone see the posters, until I call for them."

The printer nodded his understanding.

His next move was to visit every store in town that sold firearms. He made a check of the guns each store had and demanded a record of purchases.

Then he hired a whiskery old-timer, and together they unlocked the marshal's office, which was dusty and dirty from long disuse. Dixon broke open a package of price tags he'd gotten from one of the stores.

"When they check their guns, put a number on one tag and tie it to the gun. Put the same number on another tag and give it to the man."

That would forestall a man hiding his gun behind some building, and swearing he'd turned it in. A man minus his gun needed a tag to prove that he'd turned it in—not hidden it. He glanced at his watch. The two hours were almost up.

He got hammer and tacks and a horse from the livery, then rode to the printing shop.

"All done," the printer said, and handed the sheaf of posters up to him. Dixon rode to one end of town, leaned out of the saddle and tacked up the first poster. He worked swiftly from then on, and within half an hour, had tacked the last of the posters up.

Then he turned the horse back to the livery and stood down at the end of town, watching and waiting.

The posters had set the deadline for guns to be turned in as sundown, and the sun was sinking toward the distant hills.

He watched the news spread through Andover; heard the sullen anger of the town as the import of the order seeped through, then saw the town hesitate, undecided whether to obey the order, waiting for someone else to turn their gun in first.

Dixon started walking.

The first group of men were silent and sullen as he walked up. "Turn your guns in at the marshal's office," he said and waited.

"Pretty high-handed, ain't it, marshal?" one of the group asked.

"You read the poster, friend," Dixon told him. "You turn it in or use it—now."

The man slouched slowly toward the marshal's office. Dixon waited until the whole group was moving that way, then let his breath gust out in a long sigh. The first man had started. It was like breaking a trail through deep snow drifts. The rest would follow.

And they did. Before he was halfway through the town, there was a steady stream moving toward the marshal's office. Jim Dixon moved to the other end of town, near the railroad station and waited. Trouble usually broke after sundown.

He sat down on a baggage truck and rolled a smoke.

The minutes dragged on and the sun sank lower, until finally the last red rim had sunk below the hills. He tossed his smoke away and started again through town.

He took a slow hour to make the trip again, and when he had finished, he was puzzled—and worried.

He hadn't found a man who'd disobeyed the order and refused to turn in his gun. It was, he thought with a creepy feeling, as if someone had helped him enforce the order.

He was frowning and worried as he started up the street toward a Chinese restaurant. A man stepped out of a saloon ahead of him, then turned quickly and started back into the saloon. Dixon leaped forward and grabbed him by the shirt collar.

"I want to have a little talk with you, friend," he said quietly, and jerked the man around. It was the tall redhead who had been a member of the gun trap set for him that morning. He glanced at the man's holster. It was empty.

"Let's see your tag," Dixon said.

"Tag? What the hell you talking about?" the man growled.

"So you didn't turn it in—you got it hid somewhere," Dixon said softly. "C'mon."

He prodded the man forward, and the two walked down the street to the marshal's office. The whiskered oldster was sweating and cursing as he sorted his collection of guns.

"We're going out back," Dixon told the old man. "Don't tell anyone where I am—I don't want to be disturbed." He prodded the redhead into motion and out the back door of the combined office and jail building. There was a backyard, surrounded by a high board fence.

The redhead watched sullenly as Dixon slipped out of his coat, unbuckled his gunbelt and hung them both on a peg.

"I got a few questions to ask you," Dixon ground out, "and I figure the quickest way is to beat the answers out of you."

The redhead growled deep in his throat and

set himself for a lunge. Dixon moved forward, fists cocked.

"I think I can answer those questions for you, Dixon," a smooth voice broke in, "without going to all that trouble."

Dixon whirled. Ashton Blake had stepped through a gate in the fence. The moonlight shone on his bland, smiling face. His thumb was hooked carelessly in his vest pocket.

Ashton Blake, like Mark Diamond, carried derringers.

DIXON stepped back casually, but careful to put himself within grabbing distance of his six-guns hanging on a peg. He said softly, "I guess I'm getting too thick-headed for this game any longer. I still haven't figured this deal."

"No difference," Blake snapped. "This business is between Mark Diamond and myself. I don't want you blundering in. You'll walk back into the hall and step into one of the cells. I'll unlock you when this business is all over." He added carefully, "I have my hand on a gun."

Dixon grinned wolfishly. "A town marshal locked in his own jail, Blake? That's never happened to me yet—and it won't now."

He gauged his chances.

"Take him, Spike!" Blake's voice rapped like a pistol shot.

The redhead lunged forward. Dixon kicked out, hard, felt his foot sink into the man's stomach, then he was dropping to his knees, waiting for Blake's shot with the vest pocket deringer.

"Stop it, Blake!"

The little group froze in their awkward positions. Queenie Ralston stepped through the fence gate, and the moonlight glinted on the small gun in her hand. There was no sound in the backyard except the labored, pain-filled grunts of Spike as he tried to get his breath back.

The bland mask had dropped from Blake's face. "You're out of your mind, Queenie! You know that Dixon is in Mark's pay—is going to help him skip town. And Mark intends to leave you stranded and take that girl with him!"

There was fear in Queenie's voice; fear but ragged determination. "Your trouble with Mark is between you and him," she said. "If Mark can shoot his way out of town—or you can stop him, doesn't concern me. I'm looking out for Lucy. Get your guns, Jim."

Jim stepped back and lifted the gunbelt off the hook. He strapped it around his middle, and tied the holsters down.

"Then I understand you—nor Dixon—intend to interfere when Mark and I settle our difference?" Blake asked Queenie.

"I hope you two kill each other off,"

Queenie said coldly. "Andover will be a better town when you're both dead, and your extortion racket with you."

Blake smiled thinly as Queenie pushed the gate open. She and Jim stepped through and let the gate swing shut.

"I've got three horses, down by the house where Lucy and I live," Queenie said as they hurried along a dark side street. "We've got some riding to do tonight, Jim—you and Lucy—the three of us—can make a fresh start somewhere." She was talking fast and breathlessly as she almost ran to keep up with him.

Jim said gently, "When a gun marshal runs from trouble he's through, Queenie."

"What difference does it make if the two men who've been running the racket in town kill each other off!" Queenie exploded. "This fight between Mark and Blake has been building up for a month. No matter which one stays alive, the extortion racket will be over."

"They were partners in it?"

"They were partners until about a month ago," Queenie said. "Then a lawman hit town looking for Mark. He's wanted for murder in Arizona. Mark knew he had to get out of the country. He took all the money and started to leave, figuring that Blake would be afraid to say anything—"

"And Blake stopped him?"

"That's it. For the last month Mark's been a virtual prisoner in the Crystal Palace. He wants to leave, but Blake is greedy, and doesn't want to kill the racket off. Mark wants to get out of town with all the money—and Lucy."

"And the no-gun law that I put on Andover?"

"Would swing the odds in Mark Diamond's favor," Queenie cut in. "With the town unarmed, Mark could walk out."

They turned down a residential street; a street of solid, well-to-do houses, lined with trees. Queenie stopped in front of one of them.

"The horses are under that cottonwood further down the street," she said. "Lucy and I will meet you there in a couple of minutes."

"I'll ride with you as far as the edge of town," Jim said. "Then I'm coming back. I told Mark that I wouldn't stand for any whip-saw game. I'm not leaving Andover until the string runs out."

"Don't be a fool!" Queenie said fiercely. "You've got nothing to gain by mixing in that fight—but we'll talk about it later—I'll go get Lucy."

She hurried into the dark house, and Jim strolled slowly toward the horses. He'd gone but a few steps when Queenie came running.

"She's gone, Jim—he's taken her—the Crystal Palace—"

But Jim Dixon was already running, his boots pounding the dust of the street, as he

raced for the center of town. He turned into the main street and became aware of its curious emptiness and silence. There were horses tied in front of the Crystal Palace—but no signs of life.

He slowed down, shifting his course to take him into the shadows along the street, and loosening his guns in their holsters. He became vaguely aware of the people of Andover, crowded into stores and doorways, waiting and watching. The Crystal Palace was only a few feet ahead now, its gaudy interior strangely silent and empty.

"Dixon!" Blake's voice drifted to him from the back shadows across the street. "Stay out of this!"

"To hell with your fight!" Dixon kept walking. Next Mark Diamond's voice reached him.

"We're coming out!" Mark Diamond shouted from an upstairs window. "The boys and I—and the girl!"

A six-gun blasted from across the street, pouring lead into the darkened window from which Mark Diamond had yelled.

"Hold your fire!" Dixon thundered. "You might hit the girl."

There was a swish of skirts, and a light patter of small feet, and Queenie Ralston ran past Dixon. He yelled at her to stop, but she ran on and reached the swinging doors of the Crystal Palace; pushed them open.

"Let her alone, Mark!" Her voice shut off abruptly at the sound of a pistol's flat bark. Queenie came out of the Crystal Palace, walking like a person who is very tired. Her fancy little gun hit the board sidewalk with a thud, and one jeweled hand was trying to hold back the red stain that spread over the bright spangles of her dress.

She whispered, "My little baby—"

Dixon slipped an arm around her and helped her into the shelter of a doorway. A pallor was spreading over her face. She said, "When Lucy saw you—be good to her, Jim—"

He could hear voices in the Crystal Palace now, as Diamond and his men bunched together, preparing for their dash out.

"Blake!" Dixon yelled. "Hold your fire

when they come out—or you'll hit the girl. I'll kill you for that."

"It's too late to change things now, Dixon," Blake called coolly.

Dixon let Queenie down gently, and then dropped to one knee. He flipped extra cartridges from his gunbelt and laid them on the rough planks around him, ready for use. Then he drew both guns.

"A five hundred dollar bonus to the one that kills Dixon!" Mark Diamond shouted. A burst of firing came from the Crystal Palace. It rolled and thundered through the quietness of Andover; then the batwing doors were flung open, and men poured out; their guns lancing orange flames and bellowing defiance at the gunmen across the street.

The guns of Blake's men roared back and then Jim Dixon brought into play his long-barrelled Colts. He left the doorway and moved across the street, through the crossfire.

"You fool, Dixon!" Blake roared. He came out of his hiding place and Jim's lead jerked him half around, hammered him into the dust.

He saw Diamond come running awkwardly from the Palace at last. He had the girl, Lucy, in front of him. A slug slammed into Dixon's right leg and knocked him rolling in the street.

Another bullet tore into Dixon's side, and he gasped for breath. Diamond was crawling into the saddle now; slowly and clumsily with the added weight of the girl. Dixon fired carefully and saw his bullet tear half of Diamond's mustache off, ripping that handsome face into a bloody mess. Lucy broke free. . . .

He crawled on all fours over to the doorway where Lucy was cradling Queenie's head in her lap. The town was quiet again. Lucy's eyes were shut tight, trying to hold back the tears; so it was Jim who reached over and closed Queenie's eyes.

"She tried to keep me from knowing she was my mother," Lucy said, "just a good friend who wanted to look after me—but I knew it all the time."

"She wanted us to go away—and get a fresh start," Jim said.

"I think she'll know about it—when we do," the girl said softly.

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The kid handed back the dollar. "No man pays mountain folk for a decent favor. Maybe you're green and don't know that. . . ."

KING CAMERON, lord of two million acres, rode into the wagon camp at Cimarron at sundown. As fitted a king, he rode with an arrogance and headed his party, raising a dust moil that choked everyone as his *caballada* moved through the welter of big freighters.

The King was a man built thick and solid as an oak. His hair was gray and his face wrinkled as old leather, but the bleak command of his eyes struck respect into most of the Southwest. He had fought for all that he possessed and held it by his rapier wits and iron guts and the ruthless power of his own gnarled hands. But that had been when a man's enemies were few, before the coming of land boomers and the damned clod grubbers were pouring in with the persistent steadiness of ants. Now a range lord boiled them out of

one place and ten times as many popped up, chopping the range and fencing the water to hell and gone across some hill.

He had the cattle baron's arrogant contempt for tillers of the soil, yet they worried him more than rustlers, drought, Indian raids, a too-distant beef market, bad trails and all the other troubles that could crop up in a domain of two million acres.

He had been thinking of nesters during most of his long ride to Cimarron, and the molten violence of his temper flared into his eyes when he found Mike Bolton, wagon master, not immediately on hand. He gave Cord, his *segundo*, a brief rough gesture to make camp and, reining up by Bolton's wagon, commanded a buskinned snipper roughly, "Here, minnow, take my bridle."

The boy paused in weaving a horsehair reata

ROCKY MOUNTAIN KID

By T. C. McCLARY

*The Minnow came off the Rockies to find
himself a wife—and found he could throw
away a life much more easily than a man
who'd spent a lifetime living it!*

and regarded him with curiosity that gave way slowly to rich humor. He laid the reata down on a wagon tongue and moved over with the quick, animal like furtiveness and suppleness of his mountain breed.

The boy was brown as a nut and small even for his fifteen years, but sinewy as a snake and could probably outrun a horse. Almost unconsciously, the King took stock of him with approval, but this was deep and far beneath his unabated anger. The boy broke into his consciousness only when the King noted he was grinning.

"What," the rangelord barked, "is so damned funny?"

"Aw, it ain't nothing to feel 'shamed on," the boy answered good-humoredly, "but it is awful funny to see a man yore age jist larnin' to ride."

The King's face turned livid. Most of his fifty years had been spent in the saddle, and there were few men who could have controlled his spirited stallion.

"What?" he finally managed to snort at the shaver.

The boy made a gesture. "Well, that there ain't an easy hoss to handle, but you got to learn to make yore critter stand when you climb down, mister."

The King's face ebbed from purple to gray and back again. It had taken six months to teach his animal to caper. It was part of the show of being a king and riding a high-blooded horse. His anger finally disrupted for sheer need of sucking in normal breaths. Fishing out a silver dollar he flipped it over. "Save that for yore first pay," he grunted.

The boy caught it, but the grin faded slowly from his face. He stared at the shining metal a moment, then reaching up, handed the rangelord back his reins and also the dollar. "No man pays us mountain folk for a decent favor," the boy told him slowly. "Mebbe yo're green and don't know that, mister."

The King batted his eyes and stared. He had been fifty years without meeting another

rangelord he considered his equal. Now, as as he watched the boy fall into an animal trot and move away, he experienced the shock of being treated almost as an inferior by a mountain minnow.

"Why, dog damn the snipper!" he snorted finally. "You'd think he was king of the Pecos and I was some drifting dude!"

It struck his humor and suddenly his anger dropped from him and he lifted a full resounding laugh from his thick chest. This was a story he could tell upon himself with relish.

HIS business with Mike Bolton required three days and during this time the King's outfit rode along with the wagon train. Twice he had seen the boy riding like an Injun on a true range blueblood, and both the horse and the boy's riding were good. The third day the mountain minnow rode up on a half broken mustang and tethered the second-rate animal to a wagon wheel.

When he finished he turned and found the King's attention on him and, after a moment of speculation, wigwagged at the rangelord, man to man. He would, of course, have learned who Cameron was by now and show respect, but his face held no sign of being impressed. It crossed the King's mind that the minnow might blurt out one of his candid opinions, and to head him off the rangelord called over, "Boy, I hope you got a good cash trade when you got that wild critter!"

The boy regarded him thoughtfully. "Why?"

"Why, that brush pony is not half broke and and has no sense. Yore other hoss was four times this critter."

"I still got the other," the boy called back.

The King felt a premonition of having left himself open and blew against his leathery cheeks. "What did you have to give for this firebox?"

"Shucks," the boy snorted with disdain. "You don't think a mountain man would make

swap for a hoss with the hills full of 'em, do you?"

Mike Bolton rode up grinning and chuckled, "Met yore match, King?"

"Looks so," the rancher grunted sourly and rode off with the wagon master for a last drink. With the moon full and a sandy country that had soaked up the heat, Cameron's outfit would not leave until after supper.

He might not have given the mountain shaver another thought except that as he rode past the fire of a group of bull drivers, he saw the boy was in trouble. Flash Meyer, the loudest and cruelest bully of the trail, had gotten stoked up on raw rum, and his wicked temper had fastened on the boy. The boy was hunkered down with a pan in his hand, watching Meyer with the intentness of a fox.

Meyer ripped out a final curse and his anger loosened. He took two steps toward the boy. His third step sang on through, his heavy drover's boot aimed squarely at the shaver's stomach.

Cord, the King's foreman, started to shoulder his horse in, but the King reached his bridle and said, "Wait."

The boy had laid down his pan, and now he neither cringed nor bolted. He rolled his weight upon an outstretched hand. Meyer's boot scraped his ribs and went over. In a twinkling, the boy came to his feet grasping the bully's leg on his left shoulder. Erect, he simply leaned forward with a hard shove. The giant let out a roar, threw his arms wide, and smacked down hard upon his hindside.

He sat there breathing hard and fuming while the boys raised a riot of rough humor. He came to his feet slowly, teeth set and mouth wicked, in the way of a man who means mayhem. The King had his sixteen foot snake whip ready to snag the bully off if the boy failed to scamper, but the boy had ideas of his own.

He was saying levelly, "Flash, you come after my hide and you are going to get hurt proper!"

Cord murmured, "Listen to that, from a shavetail half the bully's weight and years!"

Flash let go a blast of breath and rushed the kid. The boy waited, poised like an antelope. Then, so limberly that it gave the effect of slow motion, he simply leaned his weight upon his left foot and brought his right knee in a wide arc. It smashed square into the outer muscle of the bully's thigh, precisely midway between knee and hip.

The giant let out a tearing blast of breath and pitched forward and lay still. There was a moment's silence and then one of the Ebings grunted, "What in hell, minnow, whatcha do? He looks dead."

"He'll be all right when his nerves come unfroze," the boy said imperturbably, and

hunkering back where he had been, continued eating.

The King grinned to his segundo, "Cord, we got to find a way to take that boy along. But how? You cant' hire him. He's proud as Lucifer."

Cord said dubiously, "I got an idee, but you might fire me for it."

"Not if it works," the King grunted. "What is it?"

"Give me an hour's time and I'll put the bug in the boy's ear that yo're in trouble and need his help."

The King wheeled him a chill glance, then nodded. "Just be sure it gets the boy if you like yore scalp!"

THREE hours out of camp the boy answered the King's question, "Oh, I got no time for driftin'. I come down special from The Mountain to find me a good wife."

"The Mountain?" the King repeated curiously.

"Yup," the shaver nodded and jerked his head toward a thousand miles of Rockies. The King thought of the five main ranges and the several thousand peaks most folks consider separately, but this wild little sprig just called them all, The Mountain!

The King said to Cord, "Kinda makes my little spread seem smallish, don't it?"

"Oh," the Minnow said hurriedly, "I don't own that, King." Then added with the unconscious scorn of his breed for the things that would constrict a man's freedom, "Us mountain folk feel kinda sorry for you pore ranchers hogtied with all yore land and such."

The King swallowed hard and asked, "But suppose somebody else owned it and suddenly turned up to tell you to move along?"

"Oh, nobody in their right mind would do that," the boy allowed. "He'd find hisself skinned and hanging on hooks from some tree."

It was an honest statement and the King began to recognize an irritation growing within him. He had spent a lifetime gathering and hooking together his vast empire, and he was used to the homage of lesser men and a deep satisfaction in himself. But this half wild little uplander was not only unimpressed, but felt sorry for him! And on top of it, he had unsettled the King's confidence in the values he gave to life.

The King found himself actually plotting to force respect from the boy. He was going to impress him with the responsibilities of a vast cattle empire, and of the honor that was a ranglord's due, if he had to show him every cow and blade of grass, one by one.

It was a two week trail to the edge of the Cameron domain, riding in company with the *caballada* of free horses, and the chuck and

supply wagons that formed the King's retinue. The King had always been justly proud of the manner of his travel—good food, fine extra horseflesh, bedrolls at night and a dry wagonbed when need be, attendants to gather water and wood and strike camp, to cook, to care for the animals, to provide for his small wishes. The size and luxury of his retinue was known through the whole Southwest and admired as a reflection of his wealth and power.

He knew the boy had never seen life of this fashion, and right up to the first Cameron line shack, he waited for an expression of respect. It was coming, he thought with satisfaction, when they turned to an hour of after supper talk around the fire that night.

The boy, hunkered down Injun-fashion, looked up suddenly to ask, "King, how big is two million acres?"

The King expanded. "The home hacienda is about midway of my grass, Mountain Minnow. With fast riding we could reach it in three days."

The boy screwed up his face and thought a spell. Then making a gesture at the wagons and attendants of the princely retinue he asked, "Why don't we ditch all this slowpoke outfit and make a fast trail, King?"

The King congealed. Cord wiped a caloused hand across his mouth and coughed. He had to find immediate business elsewhere.

THE next day they wound down through fanning herds of longhorns, and the King caught the first spark of intentness on the boy's face. After a spell he announced with a man's decent pride, "These are only the fringe herds, a few odd hundreds. The real herds are further in."

The boy grunted, "Gee, King!" but shortly took the bloom off that utterance too. It turned out he was impressed, not by the size of the herds, but the ugliness of the vicious latinos.

The King scowled and brought his thoughts back to the importance of his possessions with determination. "There is a heap of beef and tallow and hide on this ranch, Minnow," he insisted.

"I reckon so," the boy admitted. "But they are sure scrawny critters, King. Why don't you stock up with these fat dude cattle the boomers bring? You'd have twice the beef and no more grazing."

The King gave Cord a wild look and put the whole outfit into a gallop. "By God, I think this kid was sent by the devil!" Cord heard him muttering.

Toward sundown, they came in sight of poverty-stricken farms haywired along one side of a river bend. Counting them, the King said

grimly, "Eight more, Cord, since I was last this way."

Cord said briefly, "Yessir." Nesters were an explosive subject with the King.

The King growled, "They've got the protection of the governor, but about five more taking root, and I'll run a stampede over every rickety dugout anyway!"

The Minnow looked thoughtful and after a space said, "They can't make a real living off this brush land nohow."

"'Course they can't!" the King barked. "But try and drum that through their thick heads!"

"Why don't you move 'em onto some decent land?" the snipper asked.

"What?" the King roared wildly.

"Well, if you got to be worrying on 'em, you might as well milk 'em," the Minnow suggested. "You sure can't milk 'em when they ain't got milk to give."

The idea awakened the King in the middle of the next night. Irritated with its logic he roused Cord. He growled, "Damn it, Cord, how much does a good nester buy in supplies a year?"

"I dunno," Cord admitted. "But I've heard tell that when they got it, they'll spend two hundred, mebbe five, in lumber, feed, tools, and such."

"That is a lot of money," the King speculated. "No cow family brings that much and you've got to nurse beef through blizzard and drought."

Cord said carefully, "Boss, that Mountain Minnow just ain't healthy for you. I think he's done brought some of that Rocky Mountain fever with him."

"I dunno," the King growled. "All I know is, I'm lord of two million acres and dead broke and tied. But this little squirt can ride all over the world and never miss a meal."

He enjoyed his moment of self pity, and then returned to his usual grimness, nesters being a matter of such instinctive hatred that no self-respecting cattleman would give them serious consideration. But the boy had shaken him with that momentary thought, and now it became vital to civilize him and reduce him to the respect of ordinary cattle people. It became something urgent in the King, something he had to do, a kind of battle. At dawn, he had Piehat, his Sioux scout, sending smoke signals to the hacienda ahead. If nothing else, the homecoming fiesta was going to put awe and respect into the Mountain Minnow.

The home hacienda was an enormous tangle of gleaming white and red-tiled buildings within a wall that spread against the bright shine of the river bow at a valleys' end. The King watched the boy's intent expression for two hours as they rode down. The boy had never dreamed of a house this size in his life. It

was clear he could scarcely believe it by his eyes.

Close up, the towers and windows rose above the wall. "You mean that's all one house, jist for you and yore family?" the Minnow asked.

The King took a deep breath of satisfaction. "Well, just about. They're a lot of buildings, but all connected."

"Jumpin' jeeppers!" the boy muttered. The admission of awe and surprise sank through the King as if releasing him from an unholy spell.

"Well, what do you think about it, mountain man?" he grunted.

"Why, I'm jist thinkin' it must be a heck of a place to keep warm," the Minnow said.

He was not looking at the King which was just as well. Cord, who was, thought the King might either explode, or else simply fade away. He went in to report to the ramrod that this damned little wild man had the boss down under an Injun spell.

The King himself was not so sure he wasn't. All his life he had fought for power and land, believing in possessions as the stamp of a man's worthiness and right to respect. But this incredible backwoods boy set all of his beliefs and values helter-skelter, simply by not being impressed. There was something almost diabolical in the easy way he took life, in his direct way of looking at a problem. Land and power, which should give a man freedom and put him above worry, the Minnow regarded as so many fetters around the King's neck. The house, which should have impressed him with its magnificence, was just a lot of space to warm. The nesters, whom he should have despised as a herd of inferiors who could not stand upon their own but needed law, the Minnow dismissed with a shrug and thought only of the profit that might be made from them.

THE homecoming was regal, with the countless underforemen, clerks, supply bosses and stewards, coming forth to say a word. At least this seemed to impress the boy, but it was a long-drawn process and none could be slighted. The King noticed first that the boy was growing restless and, suddenly, that he was restless and bored stiff himself.

The King said suddenly and violently, "Damn it!" and cut the reception short. He moved into the big main hall in a dark mood and knowing there would be trouble for the feelings he had hurt.

His daughter was waiting at the door, and that at least was a bright spot. He said, "Sherry, I've brought home a wild heathen to fix our troubles for us."

The girl had been raised by men and with men and she was just fifteen. She looked

across at the Minnow with a girl's speculations, and her look turned personal with interest. The Minnow's complete self possession sputtered and melted into tongue-tied confusion.

"Thank heaven!" the King muttered earnestly. "He's part human!"

The fiesta really did impress the boy. He hunkered down in the dark shadows of the patio wall, gawking at the color and tempo and magnificence of the scene. Twice, when the King was watching him, the Minnow stole a look at the girl. Each time she caught his eyes upon her with a violent result to the boy's composure. The King chuckled and felt the spell of the mountain folk lifting in layers from his shoulders. He might have returned to his normal worried peace if he had not gone over to talk to the Minnow.

"Well, boy," he said expansively, "do you have any shivarees like these up in yore hills?"

"No, sir," the boy admitted. It was the first time he had said, "sir" and come off his plateau of aloof equality with the King.

The King tugged at his mustaches with a man's sense of self-gratification. "And the vittles—you don't have vittles like these, I'll bet."

"Nope," the boy agreed. "I've et some things I never heard of."

"Get kinda tired of yore plain mountain diet sometimes?" The King was really getting into stride. The boy's cool self-assurance and contentment with his own lot had gotten to be almost a nightmare to him.

"Why, sometimes a man gets kinda tired of eating only six, eight kinds of meat and a dozen fowl and fowl eggs, and nothin' but roots and berries and fish for sidefare," the boy agreed.

The King, whose hunters had only turned up about five kinds of meat for this special occasion, stared. "But then," the Minnow explained, "weather permitting, you can run over to one of the French trappers and likely find a good pepper stew and soup."

"Yore fowl," the King said on a strained note. "They'd be kinda scrawny mostly, 'bout equal to our prairie chicken?"

"Oh, the doves ain't very much," the boy admitted. "And there're times when the woodcock ain't too fat. But a man's usually got a wild goose to roast, or some ringnecked pheasant, or a duck, or a turkey or two."

The Minnow looked around and caught the queer look on the King's face. "Gee, King," he said, concerned, "you ain't sick, be you?"

"No," the King breathed heavily through his teeth. "Just tell me this one more thing. I am accounted a big man, able to hire all the help I need and I don't get the time for hunting that I'd like. How do you mountain folk manage a living?"

"Why," the boy grunted with surprise, "the skins and hides. Every time I bag me a bear, I've got bear steak to throw away and make five, mebbe ten dollars beside."

"Gawd'amighty!" the King wheezed.

He looked out biliously at the fiesta, which bored him, and thought of the hunting he was always missing because some trouble was bound to crop up when he had planned it. The Minnow wondered if the King had guzzled too much—he kind of staggered as he drifted off.

AFTER a time, Cord came over and said, "Minnow, how about taking a couple of weeks with me on range?"

"Chasing them scrawny ugly critters down?" the Minnow asked jubilantly. "When do we start?"

"Dawn," Cord stated briefly. "It may save a slaughter around here—yores," he added under his breath.

The King came after them himself. Cord and the boy were cutting across from one outfit to another, foraging for themselves and doing all right. The King came in on them unexpectedly at sundown.

He said, "Howdy, boys," and lifted his head to breathe in a long sniff of the stew. "Whatcha got there?" he asked curiously. "Sure ain't pork and beans or jerky."

Cord silenced the Minnow with a look. "It ain't much," he said uncomfortably. "Just some scraps and a mangy rabbit or two, boss. We been living Injun fashion, but outfit nine's chuck wagon is only four miles yonder. You could make it by dark."

The King scowled and swung down. "I've never needed you before to tell me what and where I could eat on my own grass!" he snapped at his segundo. "Minnow, you got enough of that nice smell for an extra plate?"

"Aw, there's plenty for six men," Minnow said. "I found me some roots by the creek and some of that sage, and we got some berries in it for good luck."

"Mighty good smell," the King repeated and hunkered. He suddenly pinned Cord with a glacial eye. "Why didn't you send in word the boy can cook like this?"

"Well," Cord wheezed, "it's not sure eating, boss. He just kinda makes up anything at hand."

"Well he does all right," the King snapped. "No wonder you been out here so long just moseying around."

The segundo swallowed and restrained a reminder that he had been told to keep the Minnow out of sight until Christmas. The King fell to whistling and sniffing alternately. He felt freer of troubles than he had in years, and when the plate came up piping hot, he

descended upon its contents like a famished wolf. He had a second helping and then a third.

Loosening his belt, he wheezed, "Minnow, I'll eat at yore fire from now on. Whatcha put in there?"

Cord turned a pallid gray beneath his burn and put his attention on the horizon, but the boy answered cheerfully, "Oh, nothin' much, couple of crows and pigeon and a gopher and two rattlesnakes."

The King leaned forward slowly and whispered, "What was that last?"

"Rattlers," the boy piped innocently. "Good eating, ain't they?"

The King didn't answer. He had bolted over behind a boulder.

"Say King," the Minnow asked when the lord of all this range was speaking again next day. "Cord tells me these unbranded critters scattered around ain't nobody's cattle."

"Mavericks," the King grunted. "They're any man's can put a rope and brand on 'em."

"You mean I could do it?" the Minnow asked.

A hopeful light flickered in the King's eyes. He said, "Boy, you can not only have all you round up, but run 'em anywhere you want and graze 'em on my grass."

"Say, that's handsome, King!" the Minnow yipped, and raced off after his first cow.

"Mebbe he'll starve out here," the King said hopefully.

"Not him!" Cord grunted. "Boss, he wouldn't starve on Oven Desert if you left him with a jackknife! You be careful or he'll end up owning this spread. Them mountain folk is spooked; they ain't safe!"

The King had a sudden thought. He pinned his bleak gaze on Cord. "Say, how come you were eating rattlesnake?"

Cord turned dark beneath his burn. "Well, that damned little Injun kinda eased me into it."

"I'll catch you eating worms and beetles next!" the range lord snorted. Still, now that it was over, that stew hadn't tasted bad. He was almighty sick of pork and beans and jerky tortillas.

They rode along a piece and then the King growled, "Those nesters are cutting up again. The settlement at North Stinky put up barbed wire and our Brahma up there cut the hell out of himself when he tangled with it the other night."

Cord said, "It is going to end up in a fight."

"It's hard to fight women and babies," the King growled. "And those damned grubbing clod-pushers don't ever get far enough from their women folks to shoot at!"

"We can burn 'em out," Cord suggested.

"We can also go to the penitentiary. There's a federal marshal in that crew and the govern-

ment's fighting our old land survey." The King's thoughts were wandering through his troubles. "I dunno, that kid's idea—" he started and then catching his segundo's suspicious look—"on cooking may not be so terrible."

NOBODY saw the Minnow to talk to for a full three months. Reports drifted in: He was racing all over the range; he'd been seen driving about six scraggly mavericks up toward the desert hills; he'd gotten pretty badly banged up somehow; he'd ridden into some of the nester settlements a few times.

Near Thanksgiving he rode into the hacienda with a fancy braided horsehair quirt with "Sherry" braided right into the crop. Looking at it carefully, the King saw that the colored hairs were natural and not dyed, and he demanded jealously, "Minnow, where in hell did you get all the time for this?"

"Oh, it didn't take any time, King," the boy allowed. "I was up north catching wild hosses for the nesters. I just took my pick of tailfeathers on the way back."

"You were what?" the King bellowed.

"Oh, it was off yore grass," the boy told him. "And they paid." He looked momentarily doubtful. "It was all right, wasn't it?"

"If you like 'em to do business with," the King grunted biliously. "How did they pay you?"

"Some of them nice fat dude cows."

"By Jupiter!" the King barked at Cord later about that. "It is my land, my water, my grass, they're using, and whatever of my strays they can steal and hide, and all I get is trouble! But this half pint wild animal walks in and makes 'em pay off!"

"I'm warning you, boss," Cord breathed heavily. "Don't ever do business with him or he'll have you! He traded my best pistol off me already."

"What for?"

Cord colored and did not meet his eye. "I hate to admit it. Just to learn how to make that damned pizen stew!"

"Why you doddering, idiotic, damned fool!" the King chuckled. Then added casually, "By the way, how in the devil do you cook that pizen mess?"

Sherry burst on them with dancing eyes, demanding, "Pop, who made that quirt I found on my door?"

"Why, that Mountain Minnow," the King told her. "Didn't you see him?"

"No, he didn't let me know he was here," she pouted. "Pop, why don't you bring him in here to live? I'll make him behave."

"The trouble is," the King grunted uncomfortably, "I don't think he takes much to our beds and vittles." Memory came up through him with a violent surge. "See, Sherry, we

only own two million acres and can only put out about five kinds of meat—and no goose and squirrel for a side dish!"

To Cord, he growled, "Why did I ever bring him here?"

But when the Minnow failed to come in for another two months, the King began to worry. It was strange country for the boy, really bad weather broke now and then and, for all his mountain ways, it was literally a country in which a man could thirst to death or starve. "Don't cross his pride," the King said to Cord, "but round him up and spend some time with him and see if you can get him to come in here or hunker with the line riders and take some pay. Game's scarce, the hunters say, and I'll bet that mite is down to skin and bones, but won't come say so."

He put a light to a cigar and drew the smoke in with satisfaction. One of the great gratifications of possessions was the good a man could do when it pleased him. He was still enjoying the prospect of being able to civilize the boy and turn him into something of importance when Cord drifted back after a week. Cord said a little grimly, "I better tell you about it in the office, boss."

"Sherry will have my hide for this!" the King growled. "His condition was bad, eh? Starved? Dead?"

Cord closed the door behind him and stated, "That snipper you think is starving and down to rags and bones has taken over Desert Meadows. He has a wickiup with water running through it, and a hide bunk and real feather cushions, and a cold cave with enough fresh meat and fowl to feed an outfit. He has a little trench oven beneath his bunk to keep it warm of nights."

The big vein along the King's neck was swelling.

"That's just a beginning," Cord said carefully. "He has traded ten prime blooded cows, some heavy, off the nesters, and he has rounded up and branded and is fattening about ninety mavericks, and some calves."

The King's breathing was hard. "That's enough of a picture!" he barked.

"There is one more thing," Cord stated determinedly. "He found a Brahma roaming around with no brand and he had that, too."

"Our Brahma!" the King barked. Then, curiosity mixing with his anger: "How in blazes did he get a Brahma across that desert strip into the meadows?"

Cord closed his eyes and squeezed them wearily, remembering some difficulties of moving Brahma's in the past. "Let the critter make friends with a tame cow and then stole her off at night and let the bull trail her smell across that band of hardpan."

Cord opened his eye and looked at the boss hopelessly. He said on a weak voice, "I sent

out six of the boys to drive the bull back, but the Minnow is going to have a fine crop of calves, come spring. I suppose he followed what you said about mavericks. The Brahma wasn't branded, boss."

The King sucked in a long deep breath and said nothing. He opened a cupboard and reached out a good full bottle.

"Course, we can chase him home," Cord suggested.

"No," the King grunted grimly. "I am going to humble him and civilize him if it breaks me!"

MORE immediate troubles began to pile up next day. A heap of things could happen on two million acres. There was a big and disastrous stampede at Southfork, a killing hailstorm on Sky Mesa, and the waterholes over on Drypack began to go bad. Beef prices dropped, the trail foreman of a market herd turned out second rate. Rustlers were working his southern ranges, and the Apaches were laying up winter rations out of his western herds. Tick fever began to drift through one strip of country, and hoof-blight was picking off the yearlings in another. On top of this, his bankers decided they needed some money.

The King was worn from the saddle and lack of sleep, and weary with all these worries. He found himself not far from Desert Meadows and almost unconsciously, drifted on in. What he saw was a beautiful sight in contrast to his own troubles—a fat sleek herd and high green grass and plenty of water, and the desert kept the herd from drifting out. He found the Minnow just making supper and it smelled mighty good.

The King got down wearily and sat on the Minnow's bunk. It was the first comfort he had felt in two solid weeks. He sniffed at the stew, and felt no battle left in him.

He said, "Doggone it, if I didn't know there's likely rattlesnake and crow in there, I'd eat!"

"Oh, this is a different stew," the boy told him cheerfully. "There's no snake in here, King."

"Ah!" the King breathed and, supper ready, waded in. He sat back with satisfaction after taking a chew.

"Trouble with you cattle folk," the boy commented, "You just don't know how to take care of yoreselves. Leave you without pork and beans and you'd starve."

"Mebbe yore right," the King agreed in his weary mood. "That was a right good stew. What did you have in place of crow and rattlesnake?"

"Oh, I found me some lizards," the boy said. "And some old sundried eggs."

The King froze, and he came half to his

feet, and then he subsided with a sigh of defeat. He should have known better than to ask.

In the morning, the King looked over the Minnow's herd and said with something between irritation and respect, "You've done right well on the cows I missed branding, boy! How many more do you aim to gather?"

"Oh, I got enough right here," the Minnow told him. "It's all one man can handle as they stand."

"You can always hire a man," the King suggested.

"No," the boy answered with consideration. "Then I'd get me more cattle and more land, and first thing I'd be spending all my time riding back and forth, and the cows would get gaunted moving around, and I'd be missing calves the same as yore men."

He heeled a hole in the ground. "King, I'd get jist so plumb busy I wouldn't have time for fun, and I'm missing my hunting already."

"Every man has to miss some good things in getting started," the King told him.

"Why?" the Minnow asked.

"Why?" the King growled. "Ain't it clear? Because, well, unh—" He stopped dead, blowing and glowering and unable to think of a good answer in the face of things. He finally exploded, "Who the hell wants to talk business a nice day like this? You know a good pool for fishing?"

"I've even done made you a pole," the Minnow grinned and fetched it, a fine one, limber as a whip, and smoke-toughened and cured just right. The King felt it and tested it and in the balance and the spring knew the satisfaction the maker had in fashioning it. A man got rich just so he'd have the time to make himself such things—but somehow, he never got rich enough to get the time.

"Now them boomers," the Minnow said over a frying fish supper, "are a mighty thick but a mighty stubborn lot of folks, King, and somebody's ticked them that the law will back 'em up. But they ain't no good to themselves or you or anything else where they're settling."

"I reckon you'd have me settle 'em on my best grass?" the King suggested dryly.

"Yup, that's it. I'd show 'em some of that good land away off on Table Valley and sell it to 'em cheap. I'd build 'em towns, and then help 'em to move in."

"Then what?" the King asked with scorn.

"Why," the Minnow explained with a gesture, "you got 'em fenced in proper! You got a right to charge toll in an out on all freight, you'd sell 'em the lumber they use, the feed they need, you'd own the bank and hardware store."

"Minnow," the King said definitely, "I'm a cattleman—not a pinch-faced town trader."

The Minnow shrugged. "Cattle and farmers all got to be treated about the same." Then he fell silent.

The King speculated on this angle. The boomers were coming and they were going to bring their law. Much as he talked about licking them, he knew the open range was ending. The grubbers and their law were moving in and driving off the lone wolves. And it was the fact that the Minnow was still a free lone wolf that had first challenged and irritated him.

At heart, the King came of that indomitable breed of frontier breakers, the individualists who lived by their own wits and hands and laws. But his very success, his two million acres, had rooted him and thrown him amongst the herd. He was no freer with all his cattle and land and power than the grubbiest farmer squatting on his grass. It was hard to tell where the Minnow was drifting, but some-

where the Kid would break and tame his own frontier. And he caught by it.

He thought of all these things and of the roiling weariness inside him and wondered. Testing something about the kid that jumped into his memory, he said suddenly, "Sherry has been asking for you. Wants me to bring you home."

The kid started and stared off into space until a clear purpose came out of his confusion. He said softly, almost casually, "You tell her I'll ride over for her one of these days," and the way he said it, King couldn't even argue that.

He looked over at the Minnow and said dreamily, "Must be some real fine hunting up on that mountain of yore's if a man had time to make the trip."

The Minnow lifted his sharp, wild face and grinned. "Why King, you come up there and we'll teach you what real livin' is!"

ON THE TRAIL *(Continued from page 27)*

9. $\frac{1}{2}$ wrong. While a "hard case" is general throughout all America, when applied to a person, meaning, as you say, a bad hombre, but a "hard Tail"—who the hell ever heard of mules or mule skinner in the old cow country? Stick to your subject, friend. As used in the cow country, a "hard tail" was a saddle bruiser whose hind end had become so calloused that you couldn't shoot through it.

10. Wrong again. A "hot roll" had a direct reference to suspicious strangers, with the aspersion that he likely had stolen goods or money secreted in it. It was a warning to suckers, generally.

11. "Managna" or "managner" referred to an all around expert roper—king of the lariat, taken from the Bible term Manaseh, supposed to mean the founder of a tribe—in this case, one who leads in the knack of roping. What you have reference to is a "Snake line" "Slither loop" or "Trip loop", but mostly "Creeping loop." However, the term "Snake line" usually referred to pulling a critter out of the mud in the spring, or snaking calves and yearlings to the branding fire.

13. False. Throughout the cattle country, from the Mex border to the Kenuck line, the term "Rustler" had but one meaning in the savvy of the true Westerner, as you must know. Back East and now generally, except where there are cow and horse men still, the term rustler did and does mean a working fool. But why get away from the subject "that-a-way?"

14. Wrong, except incidentally. The term "Punch" or "Puncher" has come to have a general application to cowboys or ranch heads of the saddle gang, but your question was for

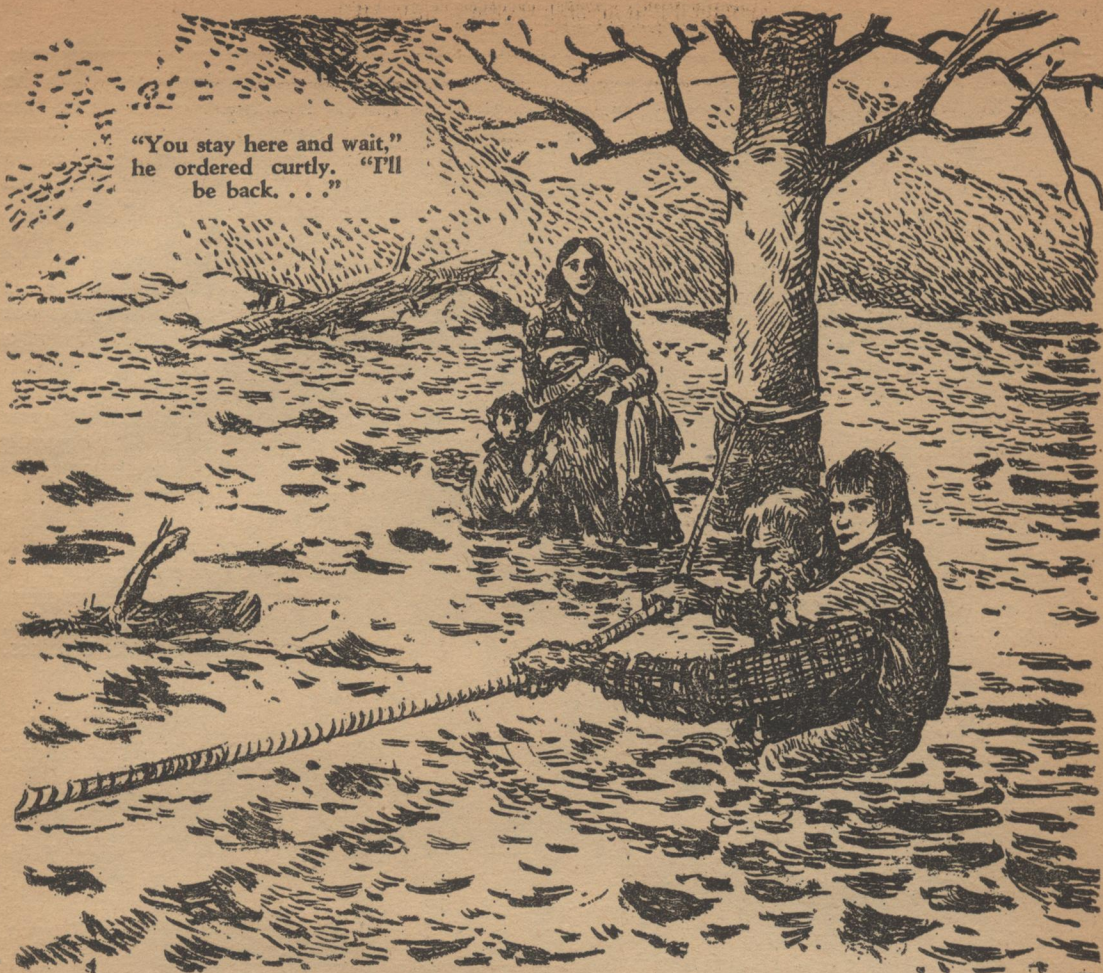
the *real meaning* of the term. I see that this was one of my own questions, so the answer will be given below with the others.

15. Wrong. No one who can help himself, will ever fill his sleeping tick in the bunk house with pine needles—it would be too foolish to be considered, therefore, the term "Pine straw" meant that you had to fill your tick with whatever you could find, usually with small sticks, sage brush and the like, mixed up with the dead grass, hay or stuff available. "Pine straw" was a vindictive against what they had to sleep on at the home ranch, line camp or summer camp, where there was any effort at a bed. See how easy a person can go wrong on these terms? To sleep on a bed of pine needles in the mountains, and use dry pine needles in a bed tick, are two very different experiences.

16. You are so vague in your understanding of a "Stack yard" that it is very clear that you are a tenderfoot. Surely it must have occurred to you that there is quite a difference between a "Stack yard" and a corral, but you do not seem to know that. Near most all ranch out buildings, there is a stock yard or rack yard, but a corral is something else entirely.

There is never room enough on a ranch to stable all of the horses that are kept up for use. Favorites and the best saddle stock are kept in the barn, but, in winter or dry seasons, kept up animals must be fed, so hay is stacked in a large corral and the stock is turned into it. Sometimes the hay is stacked outside in a real stack yard, where the stock cannot get to it at all, but is hauled to the feed corral,

(Continued on page 127)



"You stay here and wait,"
he ordered curtly. "I'll
be back. . . ."

THE WAY OF A KILLER

By RAY NAFZIGER

*When Cal Gregor gave a gent forty-eight
hours to leave town—he left or wound up
in boothill!*

THE husky young stranger who had just entered the Gold Coin Saloon in the mining camp of Ridge was drunk and in a bad mood. He stood in the doorway, scowling belligerently, glowering at the crowded barroom.

Some impulse made him head toward the bar by a route that took him not far from Cal Gregor, a wiry, thin-faced man with a touch of gray in his hair. And another impulse made him step out of his course to shoulder Gregor whom he had never seen before.

Cal Gregor staggered and swiftly turned toward the big stranger, his eyes glittering with an icy fire. In Gregor's head was a pulsing like the beat of a huge drum. That same pulsing had sprung to life in him just before he had killed a crooked gambler in a Blackhawk mine camp, and it had come there again a year later in Denver when he had faced the partner who had cheated him out of his share of a claim on Gunnell Hill above Central City. It was the beat of a savage, killing rage. That rage had driven Cal Gregor to kill some ten men in his life for reasons which mine camp juries had agreed were good enough for him to escape punishment.

In the saloon, where the record of Gregor was known, talk stopped abruptly. A bartender explained for those who had not seen the incident, "That young fool that landed in camp yesterday shoved into Cal Gregor." He let it stand at that, feeling it was enough.

The young husky facing him, Gregor realized was drunk, but being drunk was no excuse by the harsh code of the Colorado mining camps. He was looking contemptuously at Gregor now, as if to say, *I bumped into you, Shorty, and what the hell you makin' of it?* In his alcoholic glow he looked on it as a joke. Instead of apologizing he laughed.

Gregor did not laugh; neither did the men in the saloon. They were looking at the satiny sanded handle of Gregor's big .44, sticking up from behind his broad leather belt. It was a plain, businesslike gun, and the men knew that two months before it had shot to death three ruffians who had jumped Gregor's claim in the first rush of gold hunters to Ridge. The three were hard, dangerous men, but two of them Gregor had killed on the claim; the other he had hunted down. The camp had wanted to make him marshal after that, but Gregor had shrugged off the offer. He was a man who attended strictly to his own business, a hard-working prospector miner, civil in talk, peaceful until, as it did now, the pulsing started in his head.

Still laughing, the blond husky, in his late twenties and confident of his strength, reached out an arm to shove Gregor out of his path. "Out of my way, old man!" he ordered arrogantly.

It was the first time in his life Gregor had been called old. He was not much older, despite his graying hair, than the man he faced. The pulsing in his head became a heavy pounding.

Gregor stood still and the husky doubled big fists, but something in Gregor's eyes held him back. There was a look in the greenish eyes of the smaller man that partly sobered the husky. Fighting to the smaller man didn't mean using fists; it meant using the gun at his belt. To him a quarrel serious enough for a

fight meant an affair serious enough to be settled by guns. Two men with whom the husky had made friends since coming to town grabbed his arms now. He was glad to be grabbed and loudly demanded a drink. The two hurried him to the bar, leaving Gregor.

FOR the husky the incident was over, but not for Gregor. What had happened was in his code an insult he could not overlook. Yet Gregor was within limits a just person. He would give this man a chance, since he was drunk.

He moved to the bar. The crowd gave way and the pair who had grabbed the young fellow stepped back. They had managed to tell him enough about Gregor so that he knew now the sort of man he faced. The young fellow carried a cheap revolver in a holster high on his hip but the weapon might as well have been lying on the bar. He was not only drunk; he was untried, green at gunplay. Against Gregor he stood solitary, defenseless. No one would interfere. The saloon was as quiet as a church.

"You're drunk now," said Gregor in his tight voice. "If you're still here when I come into town Monday, I'll kill you."

Maybe it was the courage of the drink in him; maybe it was something deeper. "No man can order me to leave anywhere," he said thickly. "I'll not leave this camp. I've a right to be here."

"This is Saturday," said Cal Gregor. "Monday I intend to come into camp again. If I find you here, I'll kill you."

He turned and left the saloon and the talk sprang up behind him. Stopping at a grocery, Gregor picked up a sack of groceries he had left there and headed up the gulch, walking lightly through the darkness. He gave little thought to what had happened in the saloon. It was something to be taken up again on Monday when the young fellow would have made his decision—either to run or to fight.

Reaching his cabin up Lazy John Creek, he found his burros patiently waiting for the handful of corn he fed them each evening. His cabin was the only one on the creek. The nearest houses were across Capitan River, over a low ridge from his cabin, shacks scattered up and down the river, now practically all abandoned. This region offered little gold. Gregor who had been doing development work on a claim close to his house, had about decided to head back to the Clear Creek country near Denver. He thought again briefly of the man he had ordered out of camp and, after smoking a pipe, he looked out at the sky. Guessing it was going to storm, he went to bed to sleep soundly.

Rain awoke him at past midnight, as hard a downpour as Gregor had ever heard. It was

still raining when he got up at his usual hour. His burros had taken refuge in the shed. Lazy John Creek was roaring between its banks.

Toward noon the rain stopped. In early afternoon three men came up the muddy trail on horseback. Two were old-timers, Bill Lankershim and Harley Good; the third was a tall, lank minister who did blacksmithing during the week.

Gregor invited them in but they said they were headed up canyon to look at some claims and had only dropped by. "About that young fellow," Bill Lankershim said, "name of John Beale. He was drunk last night and he was in the wrong and he knows it. But Beale is stubborn. Says he won't leave camp. Says he'll wait for you Monday. He's a tenderfoot with a gun. It would be something that might be on your conscience—shooting a greenhorn that bumped against you and was too stubborn to apologize for it."

Gregor eyed them and the pounding in his head started up again. His eyes glinted with anger.

"None of us in town will do anything to interfere of course," Lankershim said hastily. "But Beale seems a honest, hard-workin' young fellow who's got a family in Illinois that he's out here trying to make a stake for. He'd been robbed last night of the little money he had made in camps and he'd got drunk. He's willing to apologize for what he said but he won't leave camp. If you'd take an apology and let it go, it'd be mighty white of you."

"No," said Gregor flatly. "If he ain't left when I come in Monday, he'll be sorry for it. Nobody is shovin' me around."

The gaunt minister-blacksmith spoke up then. "Brother Gregor, this camp is a kind of little world of itself—like a big family where we're all brothers. Yessir, brothers. This young man Beale could even be some relation to you. Anyway, he's somebody's brother, some mother's son, some children's father. A man his age has taken a long time to raise and his maw was put to a heap of trouble in the raising. And one second and one shot can end him."

"I never asked nobody to raise him," returned Gregor. "Whoever raised him should of taught him not to be mean to smaller men after he's had a few drinks. I give him his choice—either to stay or go—that's fair enough."

There was finality in his words, and the visitors realized it. Their mission had failed. Gregor plainly was immovable.

THEY rode on and Gregor returned to his pipe. The bottom dropped out of the sky again, with a tremendous crashing of thunder, in a fierce downpour. Lazy John Creek flowed over its banks. After two hours,

the downpour stopped abruptly on a flooded world. Sitting by a pot of boiling beans, Gregor dozed, to wake at a pounding on the door. Opening it, he identified Mrs. Tomlinson, the wife of a man living a half mile away.

"A family," she told him breathlessly, "came down river last night—a woman and three children. They camped at one of those old placer miners' cabins the other side the river. A little while ago I heard her yelling for help. The river's changed its course to follow those old ditches of the placer miners, and most of it is flowing over that bar where those cabins was built. She and her children are marooned on a little high place, with water flowing all around her and rising. My man's gone or he'd help 'em."

He nodded. "I'll go see, Mrs. Tomlinson."

She hurried away; she had several small children to look after.

Swiftly Gregor took the ropes from his pack outfit and, finding short lengths of tether rope used for his burros, hurried off. Rope might be a handy tool to a family cut off from help.

At a trot he climbed a low ridge to see the stream, little more than a creek in dry weather, but now a broad river, thundering along its valley. There were two branches; the main one was flowing over the place where the placer cabins had sat, a wide powerful current. Between this main current and a much smaller one flowing along the old channel was a little high spot, with a few trees on it. Here Gregor suddenly saw a woman standing in water to her knees. In the tree by which she stood were two children, and the woman held another child in her arms.

She saw him and her voice came frantically. Gregor hurried through the mud until he stood opposite her. Between the family and Gregor roared a stream about thirty feet in width. The water as near as he could judge would not be up to his shoulders; at this spot as he remembered it the creek bed was comparatively shallow.

Gregor shouted to the woman and, knotting together lengths of rope he had brought, making a long line, he tied a small stone to one end and flung it out over the torrent. The rope was wet and heavy and it took three casts before the spliced rope finally landed in the shallow water close to the woman. She snatched it up and Gregor shouted to her to secure it to the tree in which her children had taken refuge. On his side he fastened the other end to a stout cedar growing out of the rocky soil, tightening the rope so it stretched about a foot above the stream.

After testing the rope by pulling on it vigorously, he stepped unhesitatingly into the water on the downstream side of the rope. The cold mountain water was unbelievably swift and

powerful, even when it came only to his thighs. As he went in deeper it tugged at his legs, all but sweeping them from under him. Without the rope to cling to, no man could have withstood the force of the current. Slowly he worked his way toward the middle of the stream, making sure of his footing. Luckily even in mid current the water did not quite come up to his arm pits, but its force was tremendous. He had to inch along, keeping his feet always on the creek bottom, while his arms held his body against the push of the current.

Panting, he reached the tree where the woman waited. He rested only briefly and nodded toward the oldest child, a boy of five or so. Coming down from the branch where he roosted, the boy mounted Gregor's back. Using a short length of rope, Gregor bound the short legs to his body. The boy put his arms around Gregor's neck.

"Hold tight, son," ordered Gregor gruffly and stepped into the water.

The child was rather a help than a hindrance on his return trip, for the boy's weight helped Gregor keep his feet under him. But again the struggle to fight against the hundred tearing arms of the water took a tremendous toll of his strength, and when he let the boy down on the opposite bank and started back, weariness had crept paralyzingly into his legs and through his whole body.

The roar of the river dulled in his ears; he seemed to be dragging enormous weights attached to his feet. Only the rope and his arms, strengthened by hours of drilling and mucking out rock from mine shafts and drifts, saved him. In midstream he was able to get his body partly over the rope to rest for an interval. He had to rest additional times before he neared the tree again. The woman had to reach out a hand to help him up the bank—he was so far gone. She was young and strong; that was good. She would have to cross under her own power.

The second youngster, a boy of three or so, he motioned to the woman to bind to him, high up on his back.

"I'll cross with you and take the baby," she said. "You're tiring, mister. You can't make it back again."

"You stay here and wait," he ordered curtly between his labored breaths. "I'll be back."

CROSSING with the three-year-old, he doubted that he could make it to the opposite bank, and that if he made it, that he could climb up it. Undoubtedly the water was rising. In midstream it came to his shoulders. The child on his back screeched his terror. Twice one of Gregor's hands lost its hold on the rope and the water all but took his feet out from under him. The watching

woman by the tree stood like a statue, peering intently, until he had made the bank. Staggering up out of the stream finally, he fell into a little puddle of water and lay there, too exhausted to get up.

To go back a third time was impossible. If he had drilled in a mine tunnel at top speed for twenty-four hours straight he could not have been more exhausted.

Getting to his feet finally, he untied the child on his back and, turning, stepped into the water. He took a long time to cross. For long minutes at a time he made no progress whatever; it was all he could do to keep his feet on the creek bottom and his hold on the rope. The chill was also getting into his bones—although it was midsummer, the stream was like ice.

He stopped ten feet from the bank. The woman shouted to him and, when he moved again, waded out to help him up the bank. Again he marveled at her strength.

Shivering from cold, trembling from exhaustion, he leaned against the tree trunk to rest.

He saw that she had made a sack from a petticoat, a sort of cloth harness in which the third child could be securely slung and tied to Gregor's back, high enough so that the child's head would be close to the bearer's.

"You're mighty tired, mister," said the woman, looking him over. "I'll take Johnny across myself."

She had coolly assayed his strength or the lack of it pretty well, Gregor thought wryly, and had decided that the baby would have a better chance if she carried it.

"No," he said. "I'm pretty near tuckered, ma'am, but I've learnt how to keep my feet while crossin' that stream. You'll have all you can do to get yourself across."

Reluctantly she accepted his decision, placing the child on Gregor's back, suspended from Gregor's neck, and securing him there with strips of cloth. The effect was like that of a squaw carrying a papoose in a cradle-board.

When they were ready he motioned to her to go in first. Hands on the rope, she stepped in and he wearily followed. The woman's face tightened as the current hit her and her knuckles whitened as the water sought to tear her hands loose. She wavered and was on the point of being swept away. Gregor hurriedly started to move close to help her, but before he reached her the baby on Gregor's back screamed. It gave strength to the mother.

"Put your left arm in under mine," said Gregor, "and I'll help brace you against the current."

"Don't worry about me, mister," said the woman. "I don't care what happens to me, if only you get the baby across."

"Put your hand under mine," Gregor ordered sternly.

She obeyed and together, with halts of long minutes to gather strength, they moved along the rope. The odds he knew were against their reaching the bank where the two older boys were watching. His strength had been gone before he even started across; there remained only the will to fight for life—his own, the child's and the mother's.

In midstream where the full force of the current struck them, he heard the woman wail above the rush of the water. They halted with their goal ten feet away. The water tore at them ruthlessly, beating down their ebbing strength and the distance might as well have been a hundred yards. Dirty foam swept over their heads, choked them; the cold of the water pierced them. The baby on Gregor's back screamed and the mother cried out again.

For the first time in his life Gregor realized the close tie between mother and child. He heard it in her voice, saw it in her face, in the desperation with which she fought now, shouting at him to move on, striving to rouse him to the final effort. She would, he knew, have let him be drowned if it would have helped the slightest in saving the child.

Wearily he took up the struggle again. Inch by inch they crept on, holding with numbed fingers to the rope. Inch by inch they drove muscles that had turned to lead, and suddenly the water fell from their shoulders to their waists, and then to their knees. Together they staggered up the bank where Gregor collapsed. The woman was alongside him holding him up, fearing that if he fell he would hurt her baby. Only when she had the child released from its harness did she also sink to the wet earth.

Gregor lay on the ground, chest heaving, muscles quivering. Then slowly he made it to his feet and helped the woman up.

"I've got a cabin over the hill where you can dry," he told her and, taking the baby in his arms, with the two boys holding to their mother's hands, he led the way.

All the slow journey it was in his head the torture that this young mother had gone through for her children. The blacksmith's words came back to him; that young Beale whom Gregor had threatened to kill had taken a long time to raise and that his mother had been put to a heap of trouble in the raising.

HIS burros were under the shed. He fed them after he had built a roaring fire by which the mother and her children could dry. Then making a sudden resolution, he began gathering and packing the burros with his possessions, but taking for himself only a little of the grub, one of the blankets and a skillet and coffee pot. The family had

lost everything in the flood except the clothes on their backs.

He looked at them when he was ready to go. The baby, wrapped in a blanket, was asleep. The boys were eating a meal the mother had prepared. Looking at them, Gregor felt a kinship with them. *In this camp*, the preacher had said, *"all men are like brothers."*

He thought of the young man in the camp below, John Beale, who would be waiting for him on the morrow. All desire to kill Beale had gone from him. As the preacher had said, it took a long time and a heap of trouble on the part of a mother to raise a man. Beale had had a mother like this one, giving her life to raise her young'uns.

"You folks can stay here long as you want," he said. "The cabin ain't much for looks but it's comfortable and there's plenty wood to dry yourselves out. I had planned to pull out in a day or so anyway."

"There never was a better, braver, more generous man than you, mister," said the woman. "I tell you it took real courage to do what you done."

"Courage?" asked Cal Gregor. He hadn't thought of it as courage. It was something that had to be done—to give all the help he could to someone in need.

"I declare, I forgot to tell you our name," went on the woman. "The children and I came from Illinois by train to Kansas and by coach to Denver to the gold camp to join the children's dad. He don't know we're coming and we don't know exactly where he is, but we got word he was headed for Ridge. It may be even you might know him. I won't ask your name, bein' it's not polite in the West."

"My name's Gregor, ma'am," he told her. "Cal Gregor."

"Cal Gregor," repeated the woman. "God bless you, Cal Gregor. John and Phillip," she said to the oldest boys, "I want you both to look good at Mr. Gregor. He's the bravest, best man you'll ever meet. You remember him, both of you. He saved your life and the lives of your little brother and your mother, too. Always remember him and if you ever have a chance to save someone's life, you do it."

Cal Gregor spoke to the burros and headed out. The woman stood in the doorway looking after him and tears were in her eyes. Then she ran after him and caught his arm. "I forgot to tell you our name," she said. "It's Beale. John Beale is my husband. Maybe you'll run into him. If you see him, tell him where we are. Please remember his name—John Beale."

Gregor nodded. Somehow that seemed to fit in too. "Yes, I know him," he said. "You'll find him in the camp below."

GUNS OF HELL'S HALF ACRE

By RAY P. SHOTWELL



CHAPTER ONE

Nester Blood

TROUBLE rolled into Buckroe early that morning, in the form of a wagon load of nesters from the homesteader settlement out on Jimpson Creek. The wagon rolled down Buckroe's dusty main street and pulled up in front of the jail. The nesters were ominously silent, grimly purposeful.

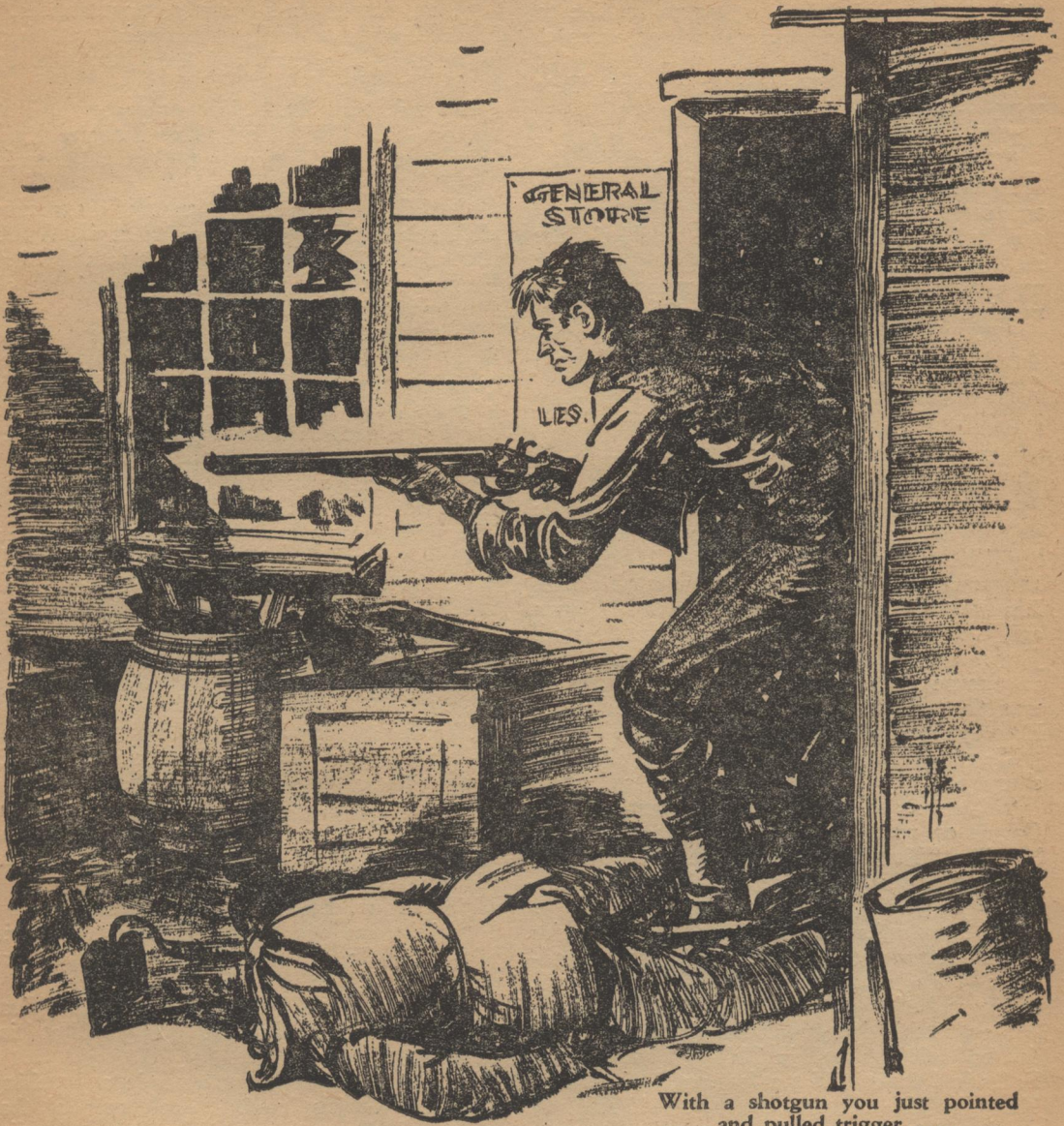
Les Harvey was going over the books of his general store, and didn't even look up as the wagon rolled past his windows. His tally had

him worried; he'd had to extend a lot of credit that year. There would be a profit only when the nesters of Jimpson Creek sold their crops and settled up.

The angry mutter of voices aroused him finally and he walked to the front of the store and glanced out. What he saw sent him hurrying out so fast he forgot his hat and coat. He collared a homesteader he knew.

"What the devil's going on, Herb—ain't

*"I'm a man of peace—and if I can't
have peace over this range—why, mis-
ter, you'll find it under!"*



With a shotgun you just pointed
and pulled trigger. . . .

that Poke Yancey up there in the wagon?"

Herb Monroe was big and solid, with the slow movements of a man used to heavy toil.

"It sure is," he scowled.

Les swallowed hard. Poke Yancey rode for the big Double G Connected ranch, owned by Grat Gagan. The trouble between Grat Gagan and the nesters had been smoldering a long time, and Les had hoped, for the good of Buckroe—and his own accounts—that it would simmer down and die out.

Poke Yancey made noises in his throat, trying to talk through the gag in his mouth and then kicked the tailboard of the wagon with his trussed feet. He rolled his eyes and glared furiously at the nesters, who stared back at him silently.

"What in thunder happened, Herb?" Les asked. "Grat's gonna raise hell when he finds that one of his men has been mishandled."

"It ain't for Grat Gagan to raise hell," John Wheeler broke in sourly, "it's for us home-

steads to raise hell over what Poke tried to do."

"Not only tried—but did," Herb Monroe said. "We caught Poke trying to set fire to our crops. Pete Tolliver lost fifteen acres of wheat—burned."

Les Harvey felt the weight of that. Pete Tolliver owed him a sizeable bill.

"Was Poke drunk?" he asked.

"Cold sober," Herb Monroe replied, his eyes narrow with anger. "He knew what he was doing, all right. He had a can of coal oil and had sprinkled it where it would do the most good. The wind changed, though, and we were able to put the fire out without losing nothing but Pete Tolliver's wheat."

"What's keeping Al?" another nester wondered aloud. "He went up to fetch Sheriff Crandall fifteen minutes ago."

LES HARVEY looked at Poke Yancey all trussed up in the wagon, and got nervous and fidgety. A few of the other storekeepers and townspeople were watching the little group in front of the jail, but none had come over to see what it was all about. Les Harvey kept thinking about Grats Gagan and Grats's brag that he'd run the nesters off Jimson Creek. Grats wouldn't need much of an excuse to start a war with the nesters; a war that would break the nesters—and Les Harvey along with them.

He grew aware of Herb Monroe eyeing him sharply.

"You worried about what happens to Grats Gagan or one of his crew?" Monroe asked heavily. "You forgot he swore he'd run you out of business when he heard you was extending us homesteaders credit?"

Les managed a surge of resentment. "You're liable to start trouble between the homesteaders and the ranchers. If that happens, we'll all go broke."

He was thinking how he'd sold the store his dad had left him back in Ohio and come West. Folks had thought him a fool and had said so. *The West is tough and mean*, they'd said. *A man's got to be a gun-fighter, a killer, even to stay alive out there*. It was building up to look as if the folks were right.

Les was still trying to think of what to say when Al Hennesy came down the street. The nester's face was red with anger.

"Buff Crandall," he said, "is on a drunk. He laughed when I told him we wanted Poke Yancey arrested. Said to turn Poke loose and give him a box of matches."

A gurgling noise came from the wagon. Poke had heard Al Hennesy's remarks and was trying to laugh through the gag. Les saw Herb Monroe's face turn beet red with anger.

"Crandall's drunks last about five days,

don't they, Les?" he asked. "Know when this one started?"

"He was sober yesterday," Les replied.

"That means he's just getting started." Herb thought a while, then said, "Reckon we'll take Poke back and keep him tied up in my barn."

Les said uneasily. "You got no legal right to keep Poke locked up. This trouble might blow over, but if you get Grats all stirred up—"

Herb Monroe shook his head. "This trouble ain't gonna blow over, Les. Fact is, Grats started it an' we aim to carry it to a finish." He looked around at the nesters, and one or two nodded at him.

"Grats can make plenty of trouble for you if you keep Poke tied up," Les said desperately. He turned to Herb Monroe. "Herb, let's you and me go and see Sheriff Crandall. Maybe we can sober him up enough to realize what's going on."

The big nester nodded and they walked up the street toward Crandall's one room shack. The sheriff was a bachelor, and every so often, he'd go on week-long drunks, shutting himself up and not showing up again until he was sober.

In spite of his laxity, however, he'd had the staunch support of the ranchers during the election a few months ago. And especially Grats Gagan.

Les knocked on the door, and when he got no reply, opened it and went on in. Sheriff Crandall was standing in the wreckage of the room, trying to pour himself a glassful of whiskey. He was spilling as much as he got in the glass. Les took bottle and glass from him and set them on the table.

"Sober up, Buff!" Les said sharply.

"Ain' even drunk yet," the lawman said with alcoholic gravity. "Won' be f'r two more days. Sober up? Whuffor?"

"To put Poke Yancey in jail and make Grats Gagan pay some damages!" Les yelled at him sharply.

"Oh, that," the lawman made a brushing motion with his hand. "Took care o' that a'ready. Tol' 'em to turn Poke loose—give 'im box o' matches."

Herb Monroe rumbled deep in his throat. "You're sober enough to realize what's going on."

The sheriff nodded owlishly. "Shober 'nough to realize whash goin' on—drunk 'nough not to give a dam'." He sagged into a chair, squinted carefully and reached for the bottle. "Campaign promish," he hiccupped. "Grats backed me in 'lection—I promised not to do nothing when he shtarted chasin' them dam' nesters offa his land."

Herb Monroe spat a curse and started for the sheriff with doubled fists. Les grabbed

him and held on till the big nester had calmed down some.

"You heard him, didn't you?" Herb snarled. "He's just drunk enough to tell the truth about the whole rotten setup!"

Sheriff Crandall grinned stupidly. "Washa gonna do 'bout it?"

"We're gonna take the law in our own hands!" Les told him flatly.

"Think you could do it better, huh?" the lawman jeered. "Hol' up you ri' hand." He mumbled a few words, then took something from his vest pocket and flung it on the table.

"Okay, you're a dep'ty now," he jeered. "Here's th' keys to m' desk at th' jail." He laughed in drunken glee. "You're the law now—lessee you try to buck Grat—"

Herb jerked Les by the arm. "C'mon," he growled. "Let's get out of here before I break his neck. I don't like his— say!" He stared hard at Les.

LES felt a little shaky at the knees, and cold and tight around his stomach, but his lips were drawn in a thin, hard line. He'd pinned on the deputy's badge and pocketed the keys.

Out on the street he told Herb Monroe. "I'm for law and order—on both sides. You ain't lockin' Poke up in your barn. An' if Grat throw's a bluff at me—he'll have to back it."

They went back to the little group in front of the jail and Les tried the keys. They worked, and inside he found the keys to the jail cell block.

"Bring Poke inside," Les ordered. "We'll put him in the first cell."

Poke rubbed his rope-burned wrists and cursed them steadily as the cell door swung shut on him.

"Wait'll Grat hears about—" He stopped as he spotted the deputy's badge on Le's vest. "Grat'll sure as hell drive that tin badge clean through you with a .45 slug," he snarled. "He ain't gonna put up with this, Grat ain't. He'll come a'gunning into this town and tear the door right off'n this cell—"

"He'll have to—if he gets you out," Les said coldly. "I'm hiding the keys to the cell block—until we get some justice done in this town."

He turned to Herb Monroe. "Go on back to Jimson Creek and mount a guard over your crops—Grat'll be sending somebody out to find out what happened to Poke and to finish his job. No matter how much proof we get on him, he'll still have us licked if he burns all your crops."

Herb Monroe nodded. "What're you going to do?"

Les took a deep breath. "I'm going out to see Grat Gagan."

CHAPTER TWO

Hell's Half Acre

GRAT GAGAN'S Double G Connected ranch had once been the biggest around Buckroe. He'd hit this country about ten years before, bought a few acres of ground on which he built his ranch buildings and then had started to expand until he'd built the Double G Connected into the largest ranch in the county. But it wasn't the largest now.

For the hundredth time that day, Grat walked out of the little leanto room he used as an office, and gazed across the rolling hills. There was an uneasy scowl on his face. The nesters, he thought, were like a creeping scourge. Already they had squatted on almost a third of his range. They had whittled him down to the size of his neighbors. A successful crop this year, and next year would see another long line of wagons rolling into the country and more plows turning his grass under. He swore softly under his breath.

He turned back into the office, and was checking his tally books when he heard a horse approaching. He kicked his chair back and strode out and at sight of the rider his scowl deepened.

"What brings you out here, Harvey?" he growled.

"Business, Grat. Legal business," Les Harvey replied crisply.

"Yeah?" the rancher grunted. He frowned.

"Looks like you got some damages to pay, Grat." Harvey climbed out of the saddle. "Pete Tolliver lost fifteen acres of wheat. One of your men set it on fire."

Grat growled, "Be careful what you accuse me of, Harvey!"

Les Harvey grinned a little. He was watching Grat closely, and saw the nervous twitch of the big man's mouth.

"Poke Yancey's in jail for starting the fire," he told Grat. "The homesteaders caught him before he could get away."

Grat Gagan said flatly, "Poke ain't in jail—that I'll bet on. Crandall's on a drunk. You're trying to pull some bluff, Harvey—get on with it."

Les laughed, a little surprised at the cold rasping sound that came out of his mouth. "Sure. Crandall and I got to jokin' some about justice in Buckroe this morning an' just to make it a bigger joke, he made me a deputy. Your man Poke is in jail all right—an' I've done lost the key."

He heard Grat suck his breath in sharply, as he threw back his vest and showed him the deputy's badge he had pinned inside it. He went on, "You're paying for Tolliver's burned wheat, Grat—or I'll plumb forget even to look for that key."

Grat lowered his head and charged. Les had been standing flat-footed, and the rancher's unexepected move caught him off balance. He tried to jerk to one side, but Grat's fist caught him on the side of his head.

Instinctively he kept his feet. He stumbled back and clumsily dodged Grat's next rush and the rancher thundered past.

Les was thirty pounds lighter than Grat, and he knew that this lightness was going to be his only hope in this fight. Anger lent him confidence and he sidestepped Grat's next rush, planted a stiff blow on Grat's face. He landed two more jolting blows on Grat's eye before the bigger man grew cautious.

Grat came in more slowly the next time and Les was moving away when he tripped. He twisted and tried to get his feet away from the obstruction, but couldn't. He went down, rolling, and caught a quick glimpse of the man who had tripped him.

"Finish him, Grat!" the newcomer yelled. The rancher bored in, and Les tried desperately to roll clear; then hot pain ripped through him as Grat's boot landed in his ribs.

The rest was a nightmare of shooting pains, and a struggle to get his breath. Les was vaguely aware that two more of Grat's riders had arrived, and were standing around silently watching their boss at his brutal work. Then merciful blackness closed in over him.

LES waited until the sound of hoofs had died away, then rolled over and got painfully to his feet. He stumbled over to the horse trough and washed the effects of the battle off, and bathed his head in the cool water.

Dizzy and sick, he sat down in the shade of the bunkhouse and smoked a cigarette, then pulled himself gingerly into the saddle, and rode toward Jimpson Creek.

Big Herb Monroe came running as Les rode into his barnyard. The nester eyed the storekeeper's bruised and battered countenance, his face turning red with suppressed anger.

"Grat didn't bluff, huh?" Herb ground out. "Knew some of us shoulda gone with you. Some of us'll ride with you, from now on."

"No such thing," Les said quickly. "Every one of you homesteaders have got to stay out here and guard your crops." He slid to the ground.

"I was doing all right with Grat—until some help showed up—for Grat." He shrugged and grinned painfully. "I'll know how to fight him the next time we tangle," he said. "I came out here to warn you."

"Grat going to try again?" Herb asked.

Les nodded. "He's gone to get Poke out of jail. Maybe he can do it. Then he'll be back this way because you're witnesses against Poke. An' our only hope of finally beating

him is to harvest your crops. Then we'll have money enough to prosecute Grat in spite of Sheriff Crandall."

Les rode back to Buckroe leaving the nesters in grim council. At the edge of town Cy Purcell, the blacksmith, waved him over. Jess Duvall, who ran the feed store, came up next and Les knew that the whole town knew what was going on. A few more townspeople clustered around as Les told the whole story. Cy Purcell whistled softly.

He said, "Gagan is a tough man to buck. He'll break you and run you out of town."

Les said bitterly. "I'm done anyhow if he burns the nesters out. You can't have a town without law."

The tradespeople shuffled their feet and looked uneasy. Hot words formed on Les' lips, but he fought them back. These people were in business, the same as himself. Only none of them had as much nester credit on their books as he did.

"Why don't you let the circuit court handle it?" Jess Duvall said nervously. "It convenes in Buckroe in a couple of weeks."

"You can't turn this fight on and off like water," Les said bitterly. "In two weeks it'll be over, one way or another."

"Nobody's ever beat Grat Gagan yet," Cy Purcell said morosely. "But I'm wishing you luck, Les."

Les nodded, looking into the impassive faces of the small band. They wanted no part of this fight. He turned away.

Grat Gagan was standing on the front porch of Les' store as he rode up. Two of Grat's men were lounging nearby, and a half dozen townspeople were idling around, watching developments. Gagan's face still showed the marks of his fight with Les, and, as Les approached, he stomped off up the street.

Les looked at the small crowd. "Funny how a man can get a rep of being awful tough—and then lose it." His bluff almost frightened himself. "Don't look like Grat wants any part of me for a second helping."

Some of the crowd looked the other way, wanting no part of such talk. But a few grinned back at Les.

CHAPTER THREE

Corpse Frame

AN HOUR or so later Sheriff Crandall came into the store. The sheriff's eyes were bloodshot and his face was red. Evidently Grat had used rough, but effective methods to sober him up.

"I've come for that deputy's badge, and the keys," Crandall rasped.

Les shrugged. "There's a charge against Poke Yancey."

"I'm turning him loose—lack of evidence," Crandall growled. He grabbed the badge and keys from Les' extended hand.

"How about a man's own signed confession?"

Crandall hesitated. He glanced at Grat, then back at Les. "That's between Poke, Grat and you," he said finally. "Was I you, Harvey, I'd get rid of that paper—if there's such." His voice took on a whiskey whine. "It's like carrying a live rattle around in your pocket."

"You mean it's like a greased chute—straight to jail for the three of you," Les said harshly.

Crandall licked his lips nervously for a moment, then shrugged and stomped out. Buckroe watched quietly as their sheriff entered the jail, and a few minutes later, Poke Yancey walked out.

The whole Double G band climbed into their saddles and rode out of town toward Jimpson Creek.

Cy Purcell walked past Les' store. "You don't suppose Grat is going to burn them nesters out, do you?" he asked worriedly. "He wouldn't try anything like that in broad daylight, do you reckon?"

"Why not?" Les asked sharply. "The whole town looked on and didn't raise a finger while he got his man out of jail, didn't it? But I don't think Grat will find it as easy to burn the nesters out, as he did to get Poke out of jail."

Cy Purcell shot him a quick glance, then walked on up the street. Les went back in his store and was going over his books when Sheriff Crandall walked in. The sheriff walked with a cocky strut.

"Got a business proposition to make you," Crandall said.

"Your ideas ain't exactly reliable," Les said wryly. "Yo're like to go back on 'em, like you did on that deputy deal."

The sheriff flushed, then grinned coldly. "Harvey, I don't think you're gonna be in business much longer. I'm willing to buy you out—right now before Grat and the boys get back. You c'n give me a bill of sale and be a good ways out of town before they get back."

"What makes you think I'll be leaving town?" Les asked.

"This county's got no use for a fool," Crandall said sharply. "An' Grat ain't one. You know where he and his boys are going, and you know what they're going to do will break you. I've allus wanted a little business of my own—and it'll mean you can leave Buckroe with enough money to keep you going till you find a job."

Les said thoughtfully, "Might be you'll need a deputy again, Crandall, time Grat and his boys get back to town. Just remember I'm

still willin'—an' I could use the salary, too, since you're worried."

Crandall's eyebrows shot up. "Them fool nesters! They wouldn't—"

He turned abruptly and stomped out.

Two hours later, Grat led his men back into town. Two of them wore bloody bandages. Buckroe was keeping hands strictly off this fight, but Les saw more than one curious citizen watching the procession as it pulled to a weary halt in front of the jail. Crandall met them. There was a brief consultation; then the whole bunch strode into the jail office.

In less than five minutes Crandall was headed again for the store. Les saw him coming and stepped behind the counter.

"Harvey, I've come for that confession Poke Yancey signed for them nesters."

Les grinned at him. "Dunno as you rightly believe in it. I jest mentioned it once. You sure there is one?"

Crandall's tongue darted over his lips nervously. "That confession won't be no good in court," Crandall said, his nervousness increasing, "they forced Poke to sign it."

"Poke tell you he signed a confession?" Les inquired blandly.

"Why, no."

"Didn't figure he would," Les said. "Grat might make him stretch hemp for it." He turned away. "Well, I don't see what you can do, sheriff, except wait for the trial."

Crandall's eyes narrowed and his hand streaked for his gun. Les brought up an axe handle from under the counter and swung for the sheriff's wrist.

The sheriff howled and his gun went clattering across the floor. He leaped for it, and Les swung the axe handle again. Crandall retreated swiftly toward the door.

"I give you your chance, Harvey," Crandall panted. "And you didn't have sense enough to take it. Don't blame me now for whatever happens to you." He stepped hurriedly out of the front door and slammed it shut after him.

Les picked up the lawman's gun and stared at it. He didn't know but what he might have set forces in motion that scared him a little. A human life is a human life—even a life such as Poke's. And, he thought, Poke stood a good chance of being done with his before another week was out.

He came to a decision finally. He found pen and ink and went to the room at the back of the store.

The circuit court would convene in Buckroe in two weeks. He scrawled a letter to Judge Ben Akers at the county seat. Then he stuffed it in an envelope and picked up his hat.

Dusk was settling over Buckroe. Les was

moving through the semi-gloom of his store when he saw a gun flash through the open window. Instinct made him drop flat. The slug buried itself into the door jamb. He waited and there was no further sound. Slowly he made his way at last to the door, started to open it—then flattened against a wall.

The hidden gun blasted again, and a bullet shattered the door knob.

He hurried through the length of the store, and flung the back door open and again stood aside. There was a sharp explosion, an angry whine and a bullet buried itself in the far wall. He slammed the door shut and wiped cold sweat from his forehead.

He was caught like a rat in a trap.

HE GROPEd his way to a chair and sat down to think it out. There didn't seem to be any immediate solution. No one in town wanted any part of this fight—and after their fight with Grats this afternoon the nesters wouldn't stir from their settlement.

The dusk deepened into black night. The long minutes dragged by, and still Les sat and stared into the darkness. There were few lights turned on in Buckroe that night, and there were hardly any people on the streets, though he heard no sounds of violence. Les wondered dully if he could point a gun at a man and pull the trigger.

The crash of broken glass sent him sprawling face down on the floor. Something rolled along the rough planks—a rock. Les picked it up. There was a note tied around it. He crouched behind his counter and struck a match. He read:

When you're ready to ride—Let us know.

He crumpled the note and walked back into the main part of the store. Someone was calling him. He recognized Grats's voice drifting in through the broken window.

"Harvey—you in there? Speak up!"

"What do you want?" Les asked huskily.

Grats wasn't in sight. He was standing at the corner of the store. "You're done in this town, Harvey. You can take a gun and a horse—and ride. But we'll search you."

"Still looking for that confession?"

Grats said, "Poke says there ain't no such paper."

"But, you want to make sure—"

Just in time, Les saw the dark blur in front of the window. He'd been watching for a trick, but the spurting, orange tongues of flame almost caught him napping. He hadn't quite expected this extreme of violence.

Then he understood. Softly he called out, "Poke."

"What do ya want?"

Les grinned, out of range of the window. "How's your health, Poke? Think Grats'll let you live long enough to say your piece at the trial?"

His answer was a virulent flow of cursing and he took Crandall's gun from his belt, sent two shots through the window. He heard Poke Yancey scuttling out of range.

Grats said savagely, "A clean shot and you missed, Poke. I dunno but what Crandall oughta hang you fer rustlin', at that. Maybe it ain't them nesters been takin' my stock."

Crandall broke in nervously, "This is getting pretty raw, Grats."

"Let's rush him," somebody said. "Hell, that tenderfoot can't shoot!"

"He's got shotguns in there," Grats said viciously. "If he ever get a notion to use 'em. We'll burn him out—"

Les' jaw came unhinged at the thought of the rackful of new guns—then he pulled it together. He'd never shot at a man, even with a six—and the thought of the damage a shotgun would do—but if they were going to burn him. . . .

Without striking a light, he moved over to the counter where the clothes were kept. He got some hoe handles, and began to make a dummy, stuffing rags and whatever he could find into a suit of clothes, and using the hoe handles for arms and legs. It wasn't much of a dummy, he thought grimly, but it might fool a man in the dark for one split second. That—and a rackful of shotguns—

He felt his way to the gun rack, and began to load. He filled his shirt-pockets with extra shells; then, carrying the dummy under one arm, and a shotgun in the other, he made his way cautiously to the back door. He heard faint movements outside, and grinned tightly. There was a sickness in him, but with a shotgun nerves didn't matter. You just pointed it, pulled trigger and—well everybody has to die some time.

He propped the dummy beside the door. The doorknob made a slight clicking sound, and it caused the faint noises outside to stop instantly.

He eased the door open about six inches, and showed the dummy partly in sight.

A gun blasted a few feet away. Les gave what he hoped was a realistic moan and let the dummy fall outside. The door sagged open fully.

"Got 'im!" a hoarse voice said triumphantly and the shotgun in Les' hands went off almost of its own will.

The charge of buckshot caught a man square in the middle and flung him backwards like a half-filled sack of grain. Les cleared the door in a leap, and raced for the shed in back of the store.

A man cursed loudly and a six-gun blasted.

Les felt something rip along his left thigh and went rolling in the dust.

He got the shotgun up and pulled the trigger. The man screamed and went down.

Les eased away from the commotion. He found he could still walk and made his way through back alleys, jamming fresh loads into the gun.

It took him a while to reach the edge of town. He rested, hunkering down behind a deserted barn, then eased across a vacant lot to a spot where he could see into the main part of town.

Shadowy shapes were still milling around his store—they used lights now freely and Les swore. He caught the flare of a naked torch and began to circle back—moving faster now despite the pain in his leg.

SHERIFF CRANDALL saw him first. Les heard a slug scream over his head. The range was long, but he cut loose. Crandall yelled in pain and ducked for shelter.

The other barrel sent Grat Gagan diving into a doorway. The torch went out.

Les was opposite the jail now. The sturdiest building in town, it gave him what he wanted. He eased into the open doorway and hastily shoved shells into the shotgun.

"There's another jail delivery waitin' for you, Grat," he called out. "Why don't you tend to it personal?" Then he saw a piece of Poke Yancey's leg sticking out from a doorway and cut loose.

Poke yelled in pain and tried to scramble back—but instead came erect. Les took good aim and let him have the other barrel. The range was long but the buckshot knocked Poke into the street. He flattened out in the dust, his sixguns roaring. Les got fresh loads in the scattergun and waited. Killing Poke was the opposite of his plans.

Grat yelled. "I'll cover you from here!"

Poke scurried back to safety.

Les waited. Grat jerked into sight for half a second, thumbed two quick shots at Les—then ducked for cover again.

The next time Grat came in sight, Crandall covered him, and Les had to hold back. Next

Crandall made a dash for a new position and accurate fire from Grat kept Les from intervening. And when he rummaged in his pockets for fresh shells, his face went bleak. He had one more shell left—and a six-gun he couldn't hit the wide open spaces with.

A rifle blasted from up the street. Crandall cursed in surprise and Grat Gagan roared, "Who the hell is that?"

Cy Purcell, the town blacksmith, was coming down the street. "I been trying to talk some other folks into buying into this fight," he said, "but they're scared of you, Grat. But there's been a mite of shootin' tonight an' we can't have stray lead flyin' too frequent. Also a lot of us figure if you can't get Les by now—you just plain won't. You kin put down your hardware an' surrender—or you'll have to shoot a heap more men. That right, Jess?" he called out.

Jess Duvall, the feed store man, joined in, "Hang and rattle, Harvey. We'll smoke these skunks into the open for you."

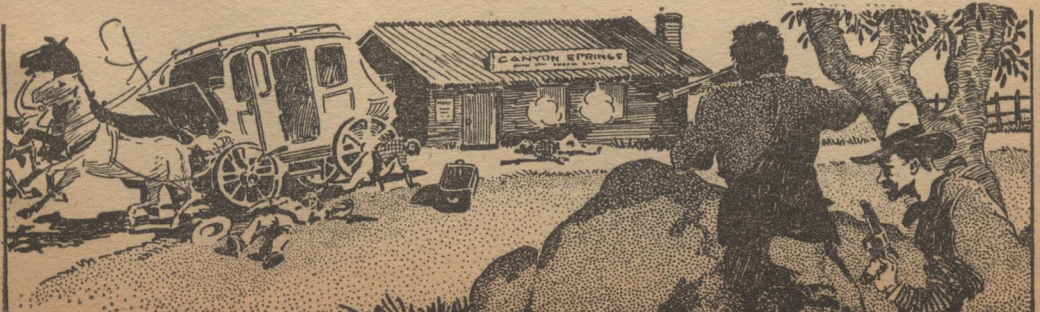
There was a sudden flare of smoky light from Les' store, followed by blasting gunfire. It sounded like an attack in force and Grat Gagan broke from cover. He hit the street in a flat—and Crandall came out next, hands high.

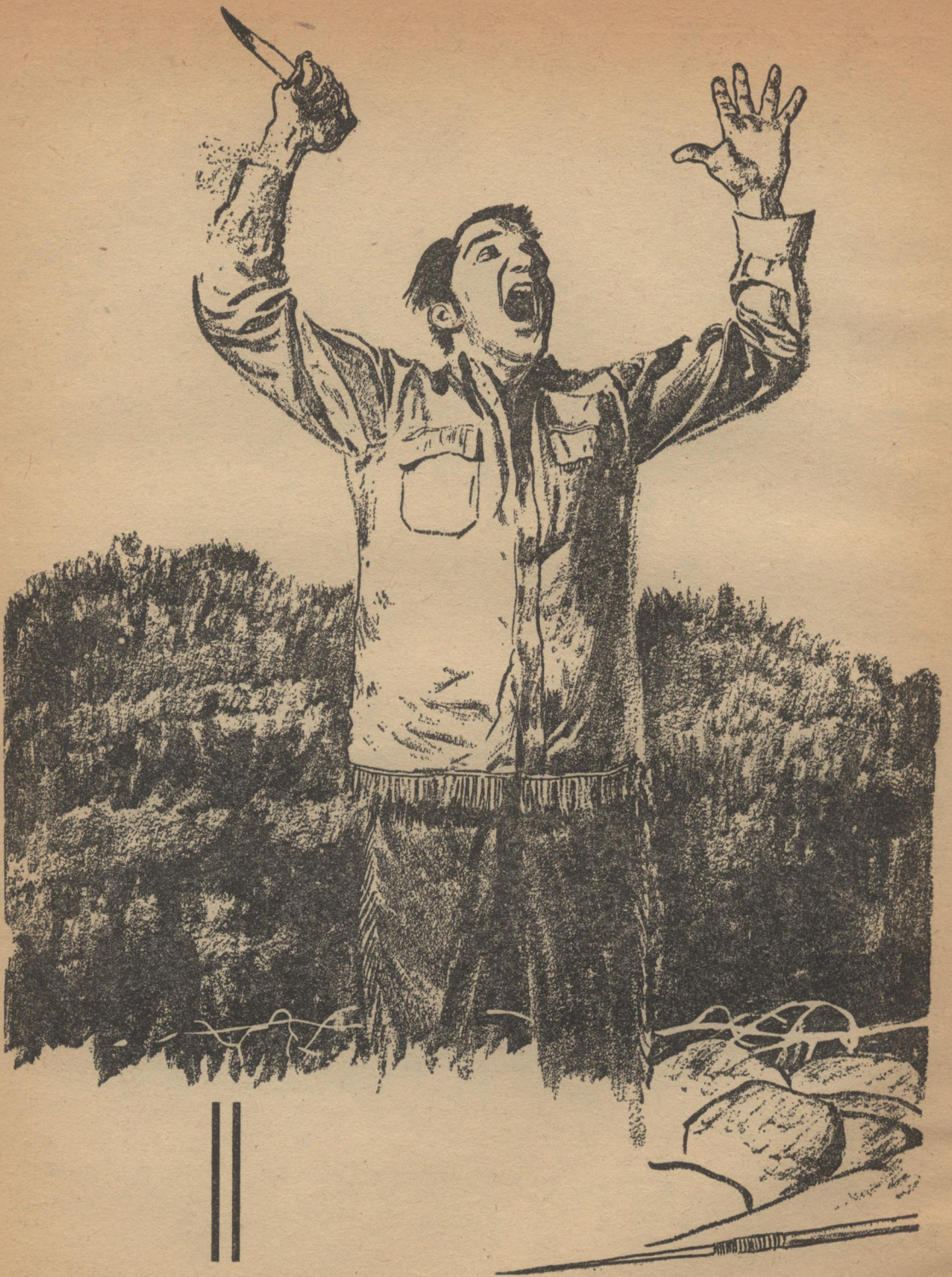
Les stared at his store. How could any but Grat's men have got into the building? The gun explosions inside continued. Finally Poke Yancey staggered out, both hands clutching his bloody middle—and Les understood.

He stepped out, limping toward the store as rapidly as he could. Smoke still billowed from the building. He passed Poke Yancey, lying still and dead in the street. In Yancey's hand was still clutched a can of kerosene, with which he'd started a fire back of the counter.

It wasn't much of a fire. Les put it out while Grat's men were surrendering to the townspeople. It hadn't done much damage, except to Les' rack of loaded shotguns—and to Grat Gagan's morale.

By the time the racket and swearing was done outside, Les was at the door—grinning a welcome to his new friends.





*Running Shadow they called him
—a white Injun and a renegade—
till he came to his greatest fight—
and ran the right way!*

*Involuntary as fate the Kiowa victory yell
came from his throat. . . .*

A WAGON FOR BROKEN BOW

CHAPTER ONE

Renegade

THE driver of the white-topped freighter was a half-breed. Comanche, Clyde Amestoy thought, and he was usually not wrong about such things. A man couldn't live sixteen years of his twenty with the Kiowas without knowing something of Indians.

Clyde rolled himself a cigarette and sat back to enjoy life. He was getting there, slow but sure. It had been a long battle, regaining his rightful place among men of his own race. There were too many who knew of Guanah Parker. But with men like Amos Walters to hire scouts for his freighters and with girls

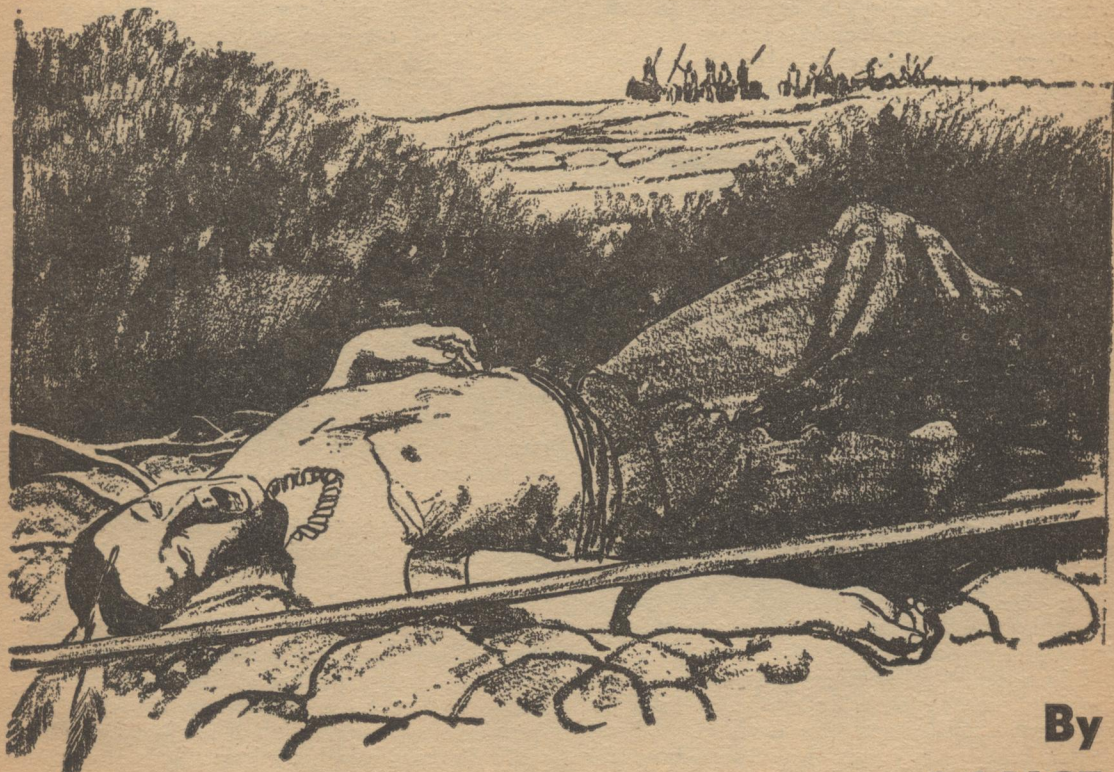
like Julie Walters to help with her smile—

Clyde blew the smoke through his thin lips, then dropped the cigarette and reached for the rifle at his knee.

There in the buffalo wallows he had seen the ponies of Kiowas.

The half-breed who drove the wagon made a quick movement and a gun barrel crashed against the side of Clyde's head.

When he came to the wagon train was under way again, but the two lead wagons were missing. The driver of the third wagon—the halfbreed—was gone, too, and Gord Cramble,



By
**LANCE
KERMIT**

the wagon boss, had taken his place and now scowled down at Clyde.

"Thought you were guarding this train?"

He was a man who did not conceal his hate, this Cramble. There was something foreboding and treacherous in his squat frame, the heavy jowls, the beady eyes under shaggy brows. But he was the wagon boss, and what he said would have to go, so Clyde made no reply. They'd be in Fort Sill soon, and he'd talk to Amos Walters and Julie.

Gord Cramble cut in on his thoughts. "Them relatives of yours got off with two wagons. Just lucky they didn't get off with some scalps."

Clyde thought of that some, ignoring Cramble's reference to his connection with the Kiowas. Clyde had no more love for Indians as a whole than did Lieutenant McCoy in at the Fort. After all, sixteen years of his life had been taken from him by the Kiowas. Sixteen years in which he had become an Indian, in spite of his white skin. He had become an Indian, and he knew their ways, and he wondered now what strange prank in the mind of what raider had dictated taking only two wagons and leaving the others unmolested. It wasn't like Satank or Satanta or Big Tree to short themselves on a prize, unless there was sound reason. He rubbed the knot on his head and passed his hand over his eyes to clear his vision.

Finally he climbed down from the moving wagon and untied his horse from the tail gate. Swinging into the saddle he took his place in front of the lead team. The scattered buildings of Fort Sill speckled the flat landscape ahead. An hour later they rolled through the outer gate, and two men came out to meet them.

LAURIE TATUM, the Quaker agent, Clyde did not know, for the man was new at the nearby Agency; but the familiar figure of Lieutenant Barry McCoy sent a hot twinge through him.

The agent looked like a capable man, and Clyde was glad. Others hadn't made much progress with the Kiowas or the Comanches. He had heard that Quakers were opposed to force, and he wondered some at that. Sometimes a gun was more useful than a promise of increased rations.

Lieutenant McCoy raised a white gauntleted hand in greeting and Clyde tried to hold his judgement of the man. He knew himself not to be a fair one to judge this officer who could be no older than himself. It was a matter of jealousy and he was fair enough to admit it.

He read the smug satisfaction on Lieutenant McCoy's beardless face as Gord Cramble told the story of the attack.

"Now are you convinced, Mr. Tatum?" the lieutenant said. There's no talking peace

with a Kiowa. They're a bloodthirsty lot, and no manner of soft handling will change them. It's lead and steel they understand. I'll never be satisfied until we wipe out every man, woman and child of them."

The lieutenant meant that literally, Clyde knew, and a slow anger burned in his cheeks. There were plenty of trouble makers among the Kiowas—But manhandling a whole nation . . . He thought of old Nataka, the squaw now dead who had raised him as if he were her own. And he stepped down from his horse and came over to where the group was talking.

"You're wrong, Lieutenant," Clyde said without introduction. He had learned the niceties of military courtesy, but to him the way of the council fire was still best at times. If a man had something to say, he should say it. He saw the flash in McCoy's eyes and the color that stained his neck above his uniform.

"Who asked you, Injun?" the lieutenant said. "Don't sound to me like you did such a good job."

Clyde held his temper. It was a promise he had made to himself, and to Julie Walters. "There was a half-breed riding the wagon I was on," Clyde said evenly. "He knocked me out before I could do anything." He saw the taunting smirk on McCoy's face and struggled hard to keep his temper in check. He turned to the new agent.

"What I mean, sir, is that this was a small band that attacked the wagons. It's fall now and soon will be winter. The Kiowa does not go on the warpath in winter. They'll come to you for food and perhaps by spring you will have talked some sense into them. Why make war when you know that for the next four months you can have peace for the asking?"

"How'd you know that's so?" McCoy asked sharply. "I wouldn't trust a man who grew up with Injuns any more than I would an Injun."

Clyde Amestoy felt his anger boiling over, and he took a quick step toward the other, but at that moment Julie Walters came across the parade ground toward them. So, instead, he removed his hat and stood there awkwardly, watching her approach and cursing the fact that she would have to know he had failed on his first job.

Julie Walters was poised and certain, her red gold hair loose around her shoulders. The wind made her a picture of lissome unspoiled freedom. She came straight to the men, no shyness or coyness to spoil her beauty. Her smile lingered unashamed on Clyde Amestoy and she greeted him warmly.

It made him uneasy, as always, the way she spoke to him. She never treated him like an Indian, and while that was the one thing he wanted more than anything else, yet he felt a wild urge to run whenever she was near. Now there was a tightness in his chest he

could not explain. He watched her run her eyes down the line of wagons and saw the startled question in her face. He started to explain, but Gord Cramble cut him short. Cramble told his version of the affair.

When he was done Lieutenant McCoy broke in, "I say call out the troops and get after 'em!"

Gord Cramble moved nervously, but made no answer.

Laurie Tatum, the new Quaker agent, stood silently for a moment. His face was grave, and his eyes soft and kind. After a second he spoke, and his voice was rich with authority. "There'll be no armed violence while I'm agent here," he said and Clyde Amestoy felt a little thrill of optimism. Here was a man who might be able to do things.

Lieutenant McCoy snapped, "You'll wake up some morning without any hair if you keep that policy."

"Fiddlesticks!" Julie Walters said, obviously trying to break the tension. "You've been telling me that for six months. And I still have my hair—see?" She fluffed the golden tresses with both hands and the sun caught and glinted from it. Clyde Amestoy felt a quickening of his blood and Lieutenant McCoy's face was bright scarlet.

"And if you don't quit hiring Injuns to guard your trains you'll lose it yet!" he snapped.

The officer knew he had gone too far—Clyde could see it in his eyes before he ever finished speaking. But it was too late. Clyde moved forward swiftly. He was what McCoy had called him—he was Running Shadow now, the man the Kiowas had named because of his swiftness. He had been insulted, and there was only one answer for an Indian to make to an insult.

He slapped with the back of his hand, then caught McCoy's arm and twisted. That he would be imprisoned—shot, maybe—meant nothing to Clyde Amestoy. He was Running Shadow, the Kiowa, and he was fighting his enemy. He saw McCoy reach for the pistol and his heel caught the officer's hand. McCoy got to his feet and came at Clyde, his fists flailing. And then from the corner of his eye Clyde saw Gord Cramble pull his gun.

He smashed his fist into Cramble's stomach, then turned to catch McCoy in the face as the officer rushed him. He felt his knuckles break against McCoy's chin, and he turned from the lieutenant as if he had never been in the fight and gave his attention to the man who had tried to shoot him in the back.

There was a blood glaze in his eyes as his fingers closed around Gord Cramble's throat and his knee crashed into the wagon boss' groin. The stocky waggoner went down, and Clyde followed him his fingers gouging deeper

and deeper into the man's throat. There was a lust to kill in him—the law of the wild. It drummed through his brain and shut out all else, until Julie Walter's pleading came through and he was aware of the tugging of hands on his arms. And then he was a white man again, so he got slowly to his feet, his eyes never leaving the purpling face of the wagon boss.

Julie Walters was weeping, and the sound cut into Clyde Amestoy's heart. But what was worse was the fear in her eyes as she looked at him. There was a knowledge there that he had never wanted to be there. A knowledge that at times he was a throwback—a savage as bloodthirsty as Satanta himself, or as Satank, who rode into battle with the bleached bones of his son strapped to a horse behind him.

He turned quickly to Laurie Tatum, the Quaker, so that he could get away from those condemning eyes. They were peaceful men, these Quakers, he had heard it said. But there was no help to be had from the agent.

"Lock him up," Laurie Tatum said.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Tatum," Clyde said quickly. "You've got no right to say what's to be done with me. I'm a white man—"

"Quanah Parker is a white man too," Julie Walters said it and it was like a slap to Clyde. He looked from one to the other and suddenly realized what they were saying to him. He had proved himself unworthy of being a white man. If he stayed here he would be treated like an Indian—put on the reservation and made a ward of the Agency.

Gord Cramble moved, and Clyde drew his gun.

He said, backing toward his horse, "You've called me an Indian and you've treated me like one. Maybe I better go back where I belong."

He mounted carefully, and knew a savage satisfaction in their fear, despite the quick tears in Julie Walter's eyes and the smugness of Lieutenant McCoy's battered face.

Then he was sinking his spurs home and heading out across the prairie. Behind him lay a world he had tried to invade and had failed. Ahead lay understanding and the land of an old squaw named Nataka. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Death Ride

HE RODE a circuitous route, keeping to the south, for he needed time to himself and the wind in his face. After his first flash of anger he was calm and cursed himself for his folly. It was still hard for him to think like a white man—be cool and to reason. Sixteen years of quick hate and sullen stubbornness had yet to be conquered.

On the third day he sighted the bank of Kiowas coming up from Texas.

Even at a distance he recognized old Satank, the Kiowa leader for these past thirty years. The old man sat his pony with a quiet murderous dignity, and behind him, as always, was a pack horse with the bleached bones of Satank's son tied in place. There had been a raid, then, for Satank did not carry this grisly reminder of his hatred for the white man unless he was in search of scalps. By the pinto horse Clyde knew that Satanta, much younger, but no less a leader, was also there. And where these two went Big Tree and the bloody Broken Bow rode.

He had promised once to meet Broken Bow alone, for there was the matter of a white woman's scalp between Clyde Amestoy and the arrogant brave who coveted the power of his three superiors. But this was not the time to start personal fights, what with a hundred raiders fresh from victory riding with new scalps at their belts. Clyde would gladly have turned back, but they had seen him, and to run was to get a bullet in the back and have his own hair lifted by the ready knife of Broken Bow. So he stayed and greeted the raiders in their own tongue.

Satank was morose and silent, as usual, but Satanta was bubbling with braggadocio. Broken Bow stood aside and his eyes were a challenge for Clyde.

It had been a successful raid, Satanta bragged. Forty mules and seven scalps. He held up the locks of hair and Broken Bow scoffed when Clyde turned his face.

"See the white man who would be a brave," Broken Bow taunted. "He has not the stomach for warfare!"

"I come in peace," Clyde said in Kiowa. "There is a new agent—a just man. Why do you not speak with him and make a treaty?"

Satanta beat his chest. "I have met and talked with this agent," he boasted. "Have you not heard of what I said? We have tried the white man's road, I told him, and we found it hard; we find nothing on it but a little corn, which hurts our teeth; no sugar, no coffee. We want to have guns, breech-loading carbines, ammunition, and caps. The commissioners who made the treaty at Medicine Bluffs proved that they were from Washington and were chiefs by giving us presents. If the new agent is a chief from Washington, let him prove it by the same token!"

"It is wise to raid," bloody old Satank said. "When we raid the agent gives us presents so we will stop. When we do not raid we get only the corn which hurts our teeth."

"Why do we speak with this man who is neither red nor white?" Broken Bow said. "He has told of how he will kill me. Let him have his chance."

"He is the son of Nataka," Big Tree put in unexpectedly. "He will come with us so that he does not tell the agent of our movements, but he will be safe."

"He has the belly of a lily," Broken Bow said. "While those who fed him raid he crouches at the feet of a white woman."

Clyde held his tongue. To start something now meant sudden death, and he was not ready to die. There had been time to think and there were things he wanted to know. So he turned his horse and fell in beside Big Tree, the one man he could trust at all. Big Tree respected old Nataka.

Satank had set up camp off reservation in the broken country to the west of Fort Sill, and they rode here, boasting of their exploits. Never had Clyde seen such confidence and such good humor among these killers who refused to be tamed, and again he spoke of the Quaker agent.

He found that Satank knew more of Laurie Tatum than he did, and the old chief knew too of the belief of the Quakers that it was wrong to use arms. He grunted contentedly and said he would go to see Laurie Tatum. He would go in person, and he would take Satanta and Big Tree and two other braves. If Agent Tatum did not believe in arms, then it was time he was shown the power of Satank. And accordingly, they left the next morning, telling of how they would flaunt themselves in front of this peaceful agent and demand more rations.

They left Broken Bow behind, and Clyde Amestoy knew that now he was a prisoner in fact.

The camp grew noisy toward evening and he saw that the men were drinking. He wondered some about this, for he had seen no sign of whiskey. He got to his feet and walked around to mingle with the braves and heard a thick voice calling him in good English.

"What's up, Running Shadow? Gettin' smart and putting in with us?"

Clyde turned and saw the half-breed who had driven the third wagon in the Walter's train. His blood quickened. He said, "Maybe."

"Good," the half-breed said. "Here, have a drink." He extended a tin cup and Clyde drained it.

He grinned and said, "Thanks. I haven't been able to find the keg."

The breed was drunk and talkative. "That's good!" he said. "Can't find the keg! Come along!" He half leaned on Clyde as they started across the open space between the tents. Broken Bow came out and barred their way.

"Running Shadow stays here," the Kiowa said.

"Get out of the way," the half-breed snarled, shoving Broken Bow aside. "I give

the orders around here, see? And I go where I damn please!" Clyde saw Broken Bow move toward a knife, and he lashed out and caught the Kiowa on the point of the chin. The brave dropped, but as he hit the ground he rose to one knee, his eyes red with anger.

"You will name the time when we meet alone, Running Shadow," Broken Bow said softly. But he got to his feet and skulked off into the circle of darkness. The half-breed threw back his head and laughed.

"Dam Injuns get out of hand," he said, and he belched loudly. "Imagine Broken Bow orderin' me around? He ain't no chief. Come on, kid, I'll buy you a drink!"

The half-breed staggered down the dark path and Clyde followed. Near the spring they came on the clearing with a small fire where painted braves lolled around or screamed drunkenly into the night. And there stood the two white topped wagons of the Walter's train. On the tail gate of one of them was a keg of whiskey.

"Couldn't find the keg, eh?" the half-breed said, slapping Clyde on the back. "Well, you've found it now. I don't care what happens to you tomorrow, see, but at least you ain't got paint on you."

THE breed was talkative—glad to have someone who spoke his language. "Tomorrow they can have your scalp, see?" he said. "Maybe I'll help 'em. But you talk English and I don't like to drink alone. These devils don't savvy my powwow, see?" He slobbered over his whiskey and caught at the corner of the wagon for support. "But they're Injuns, just the same. All Injuns." He waved his hand to take in the whole camp and he rolled his red-rimmed eyes at Clyde. "And that's more than you and me are," he said owlishly. "We ain't nothing."

Clyde wanted to take a look inside the wagons. There was more than whiskey in those huge white-topped bodies, and he had a hunch he knew now what it was. But the breed drew him another cup of whiskey and offered him the makings. "I know how it is, see?" the breed said thickly. "They won't let us be white men and then won't let us be Injuns. I'm half Comanche, but that don't make no difference. Injun Pete, they call me. The whites spit on me and the Injuns don't want me. And that's the way with you. You lived with 'em too long. You'll find out."

"What do you do about it?"

"What do I do about it? I act like an Injun and play the white man's game, if there's money in it." He punched Clyde with a stubby finger. "Ever hear of the Comancheros? That's for me, kid, and as soon as I wind up here I'm headin' for Texas where the cattle are easy to steal and easy to sell—an' plenty

of room to hide 'em in. Sell 'em to the man you stole 'em from!" He roared at his own joke and stumbled over toward the whiskey keg on the wagon. Clyde followed and jockeyed around to where he could see into the dark interior.

There were barrels there, such as were used for flour and sugar, but the faint fire glint flashed back from the breeches of new rifles. Clyde's breath whistled through his teeth. There were enough guns here to put half the Kiowa nation on the warpath. He took a long shot in the dark. "Texas is a long ways," he said. "What's wrong with staying here and hauling guns for Gord Cramble?" He held his breath, waiting for Injun's Pete's answer.

"Cramble?" Pete said, turning the spigot on the keg. "He's all right, but he's—" He sloshed the cup down on the tail gate and his hand went near his gun. "Wait a minute," he said thickly. "What do you know about Cramble? He didn't want you along on this trip—"

"Forget it," Clyde said, drawing himself a cup of whiskey. "I'm not blind. What do I care if Cramble sells guns to the Indians? Didn't you say guys like you and me don't fit in?"

"That's right," Pete said softly, staring at him. "We ain't whites and we ain't Injuns—but don't try nothing, see? You're just drinking with me and tomorrow your scalp will be hanging from a pole and I don't give a damn. Cramble don't like you. You're lucky to be alive."

Their further conversation was broken by a long wail and much talk from the upper camp and then Broken Bow came down the trail, followed by one of the braves who had ridden away with Satank, Satanta, and Big Tree. Broken Bow stood like a chieftain now, sure of himself, arrogant and proud. His voice rang as he called for silence, and even the most drunken of the braves turned their eyes his way.

"Satanta, the loud mouth, has talked too much and acted too little," Broken Bow said. "The agent had General Grierson at the fort arrest our leaders, to be tried in the white man's court. Tratunk here has escaped, and proven himself worthy of being my assistant. I, Broken Bow, chief of the Kiowas, have spoken!"

Clyde's blood chilled and he set the cup down noiselessly. If this were true then Broken Bow was in power and he, Clyde, had little time to live.

He turned and saw that Injun Pete was more sober now. "I don't like this," Pete said. "Our deal was with Satank—"

"What was the deal?" Clyde asked. He flexed his hands and felt the tension of approaching battle run through his veins.

"The wagons head north tomorrow," Pete said. "There's one wagon for Satank. He was to meet us near Cache Creek." The half-breed's eyes rolled white in the darkness. "This murderin' Broken Bow will take the whole train and kill off the men. You can't trust him, I tell you." He took a swallow of whiskey and a crafty light twisted his face.

"Gord Cramble don't know as much about Injuns as he thinks he does," the breed said. "If he takes that train through now we'll all have our hair hanging from Broken Bow's belt. That is, unless—" The man seemed perfectly sober now, and he drew himself another drink.

"Sorry to leave you like this, pardner," Injun Pete said, dribbling the contents of the cup over his chin. "But I got to get Cramble to hold up that train." He puffed with importance now. "Hold it up until I make a deal with Broken Bow." He punched Clyde in the chest with his thumb. "See what I mean? Act like an Injun and play the white man's game. There's good money in the freightin' business, and I don't aim to see it spoiled. And Gord Cramble will pay me plenty for making a deal with Broken Bow like he had with Satank!" Clyde hunched his shoulders and waited for his chance.

The half-breed turned, and Clyde's fist caught him behind the ear. Clyde chopped another blow against the renegade's chin and caught him as he fell to the ground. Then he was off into the darkness like a shadow—like his Kiowa name.

Behind him he could hear the arrogant voice of Broken Bow. "Bring the one with a belly like a lily to me. It is time he answers for his talk!"

HALF the night Clyde lay in the tall grass while the hoofs of unshod ponies cut close to his face and the calling of the Kiowas made small sounds in the vastness of the night. From time to time he could hear the condemning voice of Broken Bow, and then the men rode back toward camp and he knew the party was making up for the ride to Cache Creek. A wagonload of rifles was of more importance than the escape of a white man who could not go far.

The chill of after midnight was in the air before he dared raise his head and take his bearings by the stars. Then turning his face toward Fort Sill he started off in a jogging trot—more Indian than white man now. For one hundred paces he would trot, and then, catching his breath, for one hundred paces he would walk. The ground sped by beneath him and before the first pink had toned the light gray in the east the buildings of Fort Sill were standing like dark blobs on the near horizon. Outside the gates a small fire flickered and

dropped its red fingers lazily along the sides of white topped wagons. The train had not yet started to move.

At first he thought of going straight to the house of Amos Walters and telling what he had found, but the thought of being stopped by the soldier guards at the gate held him back. He remembered the hatred in the eyes of Lieutenant McCoy and knew that if he were stopped he would have no time for explanations.

The teams had not been hitched to the wagons as yet, and the white-topped freighters stood in a broken semicircle, their gaunt bowed sides catching the fire glow in patches of light and shadow. Clyde waited until the wagoners were hunkered around the fire and then he pulled himself over the tail gate and crawled into the interior of the nearest wagon.

Once inside he realized the impossibility of the task he had set for himself. Bales of calico were piled neatly, even with the top of the bed. He dug with his fingers, trying to discover if the cloth were concealing whiskey or rifles and found neither. The men were coming back from the fire now, testing ropes and loads. Three stopped outside his wagon and talked in low tones.

"Guess that half-breed Pete went off and got drunk again," one of the men was saying. The other said, "Never did trust the devil. Too much like an Injun."

Clyde smiled grimly.

The canvas over his head was taking a pinkish hue and he knew that morning would bring the drivers and the teamsters to their places and the train would start its trip toward the northern agencies. He had to work fast.

Waiting until he could hear the voices only as a distant blur he dropped back outside and squatted down near the off rear wheel. Carefully he analyzed each wagon, trying to decide which one would be in the lead. Slightly to one side a red-sided Conestoga stood alone. Two armed men lounged near. Clyde studied the wagon closely. There was nothing to mark it from the others, and yet the presence of the guards seemed to set it apart. Also no one came to test the ties. It was worth a try, Clyde figured, and he cursed his lack of a gun.

He made no sound as he moved from wagon to wagon, and soon there was only the intervening ten feet of space between him and the two rifle guards. The night shadows, which had been kind so far, were fast disappearing in a gray mist of morning fog. There was noise from the fort now and the cool tang of low-hanging wood smoke.

A rooster's crow blended with the jangle of chain harness.

The voice of Gord Cramble cut clearly

through the morning. "Get 'em hitched, boys. We're gonna roll!"

There was a tight line of perspiration on Clyde's forehead in spite of the cool air as he bunched his legs and hurled himself across the clearing between the two wagons. He caught the first guard in the stomach with his shoulder and heard the whoosh of breath from the man's lungs and the startled curse of the other guard. Then, stooping low, he scooped up the rifle of the man he had hit and swung it at the second guard. The stock caught the man on the side of the head and splintered and he went down hard.

There was a sudden strained silence in the air.

He did not wait to see if the commotion had been noticed. Still clutching the broken rifle, he pulled himself into the wagon, his breath catching in his lungs. There were barrels—barrels such as there had been in the two wagons at Broken Bow's camp. He crashed the broken rifle into the top of the nearest keg and caught the sour smell of whiskey. Cursing, he bashed at another keg, the splintering of the top sounding loud in the stuffy interior of the wagon.

There were rifles here all right; new breech-loaders—each one earmarked for a white man's scalp. He started to climb back out. He had his evidence. The voice of Julie Walters stopped him.

"I'll ride the lead wagon with Mr. Cramble," she was saying. "No use of eating all that dust."

"That's right, Miss Julie," Lieutenant McCoy answered. "Just ride and enjoy the scenery. My men and I will keep close all the way."

A lantern flashed at the end of the wagon, spilling its yellow light. Above it, dark and bloated by shadows, was the face of Gord Cramble.

Clyde raised the broken rifle—there was a low growl from the wagon boss. And then the man was inside, his hairy arms squeezing like a huge vise, his sweaty hand clamped over Clyde's mouth.

Clyde bit and tasted blood. He brought up his knee and heard a cough of pain. Then a fist smashed against the side of his head—another into his mouth. Blood spurted from his cut lip.

He fought back, but from out of the darkness a gun butt smashed against his head. There was a deep pool of blackness, from which came voices—

"What's the trouble, boss? Sounded like a ruckus around here."

Gord Cramble's answer. "Nothing, Just checking the load. Get those teams hitched." Cramble's breathing was labored, and his voice was choked and gasping.

CHAPTER THREE

Broken Bow

THE stifling close heat, the grind of wheels in rutted roads and the straining creak of the wagon told Clyde it was near noon and that he was still alive. For some time now he had sat dully, holding his head, picking at the dry blood that caked his face. He had never blacked out completely, he felt, for he could remember the first lurch of the wagon—remember the voice of Julie Walters, calling to Lieutenant McCoy. It was this memory which brought him to his senses and his awareness of his great thirst which kept him there.

The reek of the broken keg of whiskey was thick here in the hot closeness of the wagon and Clyde managed to crawl back toward the sloshing keg. At first he tried to drink with his face down, as from a spring, but the fumes of the liquor in his nostrils choked him and made him sick. He cupped his hands then and drank some that way, and the hot whiskey cut through his throat and seared his empty stomach. Twice more he forced himself to drink—he had to fight against nausea, but the false sense of strength was beginning to take hold.

He thought, *six hours from Fort Sill* . . . His thoughts were organized and deadly as he made his way over the barrels toward the front of the wagon. Through the flutter of the front flap he could see the blue of Julie Walters' dress.

For some time he kneeled on one of the barrels, peering out between Julie Walters and Gord Cramble—so near to them that if either one had moved an elbow they would have struck him in the face. Lieutenant McCoy was not around, nor were any of his troop of cavalry. Sent on ahead by Cramble, Clyde thought, remembering his own blunder of climbing to the wagon seat next to the half-breed. Ahead the green swath of Cache Creek appeared and disappeared across the undulating landscape.

The lead wagon was pulling ahead now, Cramble cracking the lines against the wheel-er's backs. He could see the perspiration lining the cruel cut face of Cramble and when Julie Walters asked about the increased pace he snarled back at her. There was fear in the girl's eyes. The mules gathered speed. And Clyde stood for a minute, poised, then his hands closed around Gord Cramble's neck and he jerked the wagon boss backwards, into the wagon.

He beat Cramble's head against the edge of the barrel—pounded his fist twice into the bloated face—then he was into the seat of the wagon, sawing on the lines. Julie Walters screamed, and he turned toward her, pleading

for understanding. Her voice caught in her throat when she recognized him.

"You murdering Indian thief!"

It was a strange time to know it, but for the first time he realized he loved this girl. And to make the moment stranger still, as he tugged on the lines, over the crest of a low knoll came the feathered warriors of Broken Bow, their war cries knifing the air like the wails of locoed coyotes. Clyde saw the white fear on Julie Walter's face—saw the condemnation and hatred in her eyes.

He stood on his feet and yelled and beat the mules into a frightened stampede. The wagon swayed and tilted across the uneven ground and the staccato yells of the savages clashed with the ring of steel tires on stone. Once Clyde looked back. The warriors of Broken Bow, unmindful of the dealings of old Satank, were making for the main part of the train, circling now, firing as they rode. The train was making an unsuccessful attempt to bunch. Clyde saw a span of mules drop in the harness and he saw the flame spurt from a burning arrow. And then, riding low, the broken brim of his wide hat pinned back against the crown, Clyde recognized Injun Pete, the renegade half-breed. He was making toward Broken Bow, and Clyde saw him pointing toward the single wagon streaking across the plain.

Clyde cursed bitterly as he saw Broken Bow listening to Injun Pete. There was a hurried council and a long thin cry—and then Broken Bow, drunk with blood-lust, was charging the train. Behind them Injun Pete sagged in his saddle and finally slipped to the ground. One of Broken Bow's braves stopped long enough to lift a scalp.

There was a low draw ahead, and Clyde toolled the heavy wagon into it. Quickly he stepped down and cut the horses free and then turned to lift Julie from the seat. She fought and scratched until at last he half climbed the wheel, took her roughly in his arms and placed her on the ground.

"I'm trying to save that pretty hair of yours," he said grimly. "That's Broken Bow out there, and he has a particular liking for white women!"

She whirled on him and slapped him across the mouth and started to run toward the winding course of Cache Creek. He caught and held her. "You've got to listen," he said, shaking her. "Gord Cramble sold out to the Indians. That wagon is loaded with guns—"

And as if proof were needed the shaggy head of Gord Cramble poked out through the opening behind the driver's seat. He had a gun in his hand, and it was pointed at Clyde's chest. Clyde stood there, every nerve tensed against the shock of lead that was so near, but he kept his voice level.

"You better think twice, Cramble," he said softly. "You could deal with Satank. He'd listen and take the wagon you cut out for him. But you're dealing with Broken Bow now, and you don't speak his language. You kill me and it'll be just one less man to fight for your scalp."

He could see the doubt on Gord Cramble's face as the renegade hesitated, one ear cocked toward the howling inferno around the wagon train. Then perspiration broke out on Cramble's forehead and he lowered the gun. "We can't fight 'em all off," he said hoarsely.

"We can try," Clyde Amestoy said. "Is there any ammunition for those guns you were delivering?"

Gord Cramble nodded. He was licking his lips rapidly and there was a strange pallor under his tan. Clyde stepped over to the wagon and pulled himself inside. Together he and Cramble ripped the top from a keg and took out a pair of breech-loading rifles. Cramble dug frantically in a chest and produced cartridges.

As Clyde turned to heave the barrels to form a breastwork he caught sight of Julie Walters standing at the tail gate.

Her eyes were wide, but there was no hatred there.

IT WAS not long until a blank silence told Clyde that Broken Bow had discovered the cargo he sought was not among the wagons. Thick greasy smoke rolling from behind the low hill marked the spot where the wagons burned. Gord Cramble read the sign and his hands shook as he tried to strike a match to a hastily rolled cigarette.

Finally he threw it to the ground and turned pleadingly to Clyde Amestoy. "For God's sake do something," he said, his face pasty. "Go out and talk to them. Tell them the wagon is here and they can have it if they'll let us go."

"You've dealt with Indians long enough to know the reputation of Broken Bow," Clyde said, slipping shells into his gun. "He likes scalps and women as well as guns—" He was not trying to frighten Julie more than was necessary, and yet he felt she should know the danger. He let his eyes stray to her and his heart swelled with pride at the sight of her standing stiff and straight, her knuckles white where her hands gripped the rifle. She was a girl worth fighting for.

When he looked at Cramble again the renegade wagon boss was shaking as with a chill.

"How far ahead did you send McCoy and the troops?" Clyde asked.

It was Julie Walters who answered. "They're not ahead. They went back to the Fort a half hour ago. Lieutenant McCoy

said that with Satank and Satanta out of the way there was no danger from here on—I'm sorry, Clyde."

It was as if, with perhaps only minutes to live, she were trying to tell him what he wanted to hear.

The clear note of a bugle sounded and floated up the narrow defile between the twin hills. Clyde saw the quick hope flood Julie Walters' eyes and as quick savagery drive the fear from Gord Cramble.

Cramble tilted his rifle. "It's the troops," he said, gloating triumph spilling over his face. "Now, Injun, I'm on top. It's gonna be too bad when they get here and find Broken Bow got you two." The rifle moved to cover Julie Walters. Clyde dived forward, twisting at the barrel. The gun exploded and the hot lead seared across his leg.

"Stop it, you fool!" Clyde said, tugging the rifle free. "They're not here yet—"

Out through the pass they could see the squad of cavalry, riding in formation at a slow lope. Clyde's practiced eye swept the high prairie grass for some sign of Broken Bow and found none. At the head of the advancing column rode Lieutenant McCoy, his sabre slapping against his side.

Then he caught a slow uneven wave in the grass on top the knoll and cursed bitterly. Broken Bow had spotted the squad, too, and was ready. When the soldiers rode up the narrow opening Broken Bow and his warriors would swoop down and there would be military scalps in the lodges tonight.

He stole a look at Julie Walters. "Keep an eye on Cramble," he said tersely. Then he put down his own rifle and walked into the open. Standing tall and straight, alone between the Indians and the approaching cavalry, he called loudly in Kiowa.

"It is I, Running Shadow," he said, his voice carrying with the wind. "Twice before I have said that I would have the scalp of Broken Bow. Again I say it in front of all his braves. If Broken Bow is the great chief he claims to be, let him come now alone and prove it before all men!"

It was a long shot, and it probably wouldn't work, but if Lieutenant McCoy had any brains at all he could now see that there were Indians waiting. Broken Bow was no fool. He too would know that Clyde was taking this way of warning the troops. A bullet would probably be his pay.

But the Indian mind is strange, and Clyde knew its workings as well as another Indian would. Much of it—deny the fact as he might—he knew from himself. Broken Bow was arrogant; the silence deepened, and then the chieftain, tall and sinewy, glistening with war paint, stood up from the grass and started slowly down the hill.

They met silently in the waving prairie grass insignificant in the vastness, save only for their hate. And Clyde knew he felt this moment exactly as Broken Bow did—they might have been brothers—in death.

Neither man spoke, and for a second they stood toe to toe, their arms relaxed at their sides. Then Broken Bow gave a cry that shattered the stillness and his hand came up with a knife. Clyde dodged low, butted the Indian in the stomach, his own knife catching the bright rays of the noon high sun.

For minutes they were a blurred tangle of naked brown body and buckskin, each strug-



gling for the position where he could plunge home the knife. The rest was preliminary maneuvering. Clyde felt the thumb of Broken Bow gouging his eye, and he kicked out, his feet landing in the pit of the Indian's stomach.

Broken Bow straightened, and Clyde's left hand closed around the Indian's right. The rings of paint around Broken Bow's wrists were slippery, and he lost his grip. The Indian's knife slashed wickedly across the palm of Clyde's hand. Clyde tried to bring his own knife into play, but Broken Bow was ready and vised his arm up and back until it seemed the bones would snap. Clyde could feel his breathing upon his cheek. He rolled, twisting his body, and pulled his arm free.

Even while he struggled he prayed that Lieutenant McCoy would know enough not to charge, for to do so would bring the rest

of Broken Bow's band. He would have forfeited his right to fight alone. Broken Bow's knee sank into the pit of Clyde's stomach and the pain shook Clyde and clouded his vision. He lashed up with his fist and felt the blood spurt from the Indian's face. Then the knife was there again, poised over his throat. He smashed out with all his strength, slashing his own knife at the Indian's body. Broken Bow dodged, and in that second Clyde kicked and then followed with a jarring blow with his left hand.

The Indian half staggered to his feet—threw up his arms to protect his face from the slashing knife. Then Clyde was on him, swarming all over him until Broken Bow dropped from the sheer weight of his punishment. As he hit the ground Clyde's blade struck home. He pulled it free—struck again—he stood up straight, and as involuntary as fate the Kiowa victory yell came from his throat.

For a full second he stood there, as much an Indian as his dead foe. Then slowly the bloody knife slipped from his fingers and he was sick.

He started back toward the wagon, his knees weak beneath him. His past, like a dream, was slipping away from him. His heart was changed, his way of thinking—it was as if in killing his red enemy he had also killed his red past. He heard the cavalry charge behind him—heard the retreating yells of the Kiowas, and the sound belonged to a different world. Ahead he could see Julie Walters, her eyes bright with tears. She was holding a rifle against the middle of Gord Cramble's back. He went to her and took her in his arms, and Lieutenant Barry McCoy found them there.

CLYDE AMESTOY wandered alone a long time at the fort that night. He wanted the coolness of the moon and the wisdom of the stars to be with him. From time to time he heard the low conversation of the soldiers about the death of Broken Bow.

A shadow came out of the night to meet him. It was Lieutenant Barry McCoy.

"I've been wanting to talk to you, Amestoy," the lieutenant said.

"Yes?" He wondered what he would do if the officer wanted to speak of Julie. For a moment out there on the prairie she had been his. But now—he hadn't seen her since their return to the fort.

"What do you intend to do?"

It was a direct question, with no malice. It was the question of a friend, interested in a man's welfare. "I don't know," Clyde said truthfully. "It's hard for a man to come back. I thought some of going further west. Getting a piece of land, maybe."

"That's not what you want," McCoy said softly.

No, Clyde thought, that was not what he wanted. But what was a man to do? The thing he wanted was still the same—his place among men—and Julie—

"I made my report to General Grierson," McCoy said. "I also made a recommendation."

"Yes?"

"The army is full of young fools like me, Clyde," the officer said. There was a queer catch in his voice. "We think we know all there is to know. But what we don't know is the very job we were sent out here to do. We don't know the Indian." He stopped, as if tired from a too long speech. Then he hurried on. "The general took kindly to my suggestion of retaining you as a scout. Even thought I deserved an advancement for thinking of it." The man sounded more like himself now. Sure of his ground—a little arrogant. "There'd be a commission," McCoy said quickly. "A captaincy, I think."

Clyde stood there, the realization of what McCoy was saying filtering through his mind. He tried to make some answer, but the lump in his throat caught and would not let the words pass. McCoy seemed to understand, for he put out his hand and took Clyde's in a firm grip.

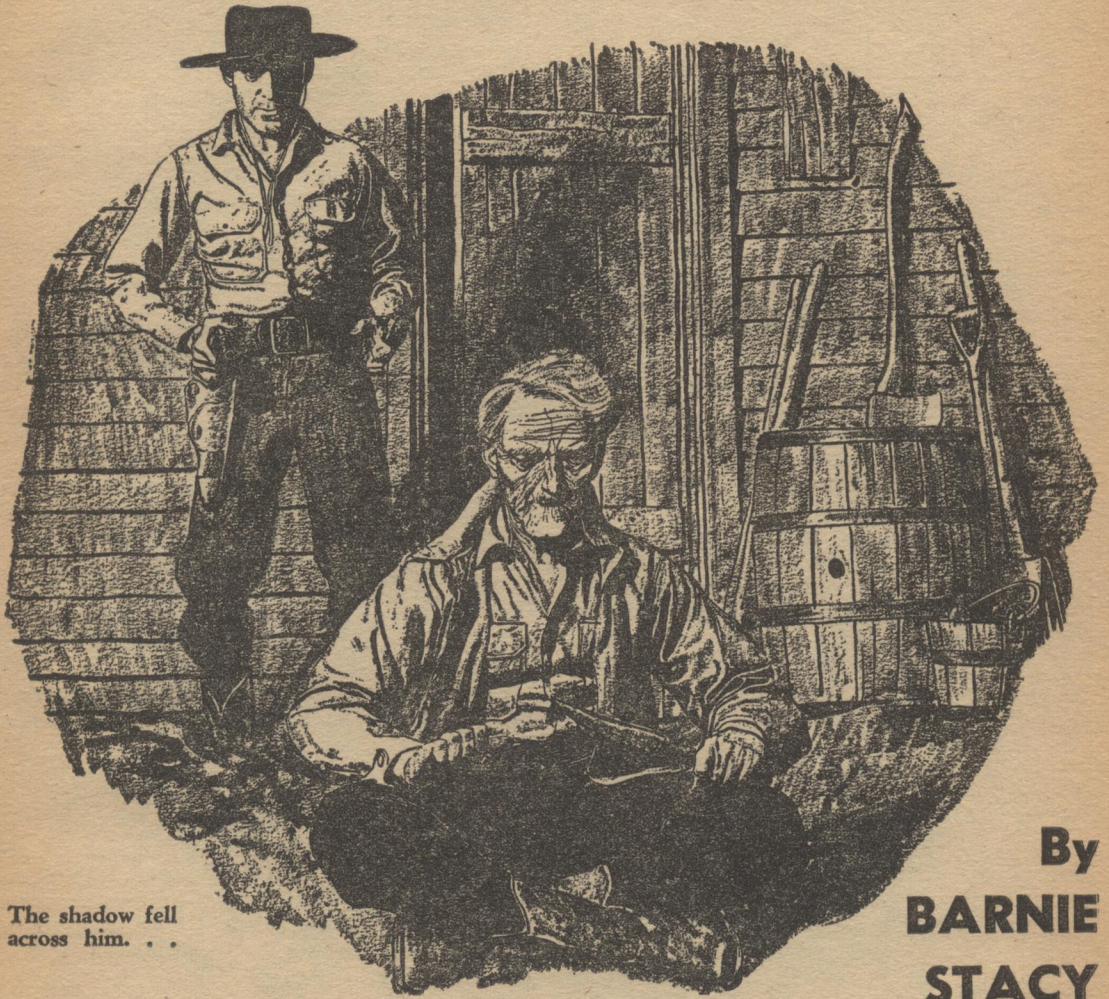
"I'll report to the General that you accept." He hesitated, snapped a quick salute and added, "Captain!"

McCoy hurried away, stopped suddenly and came back one step. He said, "I believe there's a young lady waiting for you over at the sutler's store." And then he was gone and Clyde Amestoy wondered what it was he had ever found to dislike about this man.

It seemed hard to keep his feet on the ground as he hurried toward the light building just off the parade ground. He knocked the door aside in his rush and saw Julie Walters standing there. Her eyes were bright and there was a smile that tinted her cheeks and parted her lips. Laurie Tatum, the Quaker agent, was there, and three traders from the north. But they seemed a part of the background. Only Julie Walters was real. Julie Walters, and that smile that told him she wanted him to keep walking, right into her arms.

For one brief split second he felt a twinge of self consciousness, as sixteen years of rigorous training to learn to conceal his emotions swept over him. Then he shook it off and went to her and took her in his arms. He kissed her for such a long time that there were embarrassed coughs from the traders and from the Quaker agent. But he didn't care what they thought or what anybody thought. What the hell! He was a white man, wasn't he?

DEAD MAN'S HARVEST



The shadow fell
across him. . .

By
**BARNIE
STACY**

||
*It's a good lawman who can teach
a killer to reap—what he hasn't
sown!*
||

MATT RANSOM hobbled out onto the porch of his cottage at Pima's outskirts, where he lived with a Chinese houseboy, Ling Ho. Gaunt, stooped, his deep-set gray eyes smouldering rebelliously, he faced the small, enclosed garden plot adjoining the yard, inhaled deeply the damp fragrance of the freshly turned soil. Ling Ho, ever alert, had already spaded a small area of the plot.

The Chinaman appeared then, grinning proudly. He set a box containing hand garden tools and assorted packets of seeds at Matt's

feet. "Milssa Mlat," he said, head bobbing, "plantum many seeds today, mebbeso, no? Spling, he come last night."

A wicker market basket suspended from the other arm, he headed for market downtown in his mincing, coolie trot, still grinning.

Matt smiled softly, then set his face. A few minutes later he squatted on the seed bed, gasping, pain knifing through his aged muscles. He reflected bitterly, *A hell of a way for an old law hound to die.* . . .

Then the earth was like a soft, cool cushion. Trowel in hand, he selected a packet of seeds, read the instructions. The sun's rays between his throbbing shoulders were like a soothing poultice. He dribbled a few seeds into his hand, contemplating the expectant life they held and, thus absorbed, he didn't immediately see the menacing shadow cast beside his own.

The familiar laugh jarred him to awareness. He looked up at the shadows, then stared, puzzled, over a leveled gun, into a hate-contorted face.

Gradually his puzzlement faded. "Hauk," he said slowly. "Bard Hauk."

The man laughed again, softly. "I'm glad you lived this long, Matt. Gives me a chance you didn't give me before. A chance to kill you."

Matt nodded, turned to idly tracing a pattern with trowel on the finely mulched seed bed, as if he would bring into focus the blurred outlines of a dimly remembered scene. "Fifteen years ago," he mused, "you shot an old prospector in the back for his dust poke. You got only twenty years instead of a hang-rope—" He looked up again. "You're out five years early."

Hauk's voice tensed. "I'm out on parole, all legal."

Matt sighed, but his eyes sharpened a little as he recognized his own old slick-handled Colt in the killer's hand. "So now you're going to kill me. And this time you'll hang." He smiled grimly, made several short, diagonal trenches, sprayed them with seeds, covered and patted them down. Since his retirement he'd often longed for death as a release from pain. Now that he faced it, he had all the instincts of a man trying to cling to life, stave off death, if but for minutes.

Hauk growled, "You're wrong, Matt. I planned this out, careful. Hid till the Chink left, then slipped in, got your gun. I'll blast yuh close up, put the gun in your hand, drag out my tracks with the rake, and it'll be suicide. Everybody knows you been broodin' over retirement and yuhr health—sick—" The outlaw's eyes narrowed. "You stallin' for time?"

"Time?" Matt smiled, shook his head. "My time's already running out fast, Hauk. You won't be cheating me of many months—maybe

only weeks. But the murder was never done that didn't leave a sign. Sometimes it's hard sign to read. But it's always there for those who look hard enough. And have patience."

Hauk grinned, but he threw a quick, guarded glance around, as if suspecting a hidden witness. Suspiciously he watched Matt puttering with his trowel. It was obvious he felt this wasn't working out right—that he had the uneasy sense of being played with.

And then once more his grin grew assured. Matt, palms to ground, pushed sideways a foot. His face was tense, pain-drawn, and sweat beads glistened around his mouth. He made quick furrows, seeded them with shaking hand.

"I'll be damned," Hauk said softly. "The old iron nerve finally broke, eh?" He tilted his head back, laughed out loud.

Matt sighed. "Maybe so, Hauk." His voice was taut. "Maybe death can never be pleasant."

The instant exultation died in Hauk. The feeling suddenly hit him that Matt's anguish wasn't fear. It might have been induced by his movement, for now a tinge of relief rippled across the seamy face and the old man smiled.

Hauk moved suddenly with the desperate decisiveness of a man afraid of losing his nerve, shoved the gun close to the lawman's temple, pulled trigger.

The gaunt frame shuddered, sank back, legs twisted grotesquely underneath. But there was a smile of serene content on Matt's face, and mockery in the dead eyes which stared up at Hauk.

Hauk avoided looking at them as he worked fast to clamp the lifeless fingers around the gun, and rake out his tracks.

AN HOUR later Ling Ho found the body. Sheriff Luke Spencer came with the coroner and, on the evidence they had to call it suicide. But Luke, who had been a deputy under Matt, and his friend, wasn't satisfied. He figured his old boss wasn't the quitting kind. Rather, he'd grit his teeth, play out his string to the end. He recalled Hauk's old threat, shadowed him closely, but couldn't find a shred of evidence to justify arrest.

And on the sixth day after the murder Luke went quietly to Hauk's hangout. The Tiger's Tail Saloon on Pima's tough south side. He found his man there, drinking heavily, brooding, not risking violation of his parole by fleeing town.

Spencer said quietly, "Hauk, you're under arrest for the murder of Matt Ransom."

Hauk's jaw sagged, he stared stupidly a moment, his whiskey-soaked brain reacting slowly. Then he leered cunningly. "It won't work, Luke. You're guessin'—figgerin' to trip me up, huh?"

Luke's hands rested close to gun butts. "No,

Hauk—not guessing. I've got the proof. Lift your hands, turn around slowly.”

Hauk read chilling conviction in the lawman's level voice. Desperately, his hand streaked for gun, but the watchful sheriff was faster. He sidestepped, drew, fired, in a single, swift motion. Hauk grabbed for his right shoulder, his gun dropping to the floor.

Sullenly he growled. “Yuh got no proof.”

“I'll show you the proof,” Luke promised grimly as he helped his prisoner into the buckboard. He drove to Matt Ransom's place, drew up close to the garden fence.

“There's proof, Hauk,” Luke said, indicating with whip stock the spot where the law-

man's bullet-shattered body had been found.

Hauk stared. Icy fingers clutched at his heart and he uttered a hoarse cry. For there, etched in crisp lettuce green against the brown soil background, were the letters which spelled out the words which damned Hauk to a murderer's scaffold:

HAUK KILLED ME

Matt Ransom's seed had pushed up through the crust to knot the hangman's noose around Hauk's neck. And Matt had realized his ambition.

He'd gone out—like a lawman.

TEXAS STYLE

THE tall young man who wore no guns and who strolled so quietly and thoughtfully down Texas street in Abilene seemed unaware of the storm of excitement that went flying ahead of him.

“New marshal!” the cry rang from saloon to gambling hall to honkeytonk in Abilene. “Says he's gonna collect all shootin' irons!”

Big Hank, a trail-rider with a hard bullying voice and a rawhide disposition that made him feared even in hellroaring Abilene of 1870, wasn't the only cowpuncher who decided on the instant to challenge the new officer. But Big Hank happened to be the first who crossed his path.

Hank stepped close to the black-maned young giant with the mildly drooping mustache.

“And you're the come-lately that's gonna run Abilene!” Big Hank snorted.

“Yes,” the young fellow said in a matter-of-fact voice. “I'm the new marshal.” He showed his star. Then with an apologetic smile, he murmured, “Sorry to bother you, but there's an ordinance against carrying pistols. I'll have to trouble you for yours, sir.”

“Not unless you want a quick pass to hell!” Big Hank roared.

He was surprised to find the polite marshal standing so close to him that their bodies almost touched. “Your pistol, please.”

“Not by a damned sight!” Big Hank howled, and backed away, going into his draw. The quiet man's right fist disappeared, but in a split second it turned up again, making a loud and solid contact with Big Hank's chin.

Tom Smith, the new marshal of Abilene, Kansas, strolled on down Texas Street, smiling shyly and fondling the badman's gun.

Tom Smith's triumph echoed from one end of the brawling cowtown to the other. The toughs and gamblers and the hard-riding cowhands figured it was a fluke. It might work once, but no unarmed marshal could keep on taking shooting irons away from hair-triggered gunfighters.

When Big Hank got back to camp, swearing loudly and stroking his damaged jaw, more than one said it couldn't happen again. A big gunman named Wyoming Frank dabbed his loop on a

bronk and hit the grit for Abilene to see just how tough this new marshal was.

Presently Wyoming Frank and his friends were touring the saloons, shouting that Smith had left town to avoid the showdown.

Tom Smith, however, had a way of showing up whenever trouble appeared. He came strolling down the middle of the street, unarmed, and smiling thoughtfully.

Wyoming Frank kept backing up until he backed right into a saloon. He was afraid the lawman would try to seize his wrist or wrestle him, and he wanted room for his draw. Tom Smith crowded him until his back was against the bar. There was the solid smash of knuckles against bone. Wyoming Frank's knees buckled, and he went down—his guns half-drawn.

For a spell nobody knew what to say. The saloonkeeper broke the awkward stillness by coming forward with his shooting irons. “I reckon I won't need these as long as you're the marshal in Abilene,” he said.

For six months this flaming and lawless town of Abilene lived by Tom Smith's law. But all the courage in the world cannot survive the destruction that can be loosed by a coward's trigger finger.

Tom Smith went one day to arrest a farmer who had murdered another farmer over land. He strode up to the dugout where the killer crouched, shaking with fear. Tom Smith was used to walking into the face of iron nerve. He had always walked up against great odds and matched nerve with cooler nerve.

Now as he walked in without weapons to fetch out a murderer, a rifle poked its snout from the dugout loophole and cracked once.

Today, in the trail's-end town of Abilene, a bronze plate rests on a slab of granite, bearing the appreciation of Abilene for Tom Smith's work in the early bloody days:

THOMAS J. SMITH

Marshal of Abilene, 1870

Died a Martyr to Duty, Nov. 2, 1870

A Fearless Hero of Frontier Days, Who in Cowboy Chaos, Established the Supremacy of Law.

By
**GILES A.
LUTZ**



Jigger went for Moose
with the peavey. . . .

GLORY TRAIL

*Jigger Reilly knew a logger was a fool to let
a man get up off the ground without stomping
him to death. . . . but stomping your way
into a woman's heart with murderous caulks
comes harder!*

JIGGER REILLY drained his bottle, surveyed its emptiness with somber eyes and bellowed for another.

Hammond came over, his face worried. "Now, Jigger—"

Jigger's eyes glistened with amusement. Hammond was worried for his place and he had a right to be. For the Jigger on a tear was a terrible thing. Jigger looked around the room. Four men and Hammond. Four middling-sized men. Not enough to make a really good fight.

He said softly, "Set out the bottle, Ham-

mond," and Hammond placed it before him and hastily backed away.

Jigger poured himself a generous portion. It was halfway to his lips when he remembered Ellen's words. *You're irresponsible, Jigger. You'll never change. I will not go through life worrying over you.*

He scowled at the untasted glass. She had said those words to him tonight. And for six months there had been no trouble. An occasional drink, but no trouble. His crew had cut timber beside Allison's crew, and Jigger kept the friction down. What did he

have to do to prove to Ellen his old ways were gone?

Ellen knew him well. Too well. She was right when she said he loved trouble. It was as necessary to him as the sun and the rain were to the making of big trees. But he had proven he could hold his temper and keep to steady ways as well as Allison, and still Ellen was not convinced.

Jigger Reilly was a big man. He had the breadth and height of the redwoods themselves, and his hands were massive hams. His hair was a cap of fiery red, coiled close to his skull, and the devil danced in his blue eyes. He had logged in Michigan and Wisconsin, then moved with the westward trek to the big tree country on the Pacific. He had made money in Michigan and spent it with the same prodigality with which he expended his strength. But this lumber contract was different. This time there was Ellen—with her smile that left a funny hollow spot inside him. And there was Allison too, whom Ellen seemed to favor.

Jigger scowled and tossed his drink down swiftly. Ellen would hear about tonight's drinking. In this small town nothing went unnoticed or unreported. Allison would not be drinking; he would cater to a girl's whims. The thought tickled Jigger, and he laughed uproariously.

"You're drunk, Jigger."

He turned around and eyed the speaker. "The second bottle is not empty," he said argumentatively.

"Then you're not drunk," Belle Rote said with amusement. She was a handsome woman, though her features were a little hard. She was the main attraction at Hammond's, and she brought him a great deal of business. But for Jigger there was always Ellen's face, coming between himself and this woman.

"What's wrong, Jigger? This is the first time in a long while."

"Ah," he said meanly, "You've been keeping watch on me, too."

"Jigger," she said in protest. A shadow of hurt crossed her gray eyes.

Jigger shook his head. That was so. Belle would not quibble over his fighting and drinking. She would accept him as he was. Belle was a hard woman, she had lived a hard life, but she was honest. It should have been enough, but it wasn't.

He said, "Drink?" and shoved the bottle towards her, not looking at her eyes.

She placed a hand on his arm, and he turned wearily, prepared to face the old argument.

"Here's Frenchy," she said. "Something's wrong."

Frenchy LeClaire saw Jigger and hurried across the room. His eyes were big.

"Jigger. The bulls. They are smashed."

Frenchy was a French-Canadian and with his excitement and patois, his words were hard to follow.

Jigger digested them carefully. Frenchy was his top teamster. Jigger's twelve team of oxen were in his care.

Frenchy was saying something about them being smashed.

"Easy," Jigger said. "Tell it easy."

"The beeg tree," Frenchy said. "It drop out of the sky. When I reech the stable, the bulls they are—" He made a flat, sweeping motion with his hand. "Pouff."

For a moment panic seized Jigger. If Frenchy was right—if the bulls were gone, it meant Jigger's contract was gone, too. Without the patient, plodding oxen, Jigger could never deliver the contracted footage.

He pushed past Belle and went out of the door. Allison would be behind this. Allison and his fear of Jigger—fear that Jigger would make his contract, fear that he would succeed with Ellen.

JIGGER walked down the one street of Big Tree, the fine mist of the winter rainy season touching his face gently. His caulks made little sucking sounds in the mud. The whisky influence was gone, but in its place was anger, driving him more recklessly than any bottle ever could.

"Jigger." Frenchy hurried his short legs to match Jigger's long stride. "What is there to be done?"

Jigger didn't know. That made it worse. He needed those oxen to build his landings alongside the river. He had been too busy cutting timber to do much more than snake the logs out of the cutters' way. Now the season's cutting was wasted, unless those logs could be gotten to water.

He came to Big Tree's general store, and John Allison and Ellen Landstrom were talking on the porch. The sight of Ellen had no restraining effect. He was up on the porch in a bound, facing Allison, and his eyes were ugly.

Allison said, "Hello, Reilly," with mockery in his tone. He knew what had happened—it was in his eyes. He was a big man, his large frame covered with hard, compact flesh. The faint shadows in his face were fore-runners of harsh lines. His eyes were an icy blue, perpetually narrowed. Allison was a successful logger. He was cutting the big stuff while Jigger hacked away at the fringes. He was what Ellen thought Jigger should be, and all the things he wasn't boiled within Jigger.

Allison said, "Trouble I hope, Reilly."

The smugness in Allison's face snapped something inside Jigger. He smashed his fist into Allison's mouth, knocking him back and

through the porch railing. Allison lit in the mud, the broken railing crashing down around him.

Jigger heard Frenchy's high, excited whoop. He heard Belle Rote's voice and thought, *So she followed me here. That will set fine with Ellen.*

He heard Ellen's scream as he leaped through the gap in the railing, his caulks spearing at Allison. Any logger who let a big, powerful man get back on his feet was a damn fool. Jigger's chest and shoulders were pocked with caulk marks from logger boots that had tried to keep him down.

Allison rolled, cat-like, and Jigger's caulks only grazed his arm. Jigger lit in the mud, and the slithery give of it sent him sprawling. Allison was over him before he could regain his feet, driving terrible blows down into Jigger's head and face. He could hit and hurt, and Jigger grunted under their impact. He came up out of the mud with a lurching lunge and almost made his feet. Allison lifted a knee and rammed it into Jigger's face. Hot, sticky blood filled Jigger's mouth—explosions seemed to burst his head apart and he couldn't see.

He reached out blindly, pawing at the gathering blackness and his hands touched Allison, clamped desperately around Allison's knees. Slowly, painfully, he pulled himself erect. Allison never ceased his pounding, but that kneeing had been like an anesthetic, numbing Jigger so he could feel no more hurt. He wrapped his arms around Allison's chest, pinning Allison's arms to his sides. Allison swore and struggled, trying to break the trap-like grip. He wrestled Jigger across the street, and still Jigger kept his hold.

Jigger's eyes cleared, the spinning street settled down. He looked into Allison's mad-dened eyes and grunted, "Almost, Allison. Almost." This was his first physical conflict with Allison, and he had been careless.

With a surge of power he thrust Allison from him. He followed it up before Allison could recover, hitting with deliberation and exactness. A dozen blows he hammered through Allison's weakening arms, and now Allison wobbled before him, his face stupid and slack under the pounding.

Jigger felt someone clutch at his arm. Impatiently he shook off the hold and sledged a blow into Allison's unprotected jaw. Allison fell limply, skidding on his face through the mud.

Jigger stood over him and hurt and tiredness came in a rush, leaving him dull. He felt the pull on his arm again and turned.

Ellen faced him, her face twisted with anger. "You beast," she said and slapped him.

Belle Rote moved quickly to her. She

pushed Ellen away and asked shrilly, "Did you see the kneeing? Did you see Allison—"

"He started it," Ellen said. "For no reason at all!"

Belle moved at her again. Jigger said wearily, "Let her be, Belle." He stared at Ellen a long moment. Even in her anger she was beautiful. She was a tall girl with chestnut hair, and even under these murky skies, the sunlight seemed to be trapped in its silky folds. Her eyes were brown, smoldering now, ordinarily alight with interest and vitality. Her chin was soft but molded over proud, firm lines.

Jigger wiped his hand across his face, not noticing the blood on it as he took it down. Ellen would not understand his explaining. "Let her be," he said again. "Her kind is down there in the mud."

HE WALKED down the street to his wagon and climbed in. Frenchy sat down beside him and picked up the reins.

Belle put her hand on Jigger's knee. "You're a fool, Jigger."

"Yes," he said heavily. "But she was right. I started it."

He knew what Belle meant, but Ellen would believe nothing he could say now. "Get going," he yelled at Frenchy. He hurt physically and mentally and movement was the only balm.

It was a long drive back to camp, and the first gray sullenness of the dawn showed over dripping trees when Frenchy reined in the team. Jigger climbed stiffly from the wagon, and all of Allison's blows set up their clamor.

Frenchy led the way to the crude stable that had sheltered the oxen from the winter rains. The spot where the frame structure stood was almost hidden from sight. A huge redwood trunk lay across the demolished stable. Jigger's oxen had been blotted out at the moment of impact. The rear of the stable touched the base of a high hill. Jigger could follow the path of the huge log down that hill in the earth gouges, through lighter trees smashed and broken. The top of that hill was Allison's logging property.

Jigger climbed the hill, Frenchy following him. Jigger said bitterly, "We couldn't have picked a better spot for him."

They could see the imprint where the log had lain in the earth, could see the marks where men had pried and strained at it to set it rolling. The log pries, used to start it, were still there. The big log's position, gravity, and Jigger's stable location had let Allison wipe out Jigger's bulls.

Jigger felt old and tired. He stared down the hill at the turbulent reaches of the Twisted River, swollen by winter rains into a long, snake-like torrent. If Jigger's logs were along-

side that river, he could still make his drive. But they weren't—they were scattered in piles, back from the river, and no bulls to drag them down.

Up on top of this crest and stretching as far back as the eye could see were the solid ranks of the unopened redwood forest, huge, fluted columns, rising in bare trunks a hundred and fifty feet above the ground. Laurels grew along the river, reaching back to the base of the hills.

Some of the laurels rose sixty feet above the ground, but beside the huge redwood, they looked like seedlings.

Jigger's voice was harsh. "Allison had all the redwood land leased when I got here. There was nothing left but the laurels." Suddenly he had to talk to someone, and his words poured forth.

Frenchy listened wide-eyed, not able to understand it all, but sympathetic.

"The Reilly and the Allison lumber fights are old history," Jigger went on. "My old man beat Allison in Maine. Allison's father won out in Michigan. That fight killed both of them. I grew up hearing nothing but licking Allison. Allison got here first. I was going to move on until I saw the girl." His voice was very low. "Then I had to stay. I found out laurel takes a high polish and makes good furniture. I've got a contract for a million and a half feet at fifty dollars a thousand, delivered in San Francisco. All my money is sunk in this camp and nothing to move the logs to the river."

Across the river, on a distant hillside, a settler was dragging brush from his clearing with a team of grays.

Frenchy said, "Jigger, if we could only just rent—"

Jigger saw the settler's team. "Hell, yes," and his weariness was gone. "Maybe we can't get oxen, but we can find something."

It took five days to scour the nearby country for animal power. At the end of that period Jigger had an odd assortment of beasts. He had four yoke of oxen and four teams of eighteen hundred pound grays. He had mules, nondescript horses, and even a donkey. Some of the settlers were reluctant to rent their animals, and Jigger was forced to dig down into his already thin bankroll to overcome that reluctance.

"That tops Allison's log-rolling," Jigger said grimly. "But if anything else happens, I'm whipped."

He was never without a guard on his equipment and animals from then on, but Allison made no more moves toward them. Jigger didn't think Allison was through. Allison would do anything to stop him from making his contract. The ancient feud was motivation enough—Ellen only intensified it.

THE work kept Jigger from thinking of Ellen too much. From the first faint streak of light in the morning until the last flicker at night, he and his crew cut and moved timber. They built skidroads deep into the trees and, over these crude tracks, Jigger's animal power was able to snake long turns of logs down to the river's edge. The landings at the river's bank grew into long reaches of logs.

Jigger ran a calculating eye over them. *About all I need*, he thought. Now that the end of the cutting was in sight he felt let down. At the start of the long cutting season the thought of Ellen had been his buoy, the power pushing him on. If he made his contract, he made money. If he made money, there was Ellen. He'd always felt a breathlessness when he reached that point. Now its sustaining effect was gone.

He turned and said, "Frenchy, hitch up a team. We're low on supplies."

The camp supplies were low, but that wasn't Jigger's main reason. It was Ellen, and the sight of her suddenly became very necessary.

Frenchy said, "Maybe I should go in town alone. You're needed here."

"Who's in town, Frenchy?"

"Moose Swenson," Frenchy blurted out.

Jigger had never met Moose, but he had heard of him. The Moose was a legendary figure. It was said he had never been beaten in any kind of a fight.

"The boys," Frenchy said, "say Moose just hangs around town. He is waiting for you."

Jigger said abruptly, "Get the team." He would bet his last dollar Moose took instruction from Allison. Jigger had a great curiosity to see what those instructions were.

They drove into town, and Jigger had Frenchy stop before the general store. He walked up onto the porch and spoke to Swede Landstrom, Ellen's father.

Swede was big in frame, but wasted away. His cheeks were hollow, and the marks of long illness were in his eyes. Swede was paralyzed; he never moved from his chair.

Jigger never asked the cause, and neither Swede or Ellen spoke of it. As Jigger walked into the store he thought of Ellen running this store. It took courage for a girl to handle a business and take care of a crippled father. It took Ellen.

She saw him enter, and he looked at her, the old hollow breathlessness back.

"Ellen," he said in a half-timid voice.

A high color rose in her cheeks. "Jigger," she said, and he could read nothing in her tone.

She said hesitantly, "I'm sorry about your oxen."

So she had heard, and it was a half admission that Jigger had not been wholly wrong in his attack on Allison.

He moved towards her with a smile, hope big in his eyes.

"Ellen, I'm going to make my contract. When I do, I'm asking—"

He could not understand the frightened look in her eyes, but he knew the spell was broken.

"Jigger, why are you in town?" Her tone was cold.

"Supplies. We're running low."

"You know Moose Swenson is here. You know he's looking for you. There will be trouble when you meet."

His eyes were grave. "You get a jump on trouble by going to meet it." He could not tell her logging men would be watching Jigger, waiting for his actions. That if he took a single backward step, his respect and theirs would be gone.

Her anger came, swift and devastating. "You want this trouble. If you find Moose Swenson, don't come back here."

He looked at the rigid lines of her back and walked out of the store. The warm feeling was gone.

Belle Rote met him at the door of Hammond's place. "Moose is inside. Jigger, he's drunk."

Jigger irritably shook off her hand. He saw Moose standing at the bar. The size of the man dwarfed all the other men in the room. He turned, and Jigger saw a huge, bloated face with stringy, yellow hair and deep-set, little eyes. Moose's lips parted to show gaps in yellowed teeth.

"You looking for me?" Jigger demanded.

Moose knew him. It was in his eyes. "Maybe I am." He turned back to the bar, and Jigger took his place beside him. Moose was taking his time, and Jigger could feel the tension building up inside him.

He ordered a drink, his eyes following Moose's movements in the back mirror. He didn't need Belle's scream to warn him. He caught the flash of movement of Moose's arm and ducked.

THE bottle in Moose's hand slid over Jigger's shoulder and crashed against the bar. Moose whirled, still holding the bottle neck, the broken shards attached to it sharp and cruel as dagger points. Jigger knew Allison's instructions then. *Remove him. Maim or kill, but remove him.*

Jigger went to Moose fast and drove his fist hard into the horrid face. Moose grunted impatiently. Jigger sledged his fists home. He broke skin, he brought blood, but he never stopped Moose's forward progress.

Moose kept stabbing at him with the broken

bottle. Jigger backed against a wall, and Moose's eyes gleamed. The retreating was over. He rammed the broken bottle at Jigger's face. Jigger jerked his head aside, felt a ripping pain as a jagged edge caught and tore through his cheek. He heard the shatter of glass as Moose's hand plowed on into the wall, heard Moose's howl of pain. Jigger dug his fist into Moose's guts, twisted and danced into the clear.

Moose whirled and followed him. His hand dripped blood, but there was no awareness of pain in those blazing eyes.

Jigger waited, drawing deep on his pumping lungs. He waited too long, and Moose's ham-like fist tore through his defense. It caught him on top of the head—another drove into his belly, lifting him off his feet and smashing him backwards. He lit heavily and tasted a warm sickness.

He cleared his vision in time to see a great mass leaping through the air at him. He saw the soles of boots and the ugly, glistening caulks. He rolled desperately, and iron bit into his shoulder, then slid off. His shirt was torn, his skin furrowed and bloodied, but the roll saved him the worst of the stomping.

Moose fell, and it gave Jigger time to get to his feet. He was faster than Moose, and he used his speed trying to keep out of reach of those big paws. He pounded Moose's face and belly, and there was no apparent effect. Moose had one eyes closed; his face was bloody and dripping, and still he moved in.

Slowly he drove Jigger into a corner. Jigger slugged until his hands swelled and he couldn't stop him. Moose got his hands around Jigger's throat. He put on pressure, and the room spun and began to blacken.

This was it, this was for keeps, and panic rose within Jigger. He kicked out and down. He caught Moose in the kneecap, his boot slid down the shin and stopped on Moose's instep. Red welled slowly through torn cloth and leather, then flowed from a dozen tears.

Moose howled and his hands loosened. Jigger butted him in the face. He butted again, and Moose broke backward. Jigger knew sheer terror then. Moose should have gone down under that hammering. He was moving forward again. Slowly, but still forward.

The room was a wreck. Bottles and glasses were broken underfoot, and smashed chairs were littered about. Jigger could hardly hold his head erect. His shirt was only shreds, the flesh underneath covered by ugly, reddened bruises. His throat ached and burned where Moose's hands had been. It had to be quick. If Moose grabbed him again, there would be no breaking free this time.

He picked up a chair. He swung it in a long arc, smashing it against Moose's forehead. It broke in his hands, leaving only a

leg. Moose weaved in little circles, pawing at his eyes. His breathing was a hoarse, sobbing grunting.

Jigger hit him with the chair leg, and Moose sank to his knees. He hung there, his face a grotesque, bloody mass, his hands still outstretched.

Jigger stood over him and swung the club again and again. Moose bent forward at the waist. A great shuddering "Ahhhhh," escaped his lips, and he crashed forward. He half lifted himself, then spilled onto his face. Only the twitching muscles showed life remained.

JIGGER put a wall at his back. "Drag him back to Allison." He could hardly manage the words. "And next time tell Allison to come himself."

He lurched out into the night air and was sick in great, retching convulsions. He staggered down the street, not aware of where he was going. He felt a hand on his arm and knew fear. Somehow Moose had followed him.

"Jigger. Oh, Jigger."

He caught the horror in Ellen's voice. "I did not start it, Ellen," he said in defense of himself.

She led him up the steps and into the general store and he followed blindly. She bathed his face, wincing as she did, and even her tender hands hurt as they touched him. She bandaged his hurts, and he looked into a mirror.

The washing and the cleansing brought back some of the old Jigger, and he managed a rueful grin. He looked down at Ellen, and her eyes were filled with concern and some-

thing else—something that left him trembling. Her lips were very close, the warm coral of them the loveliest color Jigger had ever seen. He swept her into his arms and pressed his mouth upon hers. For a moment she clung fiercely and fiercely returned his kiss. Then she pushed him away, and her hands had a strength that would not be denied.

"No," she said, and tears were very near the surface. "No, I will not have it."

He was shaken to the very core of his body, shaken by her kiss and her reaction. "Ellen," he said, and moved towards her.

She backed from him, and struggle showed in her eyes. "It will never be you, Jigger. Never. To spend all my life worrying, fearing for you. I won't do it. My father was like you, Jigger. He looked for trouble. He was kicked in the back during a fight. Do you want me taking care of you the same way?"

"It wouldn't be, Ellen. It wouldn't—"

"He thought like you do. Jigger—go away and don't come back."

He looked at the distress in her face, the tears in her eyes and there was nothing he could say. He knew now it was Allison. If Jigger could promise her and she believed him, it might be different. But she wouldn't believe, even if he could make those promises.

He turned and walked outside, and Frenchy was waiting. "Get the wagon," he said in weary tones.

Frenchy talked of the fight until Jigger said, "Shut up, Frenchy."

Jigger thought dully, *I won another fight. And lost Ellen.* Try as he might he could not balance the two.

He plunged back into his work, but the



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old zest was gone. All he wanted now was to deliver his timber, collect, then leave Big Tree and Ellen. He wondered if distance would lessen the ache of his thoughts.

The last log went into the landings alongside the river. Jigger had originally planned on driving the stream. He talked it over with Carlson, his woods boss, and they decided rafting was more practical. It would take fewer men to handle the cut and fewer logs would be lost along the rock-toothed banks.

The raft was built in the quieter stretches of the river. When it was finished they had log after log bound together with boom chains, forming a crude, awkwardly maneuverable craft. The rough rudder at the end, with its long sweep, would give them steerage of a sort.

The people of Big Tree came out to watch Jigger finish his raft. This was the first attempt by a craft of any kind to negotiate the winter turbulence of the Twisted, and there was speculation and betting as to Jigger making it.

The last chain went into place. Jigger checked the raft and said, "I will have Allison's prayers—that I don't make it." He should be tasting the triumph of winning, but there was only the thought of Ellen.

HE CHOSE Frenchy and two other men to make the trip. Carlson and the crew were left to close up the camp and sell the equipment. Jigger was through with this section of country. He would move on and establish again, and there would be no thoughts of Ellen to bother him.

It would take three days to reach Millville, at the mouth of the river. Jigger intended tying up at night. The Twisted was no stream to be afloat on after dark. At Millville the logs would be sawed into foot square timbers and loaded on coastal steamers for the trip to San Francisco.

When the restraining ropes were cut and the chains cast off, the raft moved sluggishly into the stream. It floated along on the surface of the river, shuddering and groaning as it made the turns or scraped a rock. Water broke over the tops of the logs, wetting Jigger and his men to their knees. Jigger was relieved when the day was over. The constant watching for shoal water or dangerous half hidden rocks was tiresome and nerve straining.

As the light faded from the sky, Jigger picked a fairly long, quiet stretch of water and steered for the shore. He brought the raft up against the bank and tied up for the night. He and his men ate their meager meal and stretched out for the night.

He was physically tired, but he could not fall into deep sleep. He dozed fitfully and

always awakened to the same thought. Should he have made those promises and tried to keep them? He rolled over and swore. Not even for Ellen would he tie his hands like that.

He heard a noise and sat upright. He shook Frenchy awake. The rackling in the brush grew louder. Animals wouldn't make that much sound. And men with black work in mind would move with more stealth.

"Jigger. Hey, Jigger."

It was Carlson's voice, and Jigger yelled, "Come on in."

Carlson and a group of men broke through the brush edging the river. "We been since dark getting here. Spotted the raft from the crest. It's rough country. Couldn't bring the wagons. Had to make it on foot."

Jigger's entire crew was with Carlson. Jigger said, "What the hell? I left you to—"

Carlson jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Let her tell you."

Jigger noticed Ellen in the group of men. He walked towards her.

She said, "I want to talk to you. Alone, Jigger."

He walked with her to the camp's edge. "You shouldn't be here, Ellen."

"I had to come, Jigger. Belle Rote came to me after you left this morning. Last night Moose got drunk. He did some boasting about getting even with you at Garrison Bend. She said she wouldn't warn you. If I wanted to, it was all right with her."

Jigger had a warm thought for Belle. She could have put him under deep obligation and she let Ellen have the spot.

"She must think a great deal of you," Ellen said slowly.

Ah, so she knew about Belle. He sensed a sort of waiting in Ellen, wanting an explanation to her words. A stubbornness seized him. He said abruptly, "You could have told Carlson and let him bring the crew."

She shook her head slowly. "It was my news, Jigger."

He tried to read her face in the moonlight and failed. The memory of his last rebuff was too new for him to make any more moves without definite encouragement.

He said shortly, "I'll fix you a place to sleep. In the morning you start back."

He saw a stiffness enter her face, and strain was heavy between them. He spent the rest of the night thinking.

There never seemed to be understanding between Ellen and himself.

He was tired and irritable in the morning. After breakfast he said, "Carlson, take her back to the wagons. We'll wait for you here."

Ellen protested, and Jigger looked at her bitterly. So she didn't believe there was going to be trouble at Garrison Bend. She would make this trip to prove the things Jigger and

other people believed about Allison were untrue.

He said tersely, "You'll go back," and turned from her.

H E SPENT the time of waiting for Carlson's return talking with some of the crew who knew the river. Garrison Bend was a mean piece of water. The canyon walls deepened there and the river was a narrow and fuming stretch. Taking the raft around the sharp bend of it would require some handling.

"We'll run it at night," Jigger decided. "We can't see as well, but neither can they. We might slip by." He felt a little surprise at his words. This was taking the way to avoid trouble—it was the course Ellen would have counseled.

He frowned and told himself, *I am not ducking trouble. This is the smart way.*

Carlson came back about noon.

Jigger asked, "She was all right?"

"She was all right." Carlson's eyes gleamed with secret amusement. "She didn't want to go back."

"No," Jigger said bitterly. "She wanted to laugh at Belle's warning and at me when no trouble shows."

Jigger and his crew climbed on the raft and pushed out from the bank. The afternoon hours were uneventful. Evening came, the light faded from the sky, and the blue and white of the river deepened into a dark, inky fluid. Jigger kept peering into the darkness.

"We're getting close, Jigger," one of the men who knew the river said.

Jigger steered into the shore. The water

boiled swiftly along and the raft fought and bucked the pull of the rudder. Jigger made the shore and sent men to the banks with long ropes. Using trees as snubbing posts, they let the raft drift almost to the end of the ropes, then snubbed it tight. Moving up the bank, they found new trees and repeated the process all over again. It was slow, tedious work and Carlson and the men fretted.

"I'm afraid of hitting something in the dark," Jigger told them. He was trying to take everything into consideration. If Allison had thrown an obstruction across the river, cutting down the raft's speed would lessen the impact.

The canyon walls pressed in until only a thin strip of sand and rock were on each side of the river. Jigger called in the snubbers, for there were no longer any trees for them to work with. Here the river was narrow enough for an agile man to leap upon the raft from either shore. They were very near the bend now, and they could hear the hungry slap of the water against the rocks of the turn.

The raft was freed. It rolled sullenly in the quickening water, then picked up speed.

"It's faster than I like, but less than if we hadn't snubbed it down. The next few minutes—"

Jigger didn't finish his sentence. The raft came to a halt with a jarring, grinding crash. Men were knocked off their feet, and their swearing swelled the general confusion.

Logs at the fore of the raft splintered and broke away. The remainder of the structure swung sideways and jammed itself tightly against the obstruction.

Jigger bounced to his feet and pulled Carl-

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son up. "Chain strung across just above the water," he yelled above the noise. "Here they come."

"Break up that raft!" Allison's deep voice rose above the din.

His men sprang onto the raft from both sides of the river. They were cocky and confident, expecting only a few men to handle. The breaking up of the raft would be a simple matter and the river would take care of the loose logs, spewing them all over the countryside.

Jigger recognized the huge form of Moose Swenson and thought he identified Allison. Then the two crews were upon each other, their ranks breaking up into individual fighting groups. Jigger swung his peavey like a fly-swatter. Men dropped under his blows, and some of them didn't get up again. His roaring sounded above the swearing and the groaning. He kept working his way towards Moose, and time and again his attention was claimed by a figure rushing at him. Jigger would swing, the figure would drop, and he could take a few more steps towards Moose.

Moose had to be stopped. He was cutting devastating holes in the ranks of Jigger's men. Jigger approached Moose from the side. Two of his men danced warily outside of Moose's reach.

It was no time for niceties.

"Moose!" Jigger roared, and as the big man turned his head, Jigger hit him with the peavey. He hit with all his strength. Jigger would worry later about Moose's skull. Moose groaned and dropped like a poled ox.

His going took something out of Allison's men. The fight went on for a few more vicious, brutal minutes, but there was a difference, and Jigger's crew felt it. They advanced over the lurching, rocking raft, slippery with the water dashing over it, hitting and swinging.

Peaveys and fists took their toll. Allison's men wavered, then broke. Those who were able made wild, bounding leaps for the shore.

Jigger saw Allison, poised for his jump to the bank.

"Allison," he yelled and ran forward. He still held the peavey in his hand and was unconscious of it as he moved.

Allison whirled and crouched. Jigger sprang for him and flame lanced through the night. Jigger was slammed backwards. His left shoulder went dead under the heavy, numbing blow.

"Why, he shot me!" Jigger said, and his tone was full of wonderment. Loggers didn't fight with guns. Somehow he kept his feet, and his will drove him forward. Allison shot again, and muzzle fire burned Jigger's face. With one hand on the peavey he jabbed. He felt the sharp iron spike, at the end of the rig,

go through clothes and flesh. It went a long way, for Jigger was falling, and his weight was behind it.

Allison stiffened and shuddered. A low, moaning cry broke from his lips. He grabbed at his stomach with both hands, grasped the peavey, and his failing strength was enough to wrest it from Jigger's hands. He stepped backward, went over the edge of the raft, and the rushing waters cut off his sharp despairing cry.

THE blackness kept reaching for Jigger, and he kept pushing it back. Carlson knelt beside him, his hands ripping open Jigger's shirt. He felt Carlson's hands working at the wound, then the blackness was too powerful.

He opened his eyes and heard Carlson say, "High in the shoulder, miss. A scratch like that wouldn't stop him."

Jigger stared wonderingly at Ellen. He was delirious, imagining things. He shut his eyes, opened them again, and she was still there.

"Jigger, Jigger." Her voice was a little moan. "I couldn't go back. I was afraid for you. I drove a wagon down here and watched. I saw Allison waiting, but I couldn't warn you more."

Jigger said defensively, "I tried to avoid trouble, Ellen. Allison forced this. He shot first—"

Her arms were around him, cradling his head. "Belle was right. She said if she loved a man she would take him the way he was. I found out she was right in the few moments I thought I had lost you."

He heard her words, but it took a moment for him to believe them. He sat up, and his wound was only a bothersome thing. "Allison's gone, Ellen. The big stuff, around here, is open again. It will mean fighting to protect my interests."

He hesitated.

Carlson stood over them, a broad grin on his face. "You could have seen this yesterday. When a girl like her comes all the way to warn you—"

"What are you standing around for?" Jigger roared. "There's work to be done. There's the hurt to be gotten out of here, the raft to be delivered at Millville, the timber to be sold at San Francisco. When you get back I'll be ready to go again." Hope of the future softened his voice. "There's work and fighting—" He stopped at the word. He remembered Ellen's old dislike of it.

Her eyes were candid and revealing. "Together," she finished for him.

A broad, new world opened for Jigger. He had never heard a finer word.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 105)

HOWDY, pardner! Draw up your bronc a spell, relax, and let's see how your supply of range-savvy is holding out. Below are listed twenty questions—brain twisters every one of them. See how many of them you can answer, pardner—but keep the game on the level and no looking at the answers. Eighteen or more correct answers automatically land you in the *Mayordomo* bracket. Less than sixteen make you a greenhorn. Good luck—and keep your aim true.

1. If the ranch boss sent you out for "pine top," you would return with: A derby hat? A straw sombrero? Intoxicating liquor? A pie with an especially hard topcrust? Some pine wood shingles for the roof?

2. If that same ranch boss sent you for "boggy-top," you would return with: A soft John B. Stetson hat? A pie without topcrust? A variety of pudding made from cholla cactus?

3. In the language of the logger, a "mudhen" is: A person who must work in wet, swampy country? A dirty barnyard chicken? A long-legged bird which frequents swamps? Any dirty individual? A type of saw used close to the ground.

4. True or false? The term "alkalied" is applied to a person who spends too much of his time in bars.

5. A cow is termed "breachy" when: It develops a habit of jumping over or breaking through fences? It has reached the age of two years unbranded?

6. True or false? "Chaps" is a shortened form of *chaparreras* or *chaparajos*.

7. When a horse is said to have a "cold-jaw," it: Has a subnormal body temperature? Does not respond readily to bridle signals? Is not bothered particularly by cold weather?

8. In the language of the miner, a "wood bee" is: A small insect which lives in hollow trees and is renowned for its vicious sting?

A small ornament which courting miners characteristically give to their girls? A party organized to gather wood?

9. True or False? In the language of the old Westerners, to "fag" is to depart hastily.

10. What is the meaning of the Western slang term "go-devil?"

11. When a cowpuncher "gives his horse the gaff," what does he do to him?

12. In the southwest one frequently hears the term *pasear*. What does it mean?

13. If an old-time Westerner told you he was going to "pick a load" into someone, would he be planning to shoot someone?

14. In the language of the true Westerner, what is the meaning of the word "ranikaboo?"

15. To a miner, a "windy shot" is: A wild shot from a revolver? An unidentifiable noise heard in a ghost town? An exploded charge which fails to break the ore?

16. In the language of the cowboy, what is the meaning of the term to "forefoot?"

17. Who, in the old West, is known as the "great seizer?"

18. If a "six-shooter" is a firearm with six chambers, is a "seven-shooter" a firearm with seven chambers?

19. In the slang of the old West, what person was known as a "straw?"

20. True or false? "To top" means to select the best livestock from a herd, and remove them from the rest.

DOOM FOR THE CHEYENNE KID

By THOMAS CALVERT

*When the Cheyenne Kid came to town,
Sheriff Rankin knew he was alone in his
fear, for he alone had to die—he learned
from a tenderfoot that true loneliness
comes with—courage!*

AT FIVE o'clock, Ally Rankin put in the biscuits and pushed a fresh kettle back upon the stove. Moving to the north door, she wiped damp hair back with a rounded forearm and stood there feeling the evening cool upon her brow. It was still hot, but the intensity of heat had lifted. Distance was forming out of the fiery haze as it pulsed into the clear sweep of gold and crimson evening light.

A rosebush screened the small kitchen porch and through it she watched the fan of ochre dust smoke progressing along the uncertain space where the trail swamped into Union Street. The rider sat tall and easy in his saddle. He rode with a rhythm that few could claim, but the rangy dash and arrogance of the country was not about him.

"If I were another man riding toward him," the girl thought with a woman's sharp hurt, "I would expect him to give way."

It was an unpleasant thought for the sister of the youngest and toughest sheriff in seven states, and she made an unconscious gesture to push the thought away. It was not that the dude was short on innards; she was sure he wasn't in the instinctive way a woman feels such things. It was just that he was wary and had no liking for rough and tumble trouble. Still, that was no good in a country where everyone was rough and tumble and a man was rated by the quickness with which he met trouble when it came.

She stood there until the dude turned along the long picket fence. He would not, she knew, put his pony in the stable yard. He would tether it almost hidden from sight by the bushes beyond the quaking aspen trees.

This act was both a courtesy to her, a man's instinctive guarding of a woman against idle gossip, and yet an admission of his own inferiority. It brought through her a swift

rush of mixed feelings—appreciation for his thoughtfulness, pain that he thought as little of himself. Even Bat Dealy, who called himself a rancher only by virtue of twenty scrub cows, would have racked his horse in front of the house.

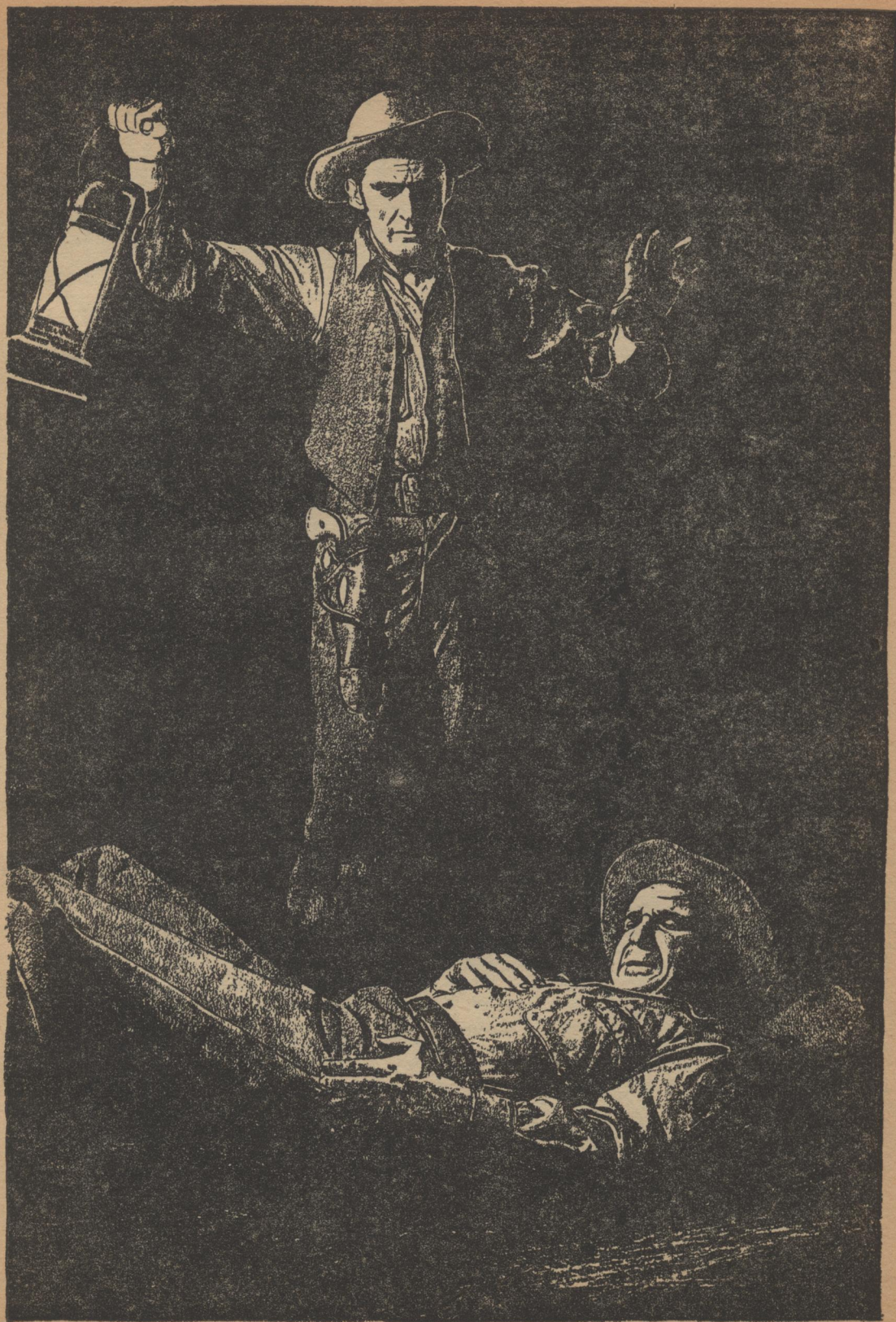
He would not come inside and she knew it; his actions were as predictable as a good clock's. He would hunker down in the deepest shadows of the front porch with his bread back resting against the wall. Shortly the softly muted chords of his guitar music would rise and fall until a careful listener was fully sure that it was music and not just memory of some tune.

She turned into the mirror in the house and the tunes came as they always did. Scarcely audible, they would not be likely to gain the attention of anybody passing on the street. Of course, the whole town knew for all of that; it always did. But the consideration for her was in him, and it touched a gentleness within her breast.

She noted the clock and added items to the pot, moving quietly so that she heard the music. *No one but a real good man could play that way*, she thought. *What is the dark secret that drove him here, and keeps him from carrying a gun, and keeps him from speaking out his heart? Not once has he ever stood close or said a word—*

Melancholy ran through her, like his tunes. She gave way to the full feel of it for an instant before burying it in the realistic need of getting supper. Then she made him a pitcher of cool ginger tea with juniper and cut him a wedge of cake. When she took them out the shadows had settled deep and dusty blue against the house, but the wild purples and reds and yellows of sundown were just forming up above the Rockies.

The dude came to his feet with a deep con-



sciousness of her in his motions. He said awkwardly, "You shouldn't take this trouble—I just like to stop by."

She laughed a woman's fond, low laugh and leaned back against the railing, her round shoulders and dark beauty edged by the sunset. "Had any luck with a job, Dude?"

"No m'am," he admitted uncomfortably. "But something will pop up."

Nothing will pop up for him in this country, she thought bitterly. *It is a tight, tough range and the pack runs together. He knows that, too.* It brought a thick fullness in her throat.

Another drifter would have moseyed on three months before. She was the solitary thing that held him here.

"You can light for supper if yo're minded," she told him, as she often did. "Buck has business right after."

He made his awkward regular apology, that he had business in town, but that he could stop by after. It was his regular line, and she did not ever infringe upon his little pride by urging or repeating the invitation. While he finished, she picked up the guitar and strummed some of the chords he was teaching her to play. He would leave it with her until after supper.

SHERIFF BUCK RANKIN rode in with his deputy from Bittersweep at five o'clock, sore from a long rough ride and with his temper edged with eating alkali and failure to pick up trail on the north fork cattle rustlers. He was a young man for the job, built like a bull and with the contained violence of a mountain cat. The same could be said of others in that country, but these qualities set him apart; an honesty that reached clean to the marrow of his bones and the unswerving courage to back it.

They came in the far end of Union Street. Buck's eyes probing every shadow from habit and picking up the evening's story of the town from the small things he saw and heard. The stage had brought in a drummer with his bag of tricks; this was obvious from the grinning expectancy of the boys lounging across from the Rice Hotel. There was momentary peace between the Bar Double T and Frying Pan, since their supply wagons were pulled up sided by side for loading in front of Wainwright's store.

And Steve Brannigan had won his bet with Owl Howland and was splurging Owl's saddle on his horse.

Zeke Mullholland stood aloof, whittling savagely at a post in front of Brockton's, a smoldering anger beating out of him in waves. He carried a fresh rawness on his blackburned cheek and Buck noted this to his deputy, Stillson.

"Watch out that in a week or so Zeke don't get stoked up and go gunning for Fritz Midle."

Stillson grinned and nodded. "From Zeke's check, it looks like Fritz will be buying Hattie's ribbons for a spell."

They moved on through the dust moil smoking up from the street, stopping at the Alcorn to slake raw throats with beer. Three foremen from the north table country were working out a water deal, which meant they were in town on business and their wild outfits would not be in tonight. Buck nodded at Ryerson, a rancher, and at Plat and Dingle, both beef traders. In passing, he flattened the momentary spark of truculence in the eyes of Spade Thorpe, whom he had sent off for a stretch for stealing.

As he finished his third beer with a grunt of satisfaction, the two Weatherill brothers burst through the batwings, loud and rangy of movement and drunk as lords. A hard humor touched Buck's mouth. "It is funny," he said to his deputy, "how tough a man thinks he is when he is too drunk to breast a good wind." He laid out a silver dollar and picked up change and nodded with dismissal at Stillson. "It will be a quiet night. You might as well go home to yore old lady if yo're minded."

"I ain't, but she is," Stillson chuckled. His brows knitted with the thing upon his mind. "Who do you reckon them north fork rustlers might be?"

"They just ain't," Buck scowled with fresh irritation. "Nobody in this country right now is that smart. In any case, they are working west of Bitter—they won't head in here."

"Reckon that's right," the deputy agreed in front of the saloon, and cocked down his hat.

They moved down the broad steps into the oblique shafts of evening light. At the rack, Buck's hands stopped on the tie knot and his big dark head wheeled downstreet. The dude was angling across, and Buck watched him with a strong man's irritation and dislike, but these feelings he contained behind the iron mask of his face.

At the alley into Myer's, the dude vanished and Buck wheeled his head back to catch Stillson's bright and speculative gaze upon him. He knew Stillson was thinking the dude had just come from the Rankin house, and that Stillson's opinion of the man was the same as his.

But the deputy made no comment—a man permitted to visit a home was accepted by the country as a friend.

The deputy patted his pony's neck and moved toward his saddle. He said, "Well, guess we can both use some sleep, boss," and, stepping into leather, waited for Buck to ride along before taking his own way.

THE sheriff put up his horse and, from a sense of bad-tempered perversity, washed out in the barn, coming around and entering the house by the front door. His sister glanced up from setting supper and sent a preoccupied smile toward him.

Buck was slipping his gunbelt on a peg when he spotted the guitar. A single quiver of violent irritation wrenched through him.

"That damned dude here again?"

The girl pivoted and waited for him to come from the hall shadows. "What has he done wrong, Buck?"

"He is just no damned good!" her brother snapped.

"Did he ever borrow money from you or cheat?"

"No," he admitted grudgingly. "But he is always hanging around."

"Not around you or anyone else in this town," she pointed out. "In four months, he has not even once stayed for a meal."

He sat down and snapped out his napkin with one motion. She saw the iron set of his jaw.

He met her gaze finally. "It is yore business Ally," he stated. "But he is gutless. Why don't you chase him away?"

Her back stiffened and a hard light spread across her eyes. "How do you know he's gutless? Yo're bad as the rest. He was a dude and from that point on you never gave him a chance!"

She struck directly at his ingrained sense of fairness and saw the hot defensive retort upon his tongue. Then he let out his breath slowly and flexed his shoulders. "All right," he said abruptly. "Mebbe yo're right. I'll give him his chance."

The antagonism died. Moved, she said earnestly, "Buck, nobody has a better brother! It's just that tough and ornery hide of yore's."

He leaned forward on his elbows so that his head was down, but his gaze stayed solidly upon her. "There is just one thing, Ally," he told her slowly. "If he fails his chance, he rides out of this country. I'll not have my name protecting a gutless drifter."

"That's fair," she murmured, but she turned quickly from him and her fingers pulled tightly in front of her. "There is a lot of violence in you, Buck," she added. "You'd not get that mixed up with guts in testing another man?"

"You know better!" he grated, struck raw by her lack of trust. "I expect nothing of any man beyond making the most of what God gave him. All I ask is that he doesn't crawl or quit when he could win a fight with a little spunk."

"Yes," she admitted, "you have always been fair." But she was longer than usual setting out supper.

The dude drifted back as dusk settled into a deep purpose and the last crimson streamers were dying into night. He had gotten his guitar and begun to strum before he realized her brother was on the porch. He stopped abruptly with embarrassment.

"Go right ahead," Buck grunted. "You make sweet music, Dude, I'll hand you that."

It was meant to be friendly. The statement was sincere, but his doubt of the man and contempt was like a deep current beneath his tone. The dude made a few awkward attempts to play, but he was ill at ease and it got into his music. The girl brought out fresh coffee, and then left the two men alone to smoke.

Between deep drags upon his cigar, Buck said, "There's not been much work around."

"Not much," the dude agreed.

"Kinda tired of jackrabbit stew?" Buck asked.

The dude gave an uncertain laugh. "It hasn't been too bad."

"Jackrabbits get kinda scarce in winter," Buck said. "How would you like to be a deputy till something turns up?"

The girl stood motionless inside the hall. She caught the sudden silence, the hesitation that would be the final sign with her brother. Slowly, finally, the dude mumbled, "I've got no gun."

"We can fix that," Buck grunted with an iron contempt. He got to his feet just as bare footbeats came tattooing down the boardwalk. He turned and waited on the stoop as Snipper Murdock formed out of the shadows in the yard.

The boy stopped dead, gasping for breath, and managed finally, "Sheriff, there's trouble at the Alcorn."

Buck's mind raced over the possibilities of that night and settled upon the two Weatherill brothers. They'd be rip-roaring drunk by now, and full of noise and wild shots, but barely able to stand up.

"The Weatherills?"

The boy nodded. "They can't even see, but they're sot to pick a fight with someone! Alcorn said to tell you."

against the darkness, watching the boy race back from the yard. Then he turned and went

"Tell him my deputy will be right up,"

Buck grunted. He stood a moment, a giant into the house. When he came out, he carried a gunbelt and holster and a deputy's star. "Go up there," he said, "and take their guns away. Take them over to the jail to cool off."

The dude hesitated again a long time before he answered dismally, "All right, sheriff, I will try it if you say."

"Don't take any guff or talk," the sheriff advised. "If they give you an argument, slap 'em with yore pistol. Tell the boys I have deputized you to keep order."

"Yessir," the dude murmured, just audibly. Buckling on the belt, he moved out, stiff-legged, through the yard.

BUCK sat down, putting a fresh light to his cigar and found his sister watching him across the match flame. She said tightly, "That is a tough chance, Buck!"

"No—they'll fall over if he blows at 'em," he chuckled. "Worst they'll do is try to shoot out the lights and bolt."

He finished his coffee. The girl said after a space, "I suppose it is the only way," and carried the cups away.

The rapid firing of two shots drifted faintly through the night. Identifying them from the same gun, Buck thought with surprise, *He had to shoot at their feet. Didn't reckon he could work a gun that fast.*

No further commotion broke the small hum of the town's night life until old Singer's voice hailed him from the side of the house.

Buck sat erect, peering out into the dark. "Come in," he grunted. "What in hell you doing skulking around back alleys?"

Singer came in the side way, his small store-keeper's figure scurrying through the shadows. He explained nervously, "You never know how many gunsicks are waiting and watching for an hombre like that."

"What are you talking about?" Buck demanded.

"The Cheyenne Kid. He hit town an hour ago. He just shot the two Weatherill boys."

Buck's breath broke out of him in one solid gust. If the Cheyenne Kid was in the country, that explained the north fork rustling. "Take the black mare in my stable," he said, "and ride for Stillson. Tell him to pick up whoever he can on the way in." He came erect. "Any of the foreman or ranchers in?"

"All drifted out," Singer answered. "Ain't nobody at all in town can shoot but you."

"All right, get going," Buck nodded and moved rapidly into the house. He carried his gun into the kitchen to inspect its working order minutely.

Bucking up, he carefully tested the swing and hang of the holster.

Ally cried shrilly, "Buck, you can't go after the Kid alone! He'll have you deadspotted from some back lot!"

He gave her a grim silencing look.

"You could wait for Stillson," she insisted. "You weren't hired to get killed."

"I was elected because they thought I was a man," he noted. In one of his rare flickers of gentleness, he pressed a hard calloused hand to her neck, and then was heeling out through the house.

He angled across street, his mind busy with keening and sensing out the small signs of the town ahead—the lay of the lights, the

little islands of noise and silence, the shift of shadows where people moved against the light. Beyond these thoughts were other feelings, a man's deep secret consciousness of himself. He felt the tautness the Kid's name had put into his muscles, his fluting nerves, and the bunching in his stomach and the back of his neck. The surge of his pulse was full and regular, but pounding its vibrations against his chest and ears.

If he hoped to win, knowledge of these things was something a man had to have. It was this knowledge that caused him to drop his shoulders and flex them back to ease the nerves, and to let his arms slack beside him while he spread his fingers as far as they would go and stretched them. It was knowledge of himself that let a man guard against human reactions beyond full control, and if he possessed it, infused wariness with the courage he needed. But it was the same knowledge that gave him a picture of himself as stark as a leafless tree against a winter sky.

He reached the opposite side of the street and started slowly along the walk. He placed each footstep carefully, achieving a casual walk in spite of the tight pull in the calves of his legs. He passed the gleaming darkness of the Cattleman's Feed windows, and it struck through his thoughts with odd humor a young roughneck did not know this fear. It was not until after he had experience that a man knew what trailing a merciless killer was like. He did not know until he looked squarely into a killer's eyes. He learned then, in one instant—and often too late.

He recognized Ringold leaning against a post beyond the fringe of the freight office light. Ringold said, "I would lend a hand, but I am slow and might be in the way."

"Where is he?" Buck called back, low.

"He left the Alcorn and turned upstreet. I think he's alone."

"He's as bad that way!" Buck grunted. "Turn out your light."

He moved on by, nearing the livelier night section of town. The tense excitement of the small groups clustered in the shadows beat at him like a row sound. There were low-called offers of help, which he curtly refused, and the boasts of those who were scared to shoot at all, which he ignored.

Through all these people he moved alone. There were, he estimated, about two hundred men in town and, except for the aged, he was conscious of a vast contempt. Of all those men, there was not one who could be counted upon not to lose his head, or freeze at the critical moment, or turn yellow.

A baby cried out through the tense silence that had clutched the town and was sharply stilled. But its brief cry jangled on his ears

and he was conscious again of his own fear, and then that his forehead was damp and cold.

HE TURNED through the narrow break between the Alcorn and the next building, pausing at the rear to listen intently. Somewhere three or four buildings beyond, a horse blew softly and pawed the earth. It could be anybody's horse, but it was nervous and highblooded, and it probably belonged to the Cheyenne Kid. If it did, the Kid would not leave that side of the street—he would not get far separated from his horse.

No other sound broke the silence. Turning the corner he felt his way along the wall to the Alcorn's back door. This led into a storeroom in which there was no light, and he stepped in gingerly, closing the door behind him. Turning, he groped for a means to reach the other door. He had taken three steps when a pile of cases blocked his passage and, as he took a half step something hard and metallic jabbed him beneath the shoulder.

For that instant, full fright broke up through the steel of his controls. He felt the nerves at the base of his skull jump twice, and then his joints and muscles froze. It was a full thirty seconds before he conquered this freezing panic—then he realized he had stepped back against an arm of the scales.

He sucked in a long breath and steadied the slamming of his heart, and had the random wonder whether men could read the weakness which even the bravest hid behind the blanket of their eyes. His gun hand was clammy and he wiped it carefully upon his leg and moved cautiously forward again along the line of cases.

The filter of dim yellow light suddenly outlined the inner door and, lifting it open, he looked into the smoke-filled bar.

He was unseen and he stood a space accustomed to the glare, and then moved forward into the low hum that filled the room. The Wetherill boys were sprawled grotesquely where they had fallen. One's arm was still crooked in reaching for his gun; the other's gun had jogged out of its holster. Even in death they looked insensibly drunk. A boy could have batted them down, but the Kid had preferred killing to dirtying his gun.

Alcorn and five men were crowded at the front, peering over the batwing doors. They turned with violent suddenness, gray and putty-looking at the sharp tap of Buck's step. Alcorn gave a feeble grin and waved toward the dead men. "He doesn't miss."

"They push the trouble?"

"Oh, they asked for it," Alcorn nodded. "But he enjoyed it. He took his time over finishing his drink. He said, 'Mebbe yore shirt-tail sheriff won't like this. Tell him I'll

still be in town if he wants to come after me.' He was just going out when yore dude deputy came in."

Alcorn stopped suddenly, puzzled and embarrassed by this development in his recital.

"The dude?" Buck repeated. It was the first time he had thought of the other and he cursed softly.

"Well, you know what yo're doing with deputies, Buck," Alcorn said lamely, "but he was all out of water. It took him a full minute to soak the picture in."

"Why'n hell didn't he come fetch me?" Buck demanded.

Alcorn shrugged. "He just said he reckoned he'd best go lock the Kid up until you came." The barkeep looked as if he had more to say, thought better of it, and mopped his bullet-shaped bald head.

"What's on yore mind?" Buck snapped. "This is no time to hold back."

"Well, this here dude deputy—Buck, he damned near fainted when he saw these Weatherill boys. I will bet you find him out in some haystack."

"What I am looking for," Buck stated, "is the Cheyenne Kid. Alcorn, leave yore lights and don't go outside." He moved back out through the storeroom, taking time to readjust his vision.

Cold violence was rising through him in a solid sheet, but with it came the echo of his sister's cry, "*You weren't hired to get killed.*" Nobody underestimated the split-second deadliness of the Kid's gunhand and, more than that, the Kid was a merciless and wary killer. There were gunhands who fought according to the strictest code, but the Kid was not one of those. He had shot men drunk, and he had shot others in the back, and some he had shot for no reason whatsoever. Killing for its own sake lay through him as in a wolf.

The country would not blame Buck for waiting for help to breast the Kid. As a matter of fact, Buck did not need to press the fight at all. He might prove later that the Kid was the north fork rustler, but right now he had no proof, and if the Weatherills had built the barroom fight, the Kid was guilty of nothing other than self defence. Buck could let the fight slide on that basis, and no man would blame him.

The thought crossed his mind, and it held the lure of a man's subconscious desire to take the easy way when his life hangs in the balance. He fought the idea down, angered that it had occurred to him, even as he was conscious that lesser men would consider it a fair out. If the Kid had come looking for trouble, then he would not be disappointed. Yet even meeting the challenge, Buck knew he was a fool and that he would not expect another to do the same.

OUTSIDE the back door he paused again to listen. His senses were keyed and he let them drift out, bringing back impressions too fine for the ears or nose alone to catch. He did not hear the horse again, yet he was sure it was standing at the back line of Quillan's alley. He let his weight down upon a step that creaked and the noise ran like a file along his nerves. He waited, but no other sound broke the stillness. He heard nothing but the hard banging of his heartbeat.

He turned to the left and worked through a broad space along the Alcorn. In the slash of light that cut across the front he saw Ben Early race low and spraddling across the street, and damned him. If the Kid did not already know or suspect the way he'd work, it would draw his attention to the very spot where Buck must come out between the buildings.

He felt his way through, stopping in deep shadow, conscious of the strain in the muscles behind his knees. He fought a growing conviction that the Kid was watching every move he made. He was keyed to hear that merciless taunting laughter and the shot break. Nothing within his range of vision helped. Men's faces were edged and sharp in the layers of shadow and light. Their positions were grotesque, curiosity and the excitement of seeing a killing freezing their instinct for flight.

He thought of Stillson and wished he were there to cover his back. Then with sudden, violent anger, he thought of the utter worthlessness of his new deputy, the dude. At least he could have kept an eye on where the Kid went.

He came out of the space and jumped spryly into the shadows of Lothrop's stoop. He did this with his fingers resting upon the edge and staying there until he landed upon the balls of his feet. One foot did not land accurately and almost slipped, and across his mind flashed a warning of what such nervousness would mean in a tight pinch.

He stood at the end of the stoop studying the faces of bystanders for some sign of attention upon things he could not see. Their attention wandered, intent but pointless, which meant the Kid had not recently been seen along the street.

He moved quietly back through the pitch shadows of the yards behind and located the horse finally by its smell. It was standing close against a shed, where he had thought it would be, in Quillan's alley. Obliquely opposite the front of this alley was a space between two stores, perhaps a foot and a half across. It would be there, he guessed, that the Kid waited. It would be from that murky darkness he would sing out and send his first shot.

Certainty of this grew within him like a

sound. With it came parallel emotions, and the warning that comes of fear. He could circle the town and sneak in the back end of that slit. But once in there he was boxed for a dead target if he were wrong.

He took this into consideration and then moved around the back of Quillan's property. Looking in from the darkness of the prairie, he saw the spread of lights, the intent faces along the street, but not a single motion. A small square of light against dead blackness showed a light in the town calaboose.

HE CUT a low silhouette until he came to the backline of this side of the street.

Once his foot came against a cat that squawled and set his heart to galloping. He leaped sidewise into the pitch darkness of a shed and stood there, waiting for a sound that would show his presence had been spotted. A full ten minutes he stood motionless until strain was jerking at him and his knees were no longer steady. He had, he realized, been standing all this time with his gun-arm crooked. He thought with anger that these were the nerves and weaknesses every man had, but was ashamed of.

He moved out slowly, silently. The Kid was no fool at this kind of fighting—he would know why the cat had squawled. The hair at the back of Buck's neck was straight and bristled. Twice he had to wipe the cold clamminess from his hand and brow.

At the slit of space between the buildings he dropped to his knees, gun now balanced in his hand. He moved forward by inches, until fully opposite the slit. In that first instant of seeing the high, narrow strip of light, cold ice gripped his stomach, and he heard the furious race and miss of his heartbeat.

He had expected to find the Kid here, ready and peering from the darkness. But nothing was here. No solitary object loomed against the light of the street. He felt tricked and trapped, and his head wheeled upward, ready for a man's low taunting laugh from the rooftops. No silhouette broke the solid shadows, there was no laugh nor orange blast from a gun.

He found he was shaking and that sweat was running down his back. He had the feeling of a man who has been outwitted and is being played with—a panicky urge to jump erect and yell out for the Kid. There were gunmen who would answer such a challenge and come forth to fight, but the Kid was not that kind. He fought the urge down with effort.

A sudden yell and hubbub of voices broke from the street. Buck crouched low and ran through. Men were calling and running, converging upon the alley that ran out to the calaboose. He saw Doc Beamish running

with his satchel, his short legs pumping beneath his rotund stomach.

The crowd milled around the cell where the dude's figure sprawled motionless in the dim lantern light that fell through the open door. Doc Beamish was already turning him over with a puzzled look.

He glanced up and grunted quietly, "Buck, I think the boys better take him along to yore house."

Buck shouldered through the crowd bunching outside the slot-iron per. door. He jerked the bolt and lifted the lantern to peer in. What he saw was the Cheyenne Kid with a black gash along his head sprawled unconscious on the dirt floor.

Doc stooped, his experienced fingers feeling the cut. Rising, he said on a humorous note, "Ain't nothing more than a pistol whipping. Leave him a bucket of water to cool his head when he comes to."

They moved back out and shut the place and the boys were already guffawing about the bad hombre who'd been gunwhipped by a dude. The Kid would find no respect or tolerance in this country again. He'd never dare show his face after tonight.

"That dude deputy?" someone in the crowd yelled.

"He'll be all right," Doc Beamish grunted. "Nothin' more than a pound or two of lead."

He turned to follow the men totting the dude. Midway up the block Buck took his arm and pulled him aside. "Doc," the sheriff growled, nettled, "that dude wasn't shot at all!"

"Nope," Doc agreed, and extracted a fat cigar from his vest. "His heart just gave out on him when he stopped to think on what he'd done."

"Yellow!" Buck ground out contemptuously. "Likely didn't know who the Kid was at first!"

Doc Beamish shot him a curious sideglance through the flame of his match. "Didn't that dude ever tell you how come he drifted to this climate, Buck?"

"It's clear enough without his telling."

"That dude deputy you made," Doc told him slowly, "has got a bullet right smack beside his heart that won't let him shake up much. He got shot over in Cheyenne one night, Buck—the night the Kid's bunch shot up the whole damned town."

Buck stared at him, and against the background of his own recent feelings, respect began to rise through his contempt for the dude. "Why, the damn fool!" he muttered finally, and then laughed. "Why, that gol' damned fool! Then he knew all about the Kid, and he knew that his heart might conk any second, but he walked up and smacked the Kid down."

"Alcorn warned him not to breast this hombre," Doc said around the glow of his cigar. "But this dude said you sent him down to cool off the trouble, so he reckoned he had to do the job—jobs being scarce hereabouts."

They came to the house and pushed through the crowd Buck's sister had herded outside the door. The girl had brought the dude around and, taking his measure, Doc Beamish chuckled, "I reckon yore the medicine he needs, Ally."

Buck stood with his head jutted forward, blowing hard against his weathered cheeks. "Deputy," he demanded suddenly. "If you knew who the Kid was, why in hell did you chance a gunwhopping instead of shooting fast?"

The dude's face was pretty white, but now blood tinted it in a solid sheet. He said softly, "Sheriff, I might have lost, like I did once before. This way he had to find out he was yellow. Besides, I never could hit the side of a barn."

"You can't use a gun?" Buck repeated unbelievably. "You can't even shoot, and you been shot up once by the Kid, and you still went after him?"

He stared open mouthed at the dude, and then suddenly threw back his head and filled the room with a roaring laugh.



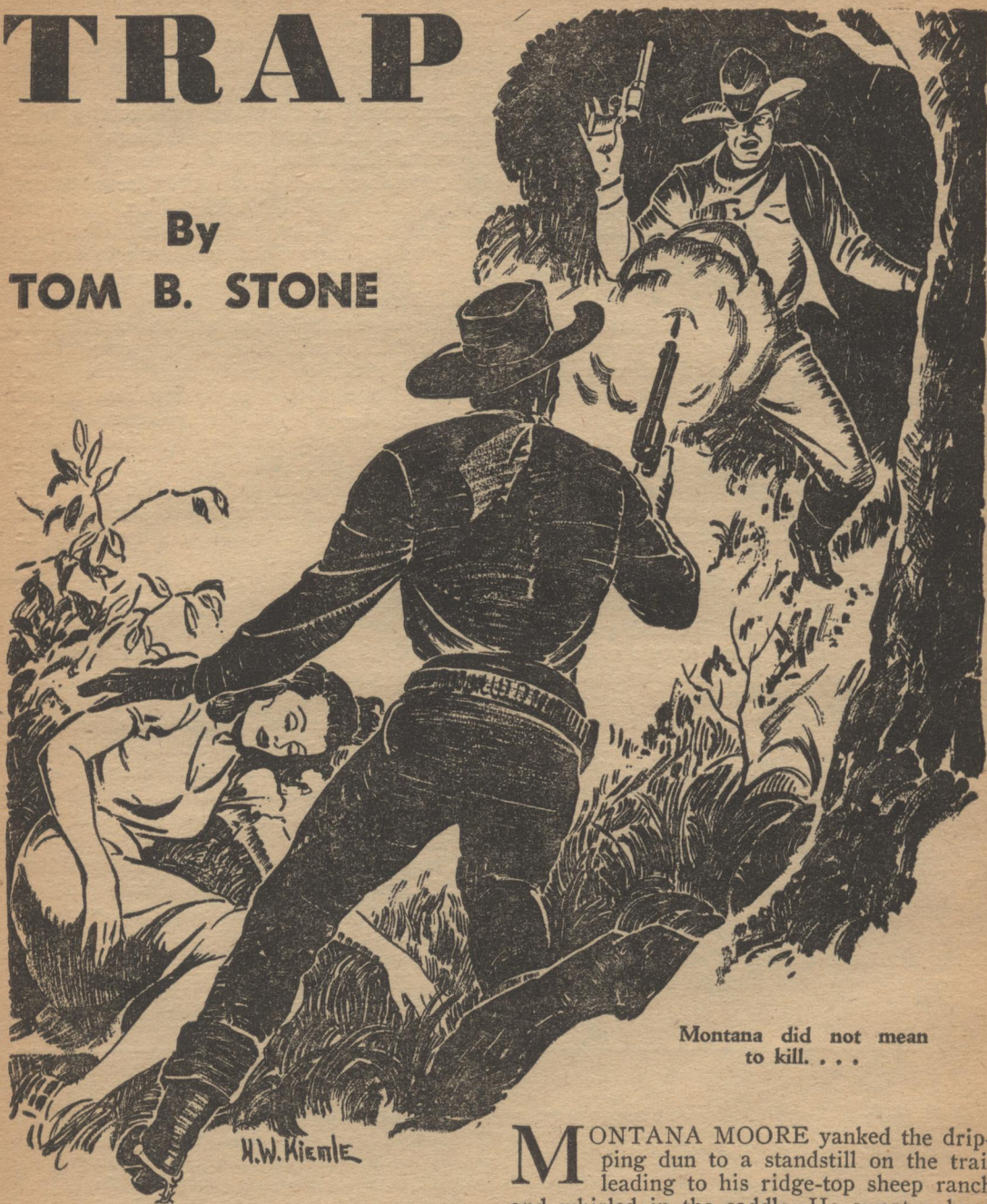
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MONTANA TRAP

By
TOM B. STONE



Montana did not mean
to kill. . . .

*A man can do worse than die
a fool — and that is to hang
too early!*

MONTANA MOORE yanked the dripping dun to a standstill on the trail leading to his ridge-top sheep ranch and whirled in the saddle. He swept a hard gaze across water-soaked shinnery oak and gamma grass and stiffened in his square-skirted Spanish saddle. In the distance were two horses, ground-anchored, heads hung low against the rain.

The dun wheeled under spur thrust, thundering off trail toward the trees. Near the

waiting mounts Montana slid from the saddle and advanced cautiously into the leafy tangle.

Through the leaves he watched a strange scene. Huddled before an oak, slim shoulders flattened back against the rough bole, slender arms caught close with hempen ties, was a Mexican girl. The girl herself was arresting, but Montana's eyes flashed to the heavy-shouldered hombre squatted before her. He recognized Milt Caswell, son of old Lute Caswell, owner of the Triple-C spread.

Montana heard the girl say, "*Lechon!*"

Caswell's mouth worked. "So!" He reached out a hand.

Montana Moore slid forward.

"Easy does it, Milt."

Caswell turned. "Git away, yuh sheep-stinkin' skunk!"

Montana said, evenly. "However that might be—hands off!"

When Caswell only grinned, Montana slid up, rattler-fast. His fist pistoned. Caswell's bristly jaw snapped shut with a click. His head jolted back, struck against the tree. He slumped groggily. Quick to seize his advantage, Montana moved in with a series of punishing hooks. Then he had his clasp-knife open—the girl's bonds fell away.

She swayed and he caught her—then swore and whirled her away, sent her reeling to one side.

There was grim tension to him as he saw that Milt Caswell had gone for his gun. It was something he had known would one day happen—there is at least one moment in each man's life when he has to reckon with finalities. The urge to kill, Montana had often thought, was akin to the urge to live—akin to birth and death and love—the three great crises in men's lives. He had been ready for this, both consciously and subconsciously for months. His hand found the butt of his own weapon by an instinct as deep-rooted as nature, even as Caswell's fire found him.

He staggered, reeled off balance; only the inborn instinct kept him in the fight. There are men to whom the quick finality of a gunfight is in itself a deterrent; Montana had trained himself to face that. He had reasoned it out—even a dead man may still pull a trigger.

But a dead man's aim is not accurate. Envisioning a gunfight, Montana had also pictured its outcome. He had not intended to kill. He had figured things to a nicety, studying only to cripple his man. Something, perhaps his slipping on the loose leaves when Caswell's second slug took him in the thigh, after the first had burned his ribs, threw off his schemes.

When silence settled again on the small clearing, Milt Caswell was stone dead, with a slug through his forehead.

THE Mexican girl crept to her feet. "*Señor,*" she whimpered.

Montana looked up bitterly. "Better clear out, miss. There'll be hell to pay. No sense yore meetin' it halfway."

"*Senor,*" the girl protested. "I—I worked for Señor Caswell."

Montana's eyes smouldered. "Lora Caswell ought to keep her brother's paws off'n the hired help, then. Seems to me you could take it up with her. This has been building a long time between Caswell an' me." The Mexican girl's cheeks flamed. Montana hastened to add, "Tell you what. My dun's there. Give him free rein an' he'll take you to my cabin on the ridge where you kin dry out. Then you have to amble. Meanwhile, I'll git into Pima an' deliver one corpse to Sheriff Bramm."

Her smile flashed fleetingly, oddly disturbing and for several seconds Montana stood stock-still, staring up the trail after the trotting dun.

Hitching up his jeans, he bent to lift Caswell's body across the dead rancher's saddle. He tied it securely, and mounted the Mexican girl's skittish mare and swung both animals toward distant Pima.

Sheriff Tal Bramm, a stubby, sleepy-eyed man of fifty with straw-yellow mustaches, grunted at Montana's burden and his story.

"Best bring him in—or there's liable to be hell to pay."

He nodded at a lath-thin deputy who hustled outside. But men had seen Montana ride in and a wave of angry sound washed in the open door when the deputy brought in the body. The sheriff nodded again.

"Keep 'em movin', Jed," Bramm told his deputy and once more the other went out.

The sheriff stared down at the dead man. He said, "Never figgered Milt to be that bad with a gal. Bad blood between you two, wasn't there?"

Montana said, "Bad enough. I oughta left him out fer the coyotes. Give 'em a good case o' belly trouble."

Bramm held up his hand placatingly. "No offence, son. It's town and cattle men you got to worry about from now on in. I aim to stand by the law."

Feet clattered noisily across the porch outside. The door opened and two figures poised on the sill, eyes riveted on the body crumpled across the pine floor—a snowy-haired, hawk-featured man with sun-blackened skin and a muscular body that belied his age, and a girl. Montana's breath sucked in sharply, audibly.

Her blue eyes flashed to his.

The man with her said, "You blood-suckin' sheep tick been warned to git out'n this valley. This time I'm invitin' you to stay till we git to the root of this."

"I'm stayin'," Montana said quietly and the sheriff got between the two men.

Bramm's hand gripped his Colt. "Neither you nor anyone else is forcing the law in Pima, Caswell. From the story I got, trouble started with Milt. So far it's the only story. I aim to talk to the Mex girl."

Caswell said nothing, rage and grief for his son struggling for mastery on his features. It was the girl who spoke, a lilting scorn in her voice.

"Don't turn your back, dad," she said. Her next move caught the three men by surprise. She brought up her riding quirt and slashed it savagely across Montana's face. It brought blood.

He said harshly, "That should be some satisfaction fer havin' had a pole-cat fer a brother—" and was sorry immediately.

Half sobbing, the girl turned and fled from the room. Her father followed her, shaking his head.

THE anger of the town crowded into the small office again in the wake of two newcomers. There was a sullen muttering group outside the door and from beyond came an occasional drunken shout. Caswell wouldn't have too much trouble raising a lynch mob in Pima tonight.

The new arrivals, Jack Trainer, Triple-C foreman, and a burly-shouldered ranch hand, flicked sharp glances around. Trainer lifted dark eyes from Milt Caswell's body, shook his head expressively.

"Milt's natchur seems to've kinda cotched up with him finally." He shrugged, looked at Montana. "Still, was I you, I'd ride." He screwed up his eyes. "I ain't never cottoned to Milt—but I ain't sidin' no sheepman, either. You can take that friendly if you like."

Montana hesitated. Then he said, "I'll take it for what it's meant."

He turned on his heel, pushed past the silent, hard-eyed group, and went outside. An ominous, rolling yell greeted his appearance. Wordlessly, he strode to the Mexican girl's mare, untethered it. Somebody slapped the reins from his hand.

He whirled, struck out and a ranch-hand sprawled in the dust. Montana regarded the silent crowd for the space of three heartbeats.

Then he said, "I aim to stick around, folks. You kin come for it now or later. Either way somebody besides me is gonna get hurt."

No one made a move as he mounted. Still silent, the crowd parted to let him ride out of town. . .

On the ridge-top, an hour later, he picked up his two Mexican herders and a flock of woolies being herded into a sheltered canyon. The rain was driving hard now, a slanting

wall of silver that stitched its needlepoint into the muddy ground. His dogs, himself and the sheep made the only sounds that broke the hiss of the storm.

Montana saw the last huddled shape vanish into the canyon, wiped his dripping face with a dripping sleeve unconsciously, and waved to the Mexicans.

"Take care." They nodded.

Back on the trail he reined up sharply, listening intently. The pelting beat of familiar hoofs drifted up from the valley. An instant later, on a panting black gelding, Lora Caswell drew up beside him. In her eyes he read a reflection of the storm about them and something else.

She said, "I want to tell you—this isn't anything of either dad's or my doing. There's a town mob after you."

He grinned, "Thanks. I wouldn't have known about the mob, but I would'a known you wouldn't set 'em onto me. Or your dad."

He couldn't read her eyes. "What are you going to do?"

He sobered. "Dunno. Hole up in the cabin an' face 'em. I promised I wouldn't run. Got a clean-shootin' Sharps' that oughta stand 'em off."

He touched his hat and rode on and found her beside him. She didn't speak and he didn't quite know what to say. When they reached the cabin, he led both mounts around to the lean-to at the rear.

He ducked his head against the driving rain and hustled inside—she still following in silence—and brought up sharply.

Warmth poured at him—and over Lora's slim shoulder he saw Rosa, the Mexican girl, standing wide-eyed beside a supper table which had been set for two. Steaming food was already in its place.

Lora's voice cut into his thoughts. "I can see why Milt was killed I—I heard she was here and wouldn't believe it. Now—"

For a moment sheer amazement held him speechless—then she had pushed past him and was gone, running into the driving storm, the last whisper of her sob lost in the rushing wind.

Montana stood, stiff-legged, still gripped by that surprise.

Then, tiredly, he moved to take his place at the table.

Rosa moved across the pine floor in bare feet. Tears shone in her velvety black eyes.

"Señor," she whispered. It was the first word she had spoken to him when he had killed Caswell.

To her it seemed to express the ultimate in crises.

Montana brushed a weary hand across his face. Maybe she was right—he didn't know.

"Let's eat," he said.

WHEN the riders came, he was ready for them. A gun exploded near the lower corral. Other shots echoed it and lead splatted, whined from the roof logs.

A voice howled, "Come out, yuh sheepherdin' killer!"

Through a gun aperture Montana watched lean forms unhorse, steal through the shadows. He sent out a warning shot. The shadows outside froze, became invisible.

Then flame leaped out raggedly from the corral—more than one gun. Glass crashed. Montana listened to the beat of lead mingle with the slashing hiss of rain. He whirled at a stifled moan behind him.

Rosa lay on the floor. Blood welled from her chest—and from its flow he thought the wound was fatal. He carried her to a bunk.

Her eyes opened briefly, "*Señor!*" she gasped—then added, "*Vaya—con—Dios—*"

He felt her pulse, then took time to press a wadded compress to the wound.

The attack outside had died to scattered shooting. The mob was deploying for position. Back at his post, he entered his sights on a vague shadow, where he thought he detected a movement, but before he could press trigger a horseman rode out in the open yard.

"You men git fer yore homes!" Sheriff Tal Bramm bawled in stentorian tones. "I'll clap the fu'st one who argys in the calaboza!"

Montana unbarred the door, slipped out into the rain with the carbine held ready in his hands.

A group of riders slowly collected near the corral.

As Montana moved outside Sheriff Bramm asked, "You git hit, son?"

"No."

Others in the posse crowded around. Montana recognized some—Harry Bailey, a rancher from the south section of Pima Valley; Jack Trainer, the Triple-C foreman who had taken his part in the sheriff's office earlier; and Red Allen, a beefy-shouldered waddy from Bailey's spread.

"Another minnit an' you'd been buzzard bait!" Trainer scowled. He scanned the shadows, and jerked his head as the quick nervous beat of horses hoofs vanished toward the valley town broke out. "They're high-tailin' it. I'll say it again, Montana—move your hocks to more peaceable grounds. There's good sheep graze land to the south—down Las Aguila way."

Montana tipped his carbine. "There's good graze here."

Bramm rubbed his chin. "Blood-spillin' don't git results—other than more blood-spillin'. I figger your story of Caswell's killin' is right—you got shot at to prove it was self-defense. Will it help if you have to kill somebody else?"

"Will it help the next man if I run?" Montana asked quietly.

He felt Bramm's stare hard on him. Finally the sheriff said, "Maybe you got somethin'—maybe the next man won't be a sheepherder."

Silently, the posse wheeled, rode back toward Pima. His brain a seething, angry vortex, Montana strode into the cabin, racking the Sharps against the wall and then going to see Rosa. The sheriff had promised to send a doctor from town.

In the bedroom doorway he froze. The room was empty—and the window was open.

He followed her, letting himself out the window. Rain stung his face, but he found weaving tracks.

He was following them toward a grove of trees behind the cabin when something hard and heavy struck him behind the ear. . . .

THE rain brought him to—it had let off considerably and traced soft fingers across his skin. It cooled the fury he felt as he made his way back to the cabin.

Again he had visitors—Bramm's posse was back.

Before the old man could speak, a posseman growled, "Yo're under arrest, Moore. Fer Lute Caswell's murder. An' he was shot in the back—let's see you make that out self-defense."

Montana said, "I was slugged back in my grove. Dunno whut you men are talkin' about."

Bramm produced a pair of muddied boots. Montana recognized them as the pair which he had kicked off before his discovery of Rosa's escape from the bedroom window. Frowning, he watched as Tal Bramm took them, inverted both and grunted.

"That's them, boys. He's the killer. Them nail studs in the heels like stars shore drape a rope plumb around his neck. It's a clincher."

Bramm said slowly, distinctly, "One o' the Triple-C boys heard a shot near the barns. He found ol' Lute dead—shot through the spine. All around was boot marks with star studs—showin' plain in the mud. The rain'd let up a mite, and they stayed clear. We found these here boots stuffed up your chimney. You own up to 'em?"

Montana opened his mouth to protest; then he shrugged.

Bramm said meaningly, "Lute and me kind a grew up together—I kind a miss him," and raised his Colt.

He rode to jail in the midst of the grimly silent posse. Townsfolk picked them up on the way in and then hung around the jail.

Sheriff Bramm's placating yet warning voice was drowned in a thunderous jeer. Montana knew it would only be a matter of minutes—

A familiar whisper snapped him erect in his cell.

"Montana!"

Through the bars he gripped Lora Caswell's icy fingers.

"Rosa came back—she's told me everything. I—I know you didn't kill dad tonight."

Two staccato pistol shots sounded in the street outside.

Lora gasped, a key rattled in the cell block. She whispered, "I'll do what I can—" and was gone.

He turned to meet the onrush of several men—and for a while held his own—then he went down, engulfed helplessly.

They dragged him outside and he saw Sheriff Bramm backed against the jailhouse wall. His eyes roved over the crowd, saw familiar faces — Bailey, Allen, Trainer, Bramm. And, back of the jostling mob, her features flower-pale, great dark eyes fastened on his face, was Lora. He managed a quick grin.

CURIOSLY enough, Montana Moore could never take credit for saving his own life. It was one of the lynch mob who gave him his idea.

Red Allen suddenly yelled, "Let 'im die with his boots on—the boots he killed Lute Caswell with."

The mob took up the cry. Montana clutched at the delay with all the despair and hope of a drowning man—and that was when he had his idea.

Only, he had never heard of a straw actually supporting a drowning man.

Still, a man can do worse than die a fool, and that is to die too early, and so he asked, "Mind if Sheriff Bramm does me one last favor?"

Trainer said slowly. "Come ahead, Tal. He can't do no harm."

The sheriff came up, frowning. Montana said, "Take yore knife, Tal. Cut them uppers from the soles o' the boots. But cut 'em careful."

Puzzled, the sheriff complied. Montana waited. Finally he spoke, in a thin, tough

voice—in the voice of a man who is licked.

"Last night I got gun-whipped. You don't believe this, but the real killer o' Lute Caswell done it. He wore my boots and then hid the boots in the smoke-hole in my cabin. On'y them boots was purty old. The side seams was split, I jest remembered. Mud would git in 'em—I dunno as anything will come o' this—reckon it jes' means I hate to say die."

He got a laugh. Then he got something more.

The sheriff held up the two boots, the uppers of which had been deftly split from the soles. On each sole, clearly outlined in caked mud, was a man's footprint—with two small toes gone from the left foot!

Bramm stared, then said, "There's on'y one gent I knows of has got a foot like thet. Who bragged 'cause he got it cotched in a wolf trap, an' hacked off them toes hisself—" The old man looked around the crowd for confirmation—but everyone was silent.

Slowly the sheriff's eyes followed those of the crowd and settled on Jack Trainer.

Jack Trainer had drawn a gun. Lora screamed. Trainer's eyes flicked sideways momentarily. It was enough for Montana Moore.

He hurled the hard bulk of his body low and flung into the plunge every ounce of muscular power he could exert.

Trainer ripped out a startled curse and his gun boomed. Montana felt a numbing sear through his leg and struck the foreman below the knees. Trainer staggered and three shots rang out and Jack Trainer crumpled slowly, a surprised and wide-eyed expression on his full face.

Montana rolled over and felt quick, gentle arms enfold him. Lora's tear-bright eyes were very close. Just beyond them were the sheriff's.

Bramm mopped his brow. "Yuh shore talked sweet an' fast, son," he said, blowing out his breath explosively. "An'—well, I reckon we folks'll kinda cotton more tuh sheep-raisin'—that is, if we want to hold in with the Triple C."



Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 91)



1. If the ranch boss sent you out for some pine top, you would return with some hard liquor.

2. If the ranch boss sent you out for "boggy-top," you would return with a pie having no topcrust.

3. In the language of the logger, a "mudhen" is a person who must work in wet, swampy country.

4. False. An "alkalied" person has lived in the desert long enough to accustom himself to the climate.

5. A cow with a habit of jumping over or climbing through fences is "breachy."

6. True. "Chaps" is a shortened form for *chaparreras* and *chaparajos*.

7. A horse is said to have a "cold jaw" when he fails to respond easily to bridle signals. It is interesting to note that horses often show wide variation in degree of sensitiveness to jaw signals.

8. In the language of the miner, a "wood bee" is an organized wood-gathering party, usually to help out a neighbor.

9. True. "To fag" means to depart hastily.

10. In the language of the West, a "go-devil" is a "hay buck."

11. When a cowpuncher "gives his horse the gaff," he spurs the horse and otherwise tries to excite or stimulate him.

12. *Pasear* means take a walk.

13. No. "Pick a load" means "to kid" or lead on with tall, impossible tales.

14. A "ranikaboo" is a prank or joke.

15. A "windy shot" is an explosive charge which fails to break the ore.

16. To "forefoot" means to rope an animal by the front feet, and thus throw it.

17. The sheriff is known laughingly as the "great seizer."

18. Yes. A "seven-shooter" is a firearm with seven chambers.

19. In Old West language, a "straw" is a straw boss—generally, the individual second in command on a ranch.

20. True. To "top" means to select the best animals in a herd and separate them from the rest of the herd.

By **ROD
PATTERSON**



A rider grabbed his gun
arm. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

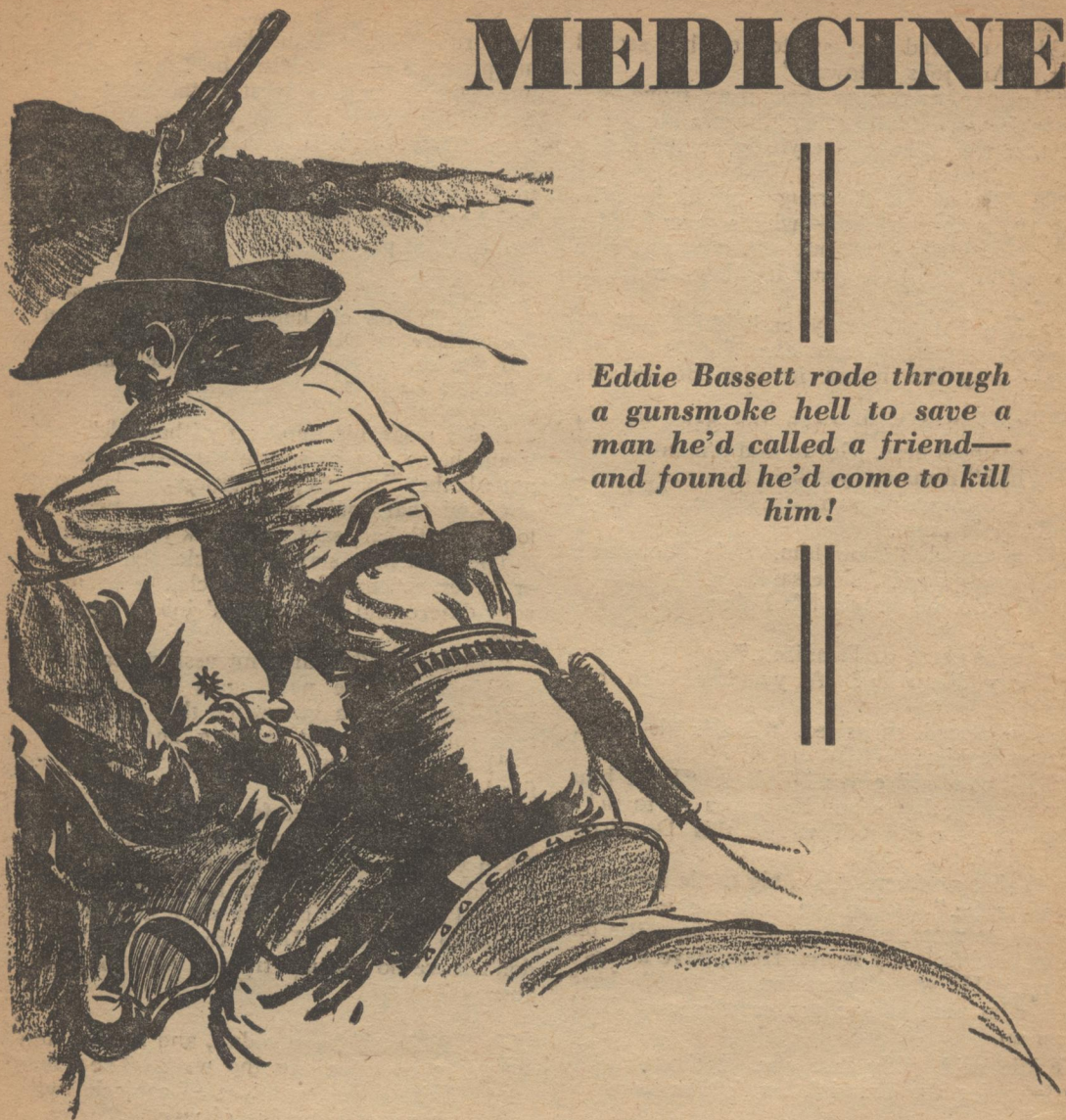
Kid for Glory

EDDIE BASSET rode his sorrel saddler down the main drag of Furnace Flats about five o'clock that Saturday afternoon in early May. As far as he could see—a hundred yards in either direction—the street was banked solid with white-topped wagons, buckboards, drays, saddle horses; and more people than he'd ever seen in one place milled over the red clay walks, jostling each other to get in and out of saloons and shops. To a young man fresh off the range it was un-

bearably hot in town; and the uproar of passing vehicles and shouting voices was a bit confusing after the silent solitude of the trail.

He rode slowly up the street and turned around, traveling back on the opposite side, looking for a space to tie his horse. He found one across from the big wood-frame hotel and got down, looping his reins to the crooked rail. His clothing, blue shirt and levis, leather vest and broad-brimmed hat bore the salt-white stain of his journey up from his home in

GUN-SHOT MEDICINE



*Eddie Bassett rode through
a gunsmoke hell to save a
man he'd called a friend—
and found he'd come to kill
him!*

the Fandolango Hills. Sweat and alkali caked his alert, good-humored face; and he had a thirst as big a desert drought.

So far, since leaving the home ranch, he had succeeded in impressing those he met that he was older than he was. And he did seem older, because he had that hard caninness, that confidence, associated with the dyed-in-the-wool, range-bred Westerner. In smaller towns along the Fandolango Trail, shouldering in among cowboys, mule-skinners, gamblers, dancehall girls, drinking beer—he touched nothing stronger—gave him the feeling of hard manhood, the outward manner of a tough trail hand.

In the Horsefly Saloon, next door to the

hotel, where he presently bellied up against the bar, he gave his usual order and said, "She sure is hot today!"

The barkeep nodded a balding head perfunctorily, drawing a stein of suds from a keg on the back-bar. The saloon was even more noisy than the street. Eddie had to make himself a hole in the line-up to get close enough to the polished mahogany to lift his glass.

A dark, heavy-set man standing on his left, blinked irritated eyes at him and said, "Who yuh pushin'?"

Eddie let him be and gulped his drink. He said to the bartender, "Some crowd in town. Looks like a boom's on."

The barkeep said laconically, "Stampede's

more like it. Damn' fool hoemen think it's Paradise!"

Eddie ordered and started on his second beer. "Any jobs in town?"

"You got any money—keep it an' move on," the barkeep advised. "Never seen a land rush yet that didn't leave everybody busted flat!"

THE dark-faced stranger prodded Eddie. "I'm Buff Bohan—what's your handle, younker?" He put out a hand and gripped Eddie's. He gave it a bone-crushing shake.

"Yuh got some ready cash, friend—" he threw a confidential arm over Eddie's shoulders—"why not invest it with Bohan and Pine?"

Eddie pulled back from the bar. "I got other business here. Got to find a man—"

"Who?" Bohan's eyes held his eyes as dark as shotgun muzzles on Eddie's face. "I know everbudy in town."

"You wouldn't know him. He's from down Fandolango way," Eddie said.

"Where's he stayin'?" Bohan asked insistently.

"People name of Dennison."

"Larry Flannery? A younker with red hair?"

Eddie stared, surprised. "That's his name. You know him?"

"Hell's bells!" crowed Bohan. "I see him nearly ev'ry day when he comes to town!"

"Then you can tell where this Dennison farm is."

"'Tain't no farm. It's a big cattle spread—or uster be." Bohan was staring at Eddie with more respect. "They don't run cattle on the Monadnock any more. Here, have a snort on me." He waved peremptorily to the barkeep who reached for the empties and filled them up.

Eddie said, "My last one. I thought I'd register for the drawin', long's I'm here in time."

"Don't be a rawhide fool," Buff Bohan scoffed, swiping foam off his stubbly chin with a dark-haired hand. "They's four-five thousand plowmen here and only two thousand claims. I got a proposition where you c'n make your pile easier."

"How?"

They had finished their drinks. Bohan nodded to the barkeep, grabbed Eddie by the arm and towed him toward the swinging doors. On the street, Bohan pointed proudly toward a high false front across the way that bore a big red-lettered sign:

BOHAN & PINE
Farm Sites
Water Rights
Supplies

Eddie had three hundred dollars in his jeans, his savings from working at the homestead ranch in the Fandolango Hills. Despite his practical conservatism he felt a surge of interest in Bohan's suggestion that easy money was to be made in this raw, wild frontier town. However, he'd come two hundred miles from home to aid a friend and he determined to finish one job before tackling another. He had Larry Flannery's letter in his pocket. It had read, in part:

... and I ain't been well since I left home. Figure it's the old lung trouble again. Been abed here at Denisons' for two weeks. . . if you could only come up and help me get back to the hills.

Eddie made his mind up without delay. It would be as easy as spittin' down-wind to find out whether Bohan's proposition was honest or not, and that could wait a day or two. He looked at Bohan, said, "I'll look you up later."

The dark man stared suspiciously. "Today or never, friend. It'll be a chance to invest your dinero and land a ridin' job at the same time."

"Ridin' job?" Eddie's interest increased.

"Me and Pine need good men that c'n ride—and shoot a gun when they have to. I seen you wearin' that hawgleg, and—"

"I don't ride gun for nobody," Eddie said firmly.

Bohan acted relieved for some reason. "You better come over and meet my pardner now. Then you c'n make up your mind."

Eddie considered that, said finally, "All right, I'll meet you in your store in an hour."

Bohan blinked. "Don't forget, then. And don't leave no sharper try and talk you outer your roll."

EDDIE said he wouldn't, and headed into the crowd along the walk. The Land Claim Office was located a block away and there was a long line of men and women on the street in front of it. Eddie reached the foot of this line, feeling a current of excitement in the gathering dust along the street like an electric tingling. He was now rubbing elbows with a different class than he'd found in the saloons and deadfalls on the trail from home. These people smelled of snuff and axle grease and sweat and sun-cured hay.

Two places forward from Eddie, a man in a big straw hat was saying to his neighbor, "I been in town two weeks and my money's almost gone. If I don't draw lucky, I'll have to hit the road ag'in."

The second man, a white-bearded giant said, "You kin git all the grub yuh need at Bohan and Pine's if yuh sign a quit-claim and deposit it with 'em."

"That's illegal," the man with the straw hat said indignantly. "You got to prove up on your land 'fore you c'n take title and transfer it."

The man with the white beard laughed. "Tell that to Bohan and Pine. They been gettin' their hooks on folks thataway ever since word got out the gov'ment was openin' this country up."

Eddie listened, impressed, but still feeling a promise was a promise. He'd meet Bohan as agreed.

The voices around him murmured on. One woman said, "Wish't I hadn't got John to come at all. Free land? Don't make me laugh! Did you see what Bohan and Pine are chargin' for grits and beans? Fifteen cents a pound! Land sakes, what's this country comin' to?"

Eddie left the line of a different mind than when he'd entered it. He had his three hundred and he guessed he would hang on to it. He turned and moved back toward the spot where his horse was tied before the Horsefly Saloon. He had his glimpse now of the tent city outside the town.

It was nearly dark, and lights stained the canvas shelters out there. The smoke of supper fires ribboned the dusty air with smells of frying food.

Loitering for a moment, he saw a girl on the gallery of a store across from him. She had just come through the door and stood swaying, her arms full of bundles. It was the quick way she looked at Eddie that made him mount the steps and lift the top bundles from her grasp. She was a straight, supple-shouldered girl, well-formed, and on the sun-dusted tint of her oval face a sudden lively interest ran, then was washed off by a sudden look of gravity.

"I'll help you, miss," he offered, leading the way down to the walk.

She said, "My rig's in front of the hotel over there."

They walked together up the crowded street. He asked, "Homesteadin'?"

"No. Ours is a ranch—on Lost Mile Creek."

They came to her buckboard and he loaded her bundles under the springless seat, afterward going to the rail, untying her broncs and tossing up the lines. She thanked him, smilingly now. Eddie stepped up on the walk, still facing her. And that was the moment the tall, flat-chested man came from nowhere and grabbed the girl by the arm, detaining her. A black hat cut a shadow across the upper part of his face; his mouth made a thin and bad-tempered line across his weather-toughened jaw.

Eddie watched the play of expression on the girl's face—the man was speaking out of

the edge of his mouth, but Eddie couldn't hear the words. The girl looked frightened.

Eddie saw her try to pull away and started to the buckboard, and now the man tipped his head until the street's first lights showed against his long, cadaverous face. The eyes were a faded, washed-out blue, and very cold.

Eddie tapped him on the shoulder. He was smiling as he said, "The lady's all right, friend. Move on."

The man in the black hat swung hard and stared at Eddie saying with an ugly violence, "You lookin' for trouble?"

He stopped, studied Eddie with care, then suddenly turned on his high, spurred heels and stalked away. Eddie touched his hat again. The girl was watching him with the deepest and most solemn attention, though she did not seem to want to speak. Then she backed her broncs out of the line-up and turned them down the street. She vanished in the ruck of wagons and people on the street.

Bohan and Pine's headquarters, when Eddie entered it a moment afterward, was a dim and cluttered building in which footfalls echoed as in a barn. It was filled with the hot and mingling smells of coffee, the sour of vinegar and dried fruits, the pungent tang of spice and tea, the odors of kerosene and hog lard and tanned leather.

From the rear came the muffled stomping of a dray team, and the guttural voice of a man swearing and wrenching with a pinch bar at the nails of a packing case. Eddie moved on through the store, past counters laden with merchandise, through the dim and smoky lights of chain-hung oil lamps turned down, and into the deeper gloom gathered at the rear behind fly-specked shelves. He saw a door and knocked on it.

It opened abruptly, and Buff Bohan stuck his darkly stubbled face through the opening. He said, "Well, come in, friend," and pulled aside to let Eddie pass.

CHAPTER TWO

Free Death

THE office was a square space partitioned off from the rest of the store. The three men inside were seated at a desk beneath another oil lamp with a green shade. One of them was tall and had on a black hat—and Eddie recognized the man who had detained the girl in the buckboard.

The other man was wire-thin, with bulging eyes and huge thick mouth. Under a big hat he resembled a frog squatting under a lily pad and the lampshade helped the likeness with its bilious green reflection on his face.

Bohan introduced the man in the black hat as his partner, Joe Pine, and the short hombre

as Ira Hasseltine. Eddie met Pine's narrow gaze uncomfortably and said, "Howdy, gents."

A look of animosity shone in Pine's eyes. "Hullo, Basset. I'm gladder to see you here than I was outside a while ago—but we'll forget it." Pine's eyes remained unblinkingly cold. "Buff, here, tells me you got some money and want to double it."

"My business depends on my seeing a friend of mine first."

"That Flannery that's stayin' out at Dennison's ranch?" Pine asked with a lift of blackish brows. He had removed his hat and his thinning hair was frosted at the temples. "Buff said he was your pard."

"That's him."

"He's out Lost Mile Creek a ways," Pine said. "But Flannery ain't able to be moved. He's that far gone."

"He is?" Eddie was violently alarmed. Then, stubbornly: "We'll see about that. Larry wants to go home and he'll make it. I know Larry."

"Sure, you do," said Pine with heavy irony. "And so do I."

Bohan said suddenly, "How's about what I told you, friend? We need good men like you—men that ain't afeered of callin' a spade a spade. Ready to chuck it in with us?"

"Not till I hear the whole proposition." When nobody answered, he turned and stalked out.

He couldn't make much out of the interview and went back to the Horsefly and asked the bald, bored bartender the way to Lost Mile Creek.

"Foller the trail west out of town," the man directed, a curious squint in his queer lackluster eyes. "Then turn right at the first fork. Can't miss 'er."

"Thanks." Eddie went out and found his horse, mounted it and rode up the street and out of town, leaving the racket and dust on his back trail.

This main road was full of traffic even at this hour of seven o'clock in the evening. Huge white-sheeted Conestogas lumbered toward him into town, ostensibly returning from inspection trips on the prairie where the claims had been staked out. Riders jogged by and a few buggies and carts. When he came to the fork and turned north, however, he saw no more horsemen or vehicles. This was a lonely trail in earnest.

The moon came up immensely over the mesquites and made it as light as day. Moving along at an easy lope, Eddie thought about Larry and was glad he would soon be seeing him. They had been brought up together on the same range and had always understood each other where their elders had not. Larry had had sense enough to light a shuck long ago. . . .

Some time after leaving the main trail, riding through the thickening brush, the sorrel shied suddenly, nearly unseating its rider. Eddie saw quick shadows closing in on him—horsemen appearing like ghosts out of the earth.

A voice snarled, "Halt, fella!"

A rider whose face he couldn't see came slamming at him from the right and grabbed his gun arm. Eddie had his hand on it and the weapon exploded thunderously. The spurt of fire, the report, and the pain in his wrist came all at once.

Another rider rammed in hard at him, swinging a leathern quirt. "Kill the fool!"

Eddie cut the bridle and tried to get clear. He lunged at a third rider and collided jarringly with horse and man. Something swished through the moonlight and struck his head. Light blossomed like a thousand moons in Eddie's brain and then was blanketed by darkness. . . .

WHEN he opened his eyes he saw the moon above the mesquites. He was stretched on the ground; there was grit in his mouth and the salty taste of blood, and he was thirsty. The blood came from a deep gash in his scalp.

Subsequent memories were incoherent, unreal. But one fact became burned into his brain. His money was gone, taken from his jeans while he had lain unconscious. He found his gun nearby in the dust, located the sorrel grazing in the *vega* not far off.

In the saddle, weak and ill, he rode blindly into the chaparral, following a dim trail seen but vaguely and sometimes not at all. After what seemed hours of riding, he saw a glimmer through the mesquites that didn't come from the moon. He rode toward it, staringly, presently turning into an angling road with a low, rambling house at the end of it in a grove of bare-limbed cottonwoods.

Halting, he called, "Hullo the house!"

A door opened with a creak of dry hinges and a woman's throaty voice queried, "Who's there?"

"Eddie Basset," he was able to answer. "Missed my trail. Lookin' for Dennisons' ranch."

"You're on it," the woman called back; and now he saw the girl he had seen in town coming forward through the mottled moonlight and shadows under the trees.

She hurried up to help him as he slid to the ground. Her arm about him was as compelling as it was gentle. They entered the lamplit house. An older woman with a lined, weary face and eyes like Kathy's got up from a chair, gasping.

"Bring hot water, mother," the girl told her, "and some bandages."

A man's voice came from deeper in the house: "Kathy!"

It was Larry Flannery's, and Eddie felt a surge of quick relief. The girl made him lie down on the horsehair sofa while she moved off down the hallway with a swish of skirts. He heard her voice talking to Larry then.

Mrs. Dennison came back with a pan of hot water and bent over him, commiseratively. He sat up, saying, "I'll do it, ma'am. I'm all right."

He had bathed his face and the cut in his scalp when Kathy returned. "Why didn't you tell me you were Larry's best friend?" she asked. "He says he's been expecting you."

"I'll go in, miss." Eddie got up and she led him down the hallway, and then he stood looking down at the man who lay so still under a patchwork quilt, his shock of red hair like a flame against the pillow of the big four-poster bed.

Larry opened blue eyes and smiled, reaching a freckled hand out from under the quilt. Eddie gripped it, a tightness in his throat. "How you feelin', kid? I come soon's I could get away."

"Feel better," Larry murmured, "now you've got here. How's everything down home?"

"Good. Your father's doin' all right and he's got two men helpin' him now." Eddie said anxiously then, "You able to ride?"

"Maybe in a week or two."

Eddie thought of his stolen money. "But I can't stay that long, pard. I—lost what money I had, and—"

"You can stay here," Larry said, his blue eyes very bright. "Can't he, Kathy?"

"Of course," Kathy answered, "providing he doesn't mind taking potluck with us. We've had bad luck, too, lately."

"Well, thanks," Eddie said, still troubled. "But I'll make out in town, if I have to. Get a job for a week or so."

Kathy filled a tin cup from a pitcher on the bedside table. She turned and slid her hand beneath Larry's red head and boosted him upright for his drink. Eddie thought, *She's gone on him, all right!*

Larry finished his drink and sank back. He looked at Eddie. "What happened to your head, fella?"

Eddie grinned. "My horse threw a shoe and fell."

"He's got to rest." Kathy tapped Eddie on the arm.

He rose from the edge of the bed and followed her out.

Back in the living room she told him, "He's very ill—it seems to be his lungs. He should have a doctor, but won't let me bring one from town."

"I'll take care of him," Eddie repeated.

Then, "How'd he come to be here this way?"

"Larry stopped for supper one night," she told him frankly, disturbingly pretty with her dark eyes and nimbus of red-gold hair. "We needed a man, and asked him to stay for his room and board."

"What'd Joe Pine want with you in town?" he asked bluntly.

Mother Dennison, who had just rustled into the room with teapot and cups, broke in, "Why, Kathy, you never told me Joe Pine stopped you in town again!"

"I'm used to it, mother," the girl said simply. "And I'd much rather meet him there than have that crowd tramping all over the ranch." She looked at Eddie seriously. "You see, when my father died two years ago and left us nothing but the house and range we had a hard time just managing to live. Then came this land rush and the government opening up the Monadnock."

"Then Pine and Bohan want this place," Eddie asked in a more intense tone, "to cut up into homestead plots?"

"I think so. You see, rustlers got what was left of our stock right after father died. Pine was nice to us at first, trusted us for food and supplies for almost a year. It was only a month ago that he and Bohan started hounding me for the money or the deed."

Mother Dennison poured the tea with a trembling hand. "I think," she said sadly, "we ought to take Larry's advice and let them take the ranch. We could start again somewhere—"

"Larry said that?" Eddie was staring now.

Kathy nodded gravely. "Probably he's right. We've registered in the land drawing in town. If we are allotted a section or even a quarter—"

THEN there was the soft sound of Mrs. Dennison's muffled whimpering. Eddie got up and reached for his hat. He felt these people's troubles crowding him—and he had some of his own. He wanted to think things out alone. Promising to be back tomorrow he headed for town.

An hour later, after a grim and thoughtful ride, he headed down the main drag toward the small wooden building he had seen that afternoon with the sign, SHERIFF, on its small gray door.

He racked his sorrel and entered the single room which served as the office for George V. Dilley, a gaunt and hard-faced man in his fifties whom Eddie had seen policing the crowd before the land office that afternoon.

He came first to a pair of hob-nailed boots propped up on a desk with Dilley's dour face showing behind them where he leaned far back in his armchair. Eddie saw with a faint start another man in a chair against the

wall. It was Ira Hasseltine, Joe Pine's man. "What you want?" Sheriff Dilley growled, not stirring in his chair.

Eddie ignored Hasseltine who went on chewing his cud with bovine placidness, looking at nothing much. He said to Dilley, "I got jumped on the trail to Lost Mile Creek." Then he gave details, time, everything he remembered about it, ending with, "I want some action. I need that three hundred and mean to get it back or make some trouble in this town!"

A pale flame leaped into Dilley's blank eyes, "I don't skeer good, young feller. But I'll see what I can do."

Eddie left. The lights from saloons and dancehalls fell on the dusty street which was still banked solid with saddle ponies and rigs, still filed with the constant movement of crowds looking for food and drink and entertainment.

Inside the Horsefly, where Eddie went immediately, the crowd had grown larger. A duet of banjos was whanging out a two-step from a raised platform in the rear, and girls in flaming taffeta gowns were whirling like dervishes with male patrons.

When Eddie came in through the swing doors, there was a stir at the nearest table against the wall; and two big hats, one black, turned toward him quickly. The faces beneath those broad brims belonged to Joe Pine and Buff Bohan.

"Howdy, kid," Pine said with an affable quirk of his thin mouth, kicking a third chair from under the table. "Set in here, and name it."

Eddie eyed both men impartially, a bleak look on his face. He accepted the invitation after a moment's hesitation, squatting on the edge of the chair. "I'll have beer," he murmured. "But I can't come back—I'm flat."

The shadow of a sneer touched Pine's hard eyes. Bohan looked pleased. "Dinero," Pine said, "sure lasts quick in this man's burg! But you come to the right man to make some more. That job's still open, kid."

They all drank before Eddie answered. He wiped the tail of his beer off his mouth, saying finally, "I'll take it. Providin'."

"Providin' what?" Pine wanted to know.

"I don't ride gun and no stealin' from women."

"Why, kid," Pine said in mock distress, "you talk like this was the owlhoot you was jinin' up!"

Eddie stared at him, disgusted with himself and the world. "Never mind. Lead out and play 'em off the top."

"I'll do the talkin'," Pine said. "Remember that gal you saw me talkin' to this afternoon?" he asked Eddie. "Her name's Kathy Dennison. She and her old lady own a ranch 'bout ten

mile outa town. Your first chore's to ride out there and make friends with 'em. Tomorrow'll do all right."

"I already been there," Eddie said.

"I know it," Pine replied, then added hastily, "One of my boys was talkin' to the barkeep at the Horsefly."

Eddie watched the tall man over the rim of his glass. "Uh-huh?" It had a casual sound, but the pupils of his eyes grew small. He had the sudden conviction that his three hundred dollars lay in Pine's pocket right now. "What else?" he said in the same unhurried tone.

"That Flannery hombre's stayin' there," Pine said, "and that's good because he'll be a good reason for you hornin' in. Him bein' your pard, and all."

"And?" Eddie said, putting down his glass.

"Work on the gal and make her see she oughta quit buckin' me and turn over the deed to the spread without a fight."

Eddie smiled thinly. "I'm a-ra-rin' right up on my hind legs to ask you why."

Pine scowled, but answered. "I aim to take the ranch over and stake it out for homestead sites. There's a fortune to be made."

"In the middle of a rush for gov'ment land?"

Pine's eyelids crawled down. "Listen, kid, after what's goin' to happen tonight, you'll see why. That's all I tell you now—" He paused as a hand fell on Eddie's shoulder.

He had a glimpse of a buckskin sleeve, long freckled fingers with blunt nails. A voice as familiar as his own said, "Rise up, ol' son, and give your paw to the durnedest liar ever drewed a breath!"

Eddie lunged to his feet into a great bear hug and the smell of whisky against Larry Flannery's broad chest. Larry's blue eyes stared into his at close range. They were bloodshot now. "Gents," the redhead turned and said to Pine and Bohan, "here you see a genuine, smoke-tanned, hand-wove ol'-timer from down on Fandolango Range! Shake hands with my pard and we'll have a drink!"

Eddie stepped back and, with a quick thrust, shoved Larry away from him. He was white about the mouth.

"You double-crossin'—"

Larry made a grimace and jerked his elbows up as though he had been smeared in the face by fire. Then he dropped them, laughing, pleading, "Easy, kid! Take it easy! I am sick! Just rode in to get some medicine!"

"Yah!" Eddie spat out. "I smell it! Medicine? I'll give you some—gunshot medicine!"

There was a brief scuffle then, and Eddie was rushed out through the swing door, out of the suddenly silent and staring crowd.

On the street Pine jerked him by the shoulder. "You big-mouth fool! Want the whole town hep to us?"

CHAPTER THREE

Coyote Strain

EDDIE felt surrounded, beaten. Before he could do more than faintly protest, he was seized by both elbows and rushed through the crowds on the walk toward the store of Bohan and Pine. Then they were on the gallery. The door was unlocked, and they took him into the darkened interior. Moving down between the counters, Eddie had the feeling of other eyes on him; he saw the vague dark faces of men back in the shadows.

He knew then that this store, by night, was the hangout of Joe Pine's gang. Another door opened. A match exploded. A lampwick sputtered and yellow light sprayed suddenly into the far, dim corners of the room.

This was Pine's private office. The shutters had been drawn and hooked. Buff Bohan took a post behind the desk. Pine stood in front of it. Larry was at Eddie's side, a jumpiness on his lean and freckled face.

They stared at him where he stood with his arms as stiff as pokers beside him. Larry's face was cynical, twisted around the mouth with his sideways grin. Pine's long face was gray with rage; and Bohan's stubbled one held open scorn.

"Now," Pine snarled, "you can holler your fool head off!"

But some of the fire had gone out of Eddie. His bandaged head, under his tight hat brim, began to ache. He stared at Larry, still beligerent, but calmer now.

"Why'd you write them lies, Larry? That's all I wanta know."

Larry made a pushing gesture with both hands. He still grinned, but his eyes weren't steady; they wavered and fell away. "Hell, Ed, I didn't mean no harm! We was pards, is all. I seen a chance to clean up big and we needed men. I knowed you wouldn't come if I wrote it down in words. I had to talk to you."

"You lied to her—to Kathy," Eddie went on relentlessly. "You let her wait on you while you figgered up a way to hornswaggle her and her mother—"

"That's enough," Pine broke in. He moved over and sat down in his chair before the flat-topped desk, crossing one chap-clad knee over the other and leaning back. He speared Larry with his bitter stare. "Tell me," he began in a slow, sarcastic tone, "what makes your pard think I'm so bad to work for? What give him that idea?"

"Blamed if I know," sighed the redhead, still avoiding Eddie's staring look, and not looking at Pine or Bohan either. "Unless he's been hearin' some of them sore-head grangers bellyache."

"Oh," Pine sighed in mock despair, "that's bad! That's very bad! After the way I been trustin' them jaspers, feedin' 'em good grub, keepin' 'em alive free gratis! Ain't nobody got no gratitude?"

Eddie kept silent, hating Pine, hating Bohan, hating Larry worst of all.

Larry asked, "What's the matter, kid? You yella? This is your chance to make a pile! Come on, be a sport!"

"A tinhorn, you mean!" Eddie flared around at him. "When you wrote and said you needed help, I dropped everything and rode up here! To a dirty, lowdown crooked—"

"I'll take that from you, Ed," Larry said, flushing to the edges of his hair. "Go ahead and poke me up some more! I take it from you!"

"This ain't no game for the likes of you," Eddie said with a rush. "Forget the easy money! Think about your old man back there alone. Think what—"

Pine stopped him, making clucking sounds with his tongue and teeth. He was staring, an ominous gleam in his cold eyes. "Maybe," he said slowly, distinctly, "we oughta teach him a lesson. He makes a noise like a wind blowin' down the road!"

Eddie looked at Pine, his own eyes intense and full of smoky flame. "You rotten thief!" he blurted out. "It was your crowd jumped me on the trail! I oughta put a bullet in your rotten hide!"

Pine threw his hands up in helpless gesture and Eddie lunged at him, knocking him backward into his chair, grabbing with both hands for the tall man's throat and choking him where he sat and thrashed.

He fought off Larry. Boots whacked the floor and surged into the office from the store. Fists and gun butts began clubbing him about the head. The bandage slipped down over his eyes, blinding him. A gun barrel hit him squarely on the gash in his scalp. He fell writhing to the floor. The men kept kicking at him with their heavy boots for quite a while after Larry began yelling at them to quit.

"Lay off him!" Larry hollered frantically. "Can't you see he's had enough?"

Then Joe Pine growled, "Leave him here to cool off now. Come on, we got some work to do."

EDDIE lay where he was for a long time after they all went out. At last, painfully, gaspingly, he got up and sat in Pine's chair and held his head. For some reason he didn't seem to mind the pain, for a greater agony was in his heart.

He thought dully of Kathy and her mother, but somehow he had lost interest in their welfare, their safety, even. He had been drained of all emotion except bitterness—bitterness to—

ward the man he had called friend and who had betrayed him.

Sunk though he was in apathy, Eddie began to hear sounds in the street outside—faintly at first, then more clearly as moments passed. Men were shouting excitedly. Boots went kicking over the hard-packed walks. Doors banged. Dogs barked—

He made his way out swayingly and the fresh air cleared his head. He stood on the store's porch, hanging to one of the gallery posts, staring streetward.

A few scattered lights showed in saloons behind their cob-webbed windows. The silence which had held the town until a moment ago now had been blasted. Yelling went up to a roaring sound like a waterfall. Figures of running men were visible in the shadows. There was a big crowd down the street near the land claim office.

A man's voice nearby yelled its dire news along the street: "They busted in and took the registration books! Land drawin's shot to hell!"

Eddie went down and walked up the street, cold sweat on his forehead and upper lip. It had been bad before—now it was worse. Now a thousand helpless settlers were involved. This could mean ruin, starvation, to a thousand more!

Eddie's sorrel stood at the rack before the sheriff's shack at the end of the street. To reach it, Eddie had to skirt the milling crowd and travel behind two stores. Emerging from an alleyway, he came to the horse, loosened the reins from the rail, threw them over the horse's head and mounted, clinging weakly to the saddle horn.

The door of the sheriff's office opened. Two men came out. George Dilley and Ira Hasseltine. The sheriff had a rifle in his hands. "Hey!" He challenged Eddie. "I see you come out of there just now! What you up to, hombre?"

Eddie ignored him. He took his gaze away, whipped the horse around and sent it sloping for the trail.

Now all the pieces had fallen into place. He knew the reason in back of Joe Pine's scheme for seizing the Dennison ranch. And Pine had started it rolling by stealing the records of the land agent, thereby throwing the land drawing into hopeless confusion, causing a delay in the whole proceedings for at least two weeks, until all the settlers had filed and sworn their intentions in again.

And tomorrow, Eddie was convinced, Pine and Bohan would pre-empt Kathy's spread and all its rolling range. Stakes would sprout up on that range like a crop of spring flowers, to mark the boundaries of prospective farms. There would be an auction. The prices would be high. First come first served. Better to buy

land than gamble on winning a pig in a poke. . . .

The moon rode high in a cloudless sky when Eddie loped slowly through the brush, up the lane, and into the yard of the Dennison ranch. The house, the outbuildings, the corrals, made hardly any shadow; and his own, when he got down and walked toward the gallery, was only a drifting spot beneath his boots.

There was a single point of light in the house. He guessed it came from Kathy's room in the el. On the gallery, he rapped softly a few times, then settled down to wait, feeling a bit better, clearer-minded anyway.

Footsteps tapped behind the door. Kathy said, wonderingly, fearfully: "Who is it, please?"

"Eddie." He took off his hat and was standing there when she opened the door to let him in. "Sorry to bother you so late."

"Is something wrong?" She asked this in a low, strained tone as she led the way into the setting room and lit a lamp. "I heard you coming, and—"

He faced her in the soft lamplight, his eyes quite steady on her anxious face. She wore a loose-flowing dressing gown, and held it tightly across her throat and waist. Her hair was beautiful, red-gold, coiled high about her fine-shaped head.

"You look so—so grim," she finished faintly.

Eddie tried to smile. "I got something to tell you that couldn't wait." He paused, unable to do what he'd come to do: tell her that Larry was a liar and a thief. He coughed, went on lamely, "Is Larry asleep?"

She nodded. "He should be. I'll go and see."

Triumph tasted like ashes in his mouth. But this was the easy way. Let her find it out herself. He waited nervously while Kathy left him, moving silently down the long hallway. Then he heard something that froze him stiff. It was Larry's drawling voice, saying sleepily, "All right, but you c'n get me a drink, if you don't mind."

Cold fury gripped Eddie. *He beat me here! The dirty sneak rode back ahead of me!*

Then Kathy came into the room, her eyes so big and dark they looked almost larger than her face. "He's all right, Eddie—" She stopped, staring, frightened. "Why, what's the matter now?"

He swallowed, trying to find the right words, failing. Standing that way, dumb and staring, he heard the quick drive of hoofs in the yard outside. The sound grew louder, then a cold and steady voice called out: "Wake up, in there! I'm after Eddie Basset! And I want him right away!"

It was Sheriff Dilley's voice! There was a silence, during which Eddie and Kathy met each other's eyes, mute helplessness in the girl's. Then Dilley's boots hit the gallery and

his voice came in: "Come out, Basset! With your hands up! I want you for stealin' Government propety!"

EDDIE'S teeth came together. Anger, recklessness, ran through him as he heard the sheriff's words. He looked at Kathy, pale and startled as she met his eyes. "I got to go," he said flatly, harshly. "I been double-crossed!"

Speechless, she made a quick reaching gesture toward him. "I'll come back," he said. "Tell Larry I'll be back!"

A door opened at the end of the hallway as though wind had blown it.

Kathy caught her breath sharply, and shrank against Eddie. He found her hand and pressed it, facing the hall's arched opening, a hand dropped toward his gun.

Then Larry stood there before them, tall and flashing-eyed. He was dressed, even to boots and spurs, his faded buckskin jumper buttoned to his chin. Now he moved into the room, walking stiff-legged and cautious—walking as a cat might when scenting danger. There was a Colt revolver in his hand.

Then came the sound of more hoofbeats in the chaparral, the massive crackle of brush breaking, the clink of horseshoes biting stone. Eddie heard the voices at the same time, swift, peremptory, menacing.

Larry pinned his blue gaze on Eddie's immobile face.

"Shag it, Ed! That's Pine out there! They'll kill you if they find you here!"

"Since when," sneered Eddie, "have you been worryin' about my hide?"

A flush burned Larry's freckle-dusted face. "Go out through the winder in my room," he ordered in an obdurate, angry voice. "Go on, you fool!"

Eddie's answer to that was to pull his gun and cock the hammer with a heavy oily click. "To hell with you!" he said and faced the gallery door.

Larry's voice cracked in desperation. "Get out of here! I'll hold 'em here till you clear the yard! There's horses in the brush!"

More booted men were on the gallery. Joe Pine bawled, "Dilley, cover the rear! I'll take over now!"

And that was Pine's pistol butt hammering at the front door. "Open up, in there! Open up, or we'll bust 'er down!"

The banging continued. A movement in the hallway made both Eddie and Larry turn to stare. Mother Dennison in her nightgown and a ribboned cap appeared to them, carrying a lighted lamp.

"Mother!" Kathy gasped. "Go back—put out that lamp!"

Then Buff Bohan chanted from the porch: "We want Basset! Open up this door!"

Kathy called clearly: "He's not here! Go away and leave us alone!"

"You're a liar, sister!" Bohan's voice jarred back. "We found his hoss! Open up or we'll start breakin' this damned door!"

Eddie stepped to the table and the low-turned lamp. He clapped a palm over the chimney, snuffing out the light. Darkness cracked down on the room, gradually lightening as moonlight made bright, barred patterns of the windows on the floor. "If I get out of this," Eddie breathed. "I'll go back home and stay there for a hundred years! That's one good thing you done for me!"

Larry only grunted out an oath and moved against the door.

"Eddie," Kathy begged, "this isn't your fight!"

"I'm makin' it mine!"

They all heard the splintering crash of a window pane; the glass fell on the floor somewhere toward the rear of the house. Larry glided to the hallway arch, paused there, looking at Eddie and the girl, his mouth a long tight line, danger a feline brightness in his eyes. Then he whirled and disappeared. They heard his boots fade softly through the hall.

Eddie moved to one of the two windows, bringing the barrel of his weapon up preparedly, alternately watching the moonlit yard and the gallery door.

"Get back," he warned Kathy. "Behind the sofa! Run!"

The girl obeyed without comment. Then the house shook under the blow of a fence post used as a battering ram. Eddie never moved from his post, the gun in his upraised hand.

An alarm was sounded at the side of the house. Boots ran by under the windows; the crowns of two big hats flashed past. The next blow of the fence post against the door jarred a handful of plaster down from the ceiling. It fell with a dry clatter. Dust puffed across the room.

Then came the quick beat of hoofs in the yard, a shot, a yell of pain. Another voice—Joe Pine's—went up: "He got away! By God, I told you to watch the rear!"

There was a louder stampede of horses out there, the creak and clink of saddle gear, the curses of mounting men. Then came the rush of hoofs as a party left the yard at a breakneck run.

Eddie drew a breath. "Larry's lit a shuck!" "No!" It was Kathy's quick, protesting cry. "He did it to draw them off! Oh, Eddie, I know he did!"

Distant gunfire drifted down the wind, faint yelling came quickly after that. Angered unaccountably by Kathy's defense of Larry, Eddie started to fling a scornful answer back, but never spoke. For the battering ram was at work again. The panels of the door split

with the blows and streaky moonlight glinted through from the gallery.

The post struck again, and again. With the fourth crash on the door, the portal broke loose from the iron hinges and whacked down to the floor.

THREE men came stumbling in, dropping the post and confronting the shock of a tall man with a pistol held in front of him. There was only moonlight in the room, coming through the windows and the broken door, but Eddie saw those faces, long and lean and dark. And one belonged to Buff Bohan!

Eddie said, "Unbuckle 'em and let 'em fall! One tricky move and I'll kill you."

Bohan stood nearest to Eddie. It was his gunbelt that struck the floor first. The other two came afterward, thudding sounds like crow bars falling.

Bohan had the nerve to speak when he got his breath. "Friend, you wouldn't shoot your turkey cold! Don't chuck a bluff like that!"

"I'll show you whether it's a bluff," Eddie said and pulled the trigger once. The thunder of the shot left a deafened silence after it. But Bohan danced up on his toes, yelping fearfully, "Aw right—aw right—"

His two companions clawed anxiously toward the ceiling overhead.

"Who was the hombre got away?" the dark man whined.

"Find out for yourself. Now, turn around and start movin'."

"What you goin' to do with us? What—"

"Git!" Eddie prodded Bohan with the barrel of his gun. Outside they found a fourth man under the cottonwoods, nursing a shoulder and groaning. It was the man Larry had winged in his getaway.

The three men joined the wounded man, helped him up on a horse. They melted into the shadows by the barn. Bohan yelled back harshly: "Aw right—we'll see! We'll see!"

Kathy stood on the gallery at Eddie's side, her hand gripping his arm desperately. "We can't stay here. Pine may come back with the others!"

Eddie looked at her, seeming gaunt, grimly older, a little tired. "Get your mother dressed," he said. "We'll leave and come back later."

They both had turned to enter the house when it happened. There was a sudden massed rush of horsemen coming seemingly from nowhere; one moment the yard was deserted in the moonlight, the next it was swarming with riders. Guns banged across the dust and bullets clipped the gallery boards.

Eddie's movements thereafter were violent. He shoved Kathy through the door, wheeled and jumped to the railing, gun lifted and bucking suddenly in his fist. Pine's men came boiling into the yard from two directions and the

echoes of all that firing ran on past the house and rolled thunderously back to the surrounding hills.

Eddie knew grimly that Larry had run the gauntlet and had made his getaway. He was surprised to feel relief, and angry, too. He fired at a rider and saw the man go into a headspin and land like a sack on the ground.

The pressure of Pine's men grew greater in the yard and behind the house. He saw them, heard them, everywhere at once, a merry-go-round of blazing death. Bullets whacked the wall in back of him; he dropped to one knee, holding fast to a porch post and firing past it at all those weaving shapes.

It was telescoped confusion, whirling smoke and dust and drumming hoofs. A bullet seared his cheek and left a welt of blood. Somewhere he heard Mother Dennison's horror-stricken shriek. . . .

Then Eddie saw a spurt of muzzle flame in the brush across the yard from him. Whoever was holed up over there was patiently blazing away at Pine and his men and getting good results. Another horse and rider hit the dust. Larry Flannery?

Hunkered on the rough floor boards, with moonlight in his eyes, Eddie fired, reloaded, and fired again. He saw Joe Pine's high-riding form before him, not a hundred feet away. Pine was wheeling his big dun to charge the gallery when Eddie snapped a shot at him.

For one brief tick of time Pine made a looming target on his horse. Eddie's first shot missed—his second, aimed for the top of Pine's black vest, went home. There was the backlash of Eddie's gun, the report; then he saw Joe Pine go down off his saddle as though yanked down by a rope around his waist.

The noise increased. Other, strange riders were streaming up the lane and pouring through the hemming brush. New yells broke over the sounds of gunfire in the yard. Eddie saw these new arrivals with a kind of stunned disbelief: men on ponies, long-eared jacks, on Percherons; long lean men in straw hats and flapping overalls. The sound of their guns merged in one long cannonading roar.

Eddie came to his feet, yelling like a crazy man. For these were the grangers, the hard-tail farmers from Furnace Flats and the tent city! There were fifty men at least, and more were riding hell for leather up the lane!

Suddenly all the firing quit. Dust came like a solid, drifting storm cloud in the yard. It was like war—like the end of a battle with the victors storming a citadel wave on wave then standing fast.

THE throng of riders had swept on through, all but a few who scrambled down to identify and remove the dead. The smell of powder smoke and dust clung

to the yard long after the posse had gone on the trail of Joe Pine's now stampeding gang.

Two horsemen pulled up in front of Eddie on the gallery. One was Larry Flannery, a sheepish grin on his freckled countenance, an apology on his lips. The second rider wore a tight-lipped smile, tall in the saddle, a bronze star glinting on his coat.

Larry blinked blue eyes and said, "This here's Sam Spangler, Ed. U. S. Marshal from Panamint. Ed Basset, Marshal, the man I was tellin' you about, the Fandolango Kid."

"Howdy, kid," the Marshal said, the smile wiped off his saddle-leather face. "Nice goin', I'm bound to say. I'm a day late gettin' here and I can thank you and Flannery for holdin' the fort for me. Thanks and I'll see you get your split of the price on Joe Pine's head."

Eddie could only stare in wonderment, hearing but not believing any of it. He wiped a streak of blood off his chin with the hand holding his still-hot gun. He looked at Larry then, demanding in an almost sullen tone: "Lay off the fancy-dancin' now, and give it to me straight, without no curlycues!"

The badgering grin came back to Larry's face. "You always was a cuss for wantin' to know the whys and wheres and mebbenots." He laughed. "That's why I wrote them lies to you—about me bein' sick. I been workin' for the Marshal here, and I needed help and didn't know where to get one I could ride the river with."

Eddie remained a lean and truculent figure on the gallery. But the muscles along his jaw were smoothing out. "All right, but cut the deck a little deeper now, and give me all of it."

"Bohan and Pine," Larry continued quietly, "are wanted in two states for swindlin' and other crimes that'd choke a hawss." He glanced toward a still form two farmers were bearing toward the barn. "That's Pine, there, dead. The brains of the outfit, but he got in a hurry. That was one reason I couldn't tip you off about the deal. Was afraid he'd smell skunk and hunt it down!"

Kathy came slowly out to the gallery, color in her cheeks, brightness in her eyes. Eddie said to her, "You was right—a little bit—

about this punk. He ain't all bad—not all. Just the same I'm a-goin' to bust him one for luck!"

They all laughed, and Larry made that habitual pushing gesture with both hands. "Hold on, ol' son! I've had my medicine! Now what I need is a good stiff drink!"

Kathy smiled at him. "You can have it if you and the Marshal will get down and come inside."

"Thanks," said Larry. "And I'm plumb sorry I had to fool you, Kath."

"You didn't," Kathy said primly. "I've known you weren't ill for a long time now."

Larry stared, mouth open. "You have?"

"Ever since you started stealing out at night," she said with a chiding smile. "And when I found your deputy marshal's badge—"

EDDIE stood alone with Kathy on the gallery later on that night. She was very grave, almost sad, Eddie thought as he looked at her. They were close together in the moonlight, close enough for him to smell the faint perfume of her hair. Her breathing was strong and slow, as rhythmic as time itself. She said, "And now you'll be going home, and there's nothing—no way I can repay you what you've done for me."

He had removed his hat from his bandaged head. His shoulder brushed hers, broke clear, then touched again. Her breathing quickened audibly. But Eddie had a will, a stubborn streak, beneath his recklessness; and now she saw that will bite deeply into his desire to fold her in his arms.


He said, "I'll take my pay—in my own way. In my own time."

"Yes?" She turned her face away from, waiting.

They were facing the chaparral and the prairie out beyond, the plain where white-topped wagons and faded tents would soon be stationed on the land of a thousand farms.

"This is cow country," Eddie said. "Nearly as good as Fandolango Range. This ranch of yours is good—it's big. It can be made to pay again." He looked around at her and smiled. "I think," he drawled, "I'll hang my saddle up and stay a while!"





"I—I never met a man who
could fight like he could!"

YOU CAN'T STOP A GOLD RUSH!

By MICHAEL OBLINGER

*It's easy living—and hard, slow dying—down a trail
where gold lies waiting!*

IT ALL began when a lone prospector with a rough-chiseled face and long hair on his neck walked over the Lazy Time spread, hoping to reach the hills before dark. Four times—following his nose in a westerly direction—he had to cross Dry Creek, which ran crazy and crooked through Hugo March's two thousand acre ranch. At the fourth crossing the prospector, whose name was Job Piny, could see off to his right a sizeable scattering of buildings and corrals. He could also see a lot of signs of life and pressing business. Cowhands were cutting into a herd of ponies for fresh mounts. Some of the boys were lugging out gear, and in one place a pair of saddle-bowed legs, too old to stand the gaff, trudged up to a chuck-wagon being loaded hurriedly for departure to the southern limits of Lazy Time Range.

One crew would be taking a herd of yearling steers to those limits pretty quick, and the wagon would roll after them, and the man who had the too-old saddle-bowed legs would have to stay behind, choring. But though his legs had got kind of wobbly in the joints, and he couldn't ride any more, he had a pair of the sharpest gray eyes on record.

Old Pop Ranson, Hugo March often said, could see a fly buzzing a mile off. He could see better than any man in the outfit. Though his legs were old, his eyes were young. They were quick as a gunman on the draw. Pop saw everything, near and far. Now, standing close to the chuck-wagon's rear left wheel, he suddenly picked up Job Piny, a good half mile away. Piny was making his fourth crossing of Dry Creek, sliding along like an Indian over a smooth portage, when, unexpectedly and to the amazement of Pop, he jerked to a stop, threw down his packload and grabbed up a pick.

Pop Ranson grunted. What in tarnation did that lanky, loose-jointed bucko think he was doing? Then he grinned. He knew something about prospectors and they sure were an odd lot. A prospector got so accustomed looking for gold it became an obsession. He would even look where he knew it couldn't be; he would look anyway. Finally, a prospector, if he stayed at it long enough, could dream up a bonanza on a bald prairie or in a busy village street.

Gold was always where you didn't expect to find it, so that's where he looked.

Silently and amusedly, Pop watched Job Piny pick and putter in the very dry bottom of Dry Creek. The dang fool was getting some speed on him now. He hopped down the creek and came back. He went up a piece and fell on his knees, grubbing in the sand. He rose and stood silent, straight as a planted tree.

Even at that distance, old Pop Ranson

could see the strange excitement, the tension, in the man.

The feller must believe he'd discovered something so big it just couldn't be believed. He was shocked to the point he couldn't move. He hadn't moved one step. His arms hung stiff as gnarled sticks. The sun spilled over him, making shadows under the broad-brimmed, shapeless hat. Pop was beginning to wonder if maybe the crazy cuss didn't actually intend to take root there for good, when his attention was drawn to Sam Gruber fetching up a team to the chuck-wagon. The nigh hoss straddled the pole. Sam was in a hurry.

"Come here, Pop, an' hook some o' these tugs," he called in a low voice, nervously. "Hugo's busting out his pants."

Pop went to help him, breathing the dust from the yard. There was always this last-minute rush. Yelling and cussing, the boys were mounting and saddling. Big Hugo's ringing voice sounded louder than the others, but even his was drowned momentarily in the bawling and rushing of yearlings, the crackling of long bull-whips.

As the racket subsided, Sam Gruber nodded his thanks to Pop. "We're taking the first lot, three hundred head. Hugo's sending down the next batch tomorrow. There's a letter in my bunk I didn't have time to mail."

"I'll attend to it," Pop said.

HUGO came over, sweating hot. His tan shirt, open at the front, showed the cords of his swelling neck. His eyes looked like dark plum pits. They were the kind that changed color in different lights or moods. They could be black if he was mad enough or, when he was pleased, almost gray. Pop could tell by their present color Hugo was just on the verge of blowing up. All the morning, he had been holding himself in, blocking his temper, trying to see that things went right. He had a lot on his mind he'd like to get off. Being top-kick of this outfit, Pop reflected, was no easy job. In this section of British Columbia, one couldn't find a harder, tougher crew than the Lazy Time hands. Hugo hired 'em for that very reason. A fighting man himself, he couldn't be bothered with a bunch of sissy-pants; it just wasn't in his nature. He admired a man who would stick out his jaw, as he did himself, and blast the first guy who crossed him. Considering the warlike qualities of Hugo and his hired hands, it was remarkable, Pop considered, how well they behaved usually. But this morning there had been a couple of clashes. Foley and Tucker had rowed over a horse, each claiming it. Then Bent and Williams had tangled for no apparent reason at all. Hugo had wanted to mix in both scraps but the rush of work had prevented. Now he was peeved at every one, in

the false belief there was a conspiracy afoot to slow down operations on the ranch.

Striding past Pop, he bawled at Sam Gruber, "Get that danged chuck-wagon rolling, you square-headed coot. Snap it up!"

Gruber threw down the reins. When he turned toward Hugo, his face was black.

"Do your own rolling, you loose-tempered, overgrown baboon! I've quit!"

Pop hobbled out of the way, for he saw what was coming. Gruber just stood there facing Hugo. Hugo licked his lower lip. All his accumulated resentment and anger showed in his expression but Pop saw something else there, too. It was eagerness and anticipation. He loved a good fight, either with fists or guns. It was a sort of check-valve for a man bursting with energy, chock-full of steam. If he could expend some of that surplus power on Gruber, he would come out a changed man, and be pleased and agreeable all the rest of the week.

Sam Gruber wouldn't back down for anyone, either. He would give Hugo all he had. You could see it in him—a strong, squared-off chunk of a man. His nervousness was gone.

He said, "I'm through working for a blasted, spouting fool. What you said I won't take from anybody."

Hugo's pitted eyes were shading off darker and darker.

"You'll get your money," he said. "But first, you'll get something else." He lunged toward Gruber. "Damn you!" he said.

Pop Ranson hitched around in time to see Gruber leap and strike. The fight was on in earnest. His quick ears caught the sound of Hugo's deep-throated growl, then a mighty smack. The rancher reeled back, bewildered and confused, a trickle of blood from his teeth. Obviously, he had underrated Gruber. He'd been careless wading in. Now Gruber pressed him, landing two hard blows just below Hugo's heart. It looked like Hugo had finally met his match. No one had ever seen Gruber use his dukes before and everyone had thought he had avoided clashes because he had so little to back them up. To the astonishment of the Lazy Time punchers, now crowding around, and to Pop's astonishment, too, Gruber had taken the lead. He was sinking blow after blow into towering Hugo's midriff. He plastered the rancher in the jaw. He forced him back. He pounded him to his knees. The boys yelled and howled.

Bert Foley clamped a hand hard over Pop's right shoulder.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed. "Wow! Well, I guess Hugo had it coming to him."

Hugo wasn't out yet, but he was pretty groggy. Secretly Pop hoped that Gruber would win the fight. But unlike most of the other hands, he was still dubious of Gruber's

chances. Hugo had, somewhere deep in him, such reserve of latent power and stubborn will, he could carry on almost indefinitely. Unless Gruber could manage to knock him out cold, there'd be no end to it until Gruber caved in.

Presently, Hugo stood up, shaking himself like a wet dog, feeling the reviving effect of some new, unleashed strength. Lowering his head, he charged Gruber. For a time, the teamster held him off. Then, suddenly, a straight-arm jab plunged its way through the teamster's guard, catching him on the chin. Gruber rolled his eyes upward until only the whites showed. He was blind to the next one coming smashing, crashing into his belly.

Hugo stumbled over the sprawling figure on the ground. His face twisted in a smeary grin.

"Now," he said, and his voice had lost its biting edge, "break it up, fellows. We've got a job to do."

Pop Ranson turned away, heading for the bunkhouse and his round of chores. By chance, he glanced out of the window a few minutes later and, to his disgust and dismay, Foley and Tucker were going to it, hammer and tongs. A short distance away from them, Bent and Williams were locked together like two clawing cats. Hugo, aware of the inspiring example he'd set, and realizing, probably, that his was the only sure way to clear the air, stood offside, an interested spectator.

For his own part, old Pop Ranson didn't care one way or the other whether they killed themselves or not. The Lazy Time Ranch was just living up to its reputation. These men were a hard-fisted, explosive crowd.

"What they need," Pop said grumpily, "is some tougher outfit to bring 'em to time, clean the living daylight outa them. Then maybe they'll settle down like human beings an' behave themselves."

The door opened and Hugo stalked in.

"Pop," he said, "there's some crazy geezer over on Dry Creek. He's pitching a small tent. I got to go along to the south limits with that herd of yearlings. I'll be back tomorrow night. Meanwhile, I wish you'd find out what he means trespassing on my land."

Pop started, for in the excitement of the fighting, he had forgotten all about the stranger.

"Okay, I'll shag over there, he said.

BY THE time the chores were done, carrying water, splitting wood, sweeping out the bunkhouse and running errands for Domino Dewar, the cook, it was the supper hour. Pop Ranson decided he'd eat first, then sit a mite to rest his tired legs before he trudged over to Dry Creek. He was on his way there as the sun settled down on the sharp-pointed peak of Shadow Mountain. The hard

shaft of rock and granite drove like a spear through that huge red ball, spattering fire all over the sky. This fire glowed and burned. Crimson coals were still dropping in retaliation when Pop was startled half out of his wits by the sight of a pack-train coming out of a draw.

Five horses and three men. Wooden pack-saddles creaking, loads rattling—picks, shovels, pans, stoves, tents, grub. The ponies, forced along by the three men on foot, were puffing and wet. They were packed too heavy, Pop judged, for the size of them. It was a shame loading down cayuses like that, but these bozos didn't seem to care. They pounded the ponies whenever they lagged. Every man of them gave the impression his life depended on getting somewhere quick. If the devil was chasing them, they couldn't have been more eager to get along.

Catching sight of Pop, one of them called to him sharply, "Hi, you gran'pa, where the blazes did Job Piny pitch his tent?"

Pop didn't know the stranger at Dry Creek was named Job Piny but he knew about the tent. From this distance, he could see it clearly, a gray patch of color upon a sloping shadowy bank. Then he remembered not everybody had eyes like he had. You could excuse them missing things in this changing light. So he pointed.

"Just a piece over that way," he said. "Taint over a quarter mile."

He tailed along, wondering what they were up to and what Job Piny had to do with it. And he wondered if these dark-whiskered, sloppily-dressed men were also bush bums, which is the name prospectors had around these parts. It might be they knew Piny and were just stopping with him for the night. But who in tarnation had told them Piny had pitched his tent on the creek, and why were they so eager?

He said, "I don't make heads or tails outa it. I don't, for a fact."

In the fast gathering dusk—the mixing of equal parts of darkness with equal parts of light, then the red glow from the northwest sky adding to it to give the whole mass an unearthly yellowish tinge—Pop couldn't see now any too well himself. Ponies and men were blurred and indistinct. But he perceived they had got to where Piny had camped. He could make out vague shapes and hear voices, sharp against the silence.

As he drew nearer, two of the men, members of the pack-train, were down along the left bank of the creek hurriedly pounding sticks into the ground. Right then Pop felt his knees creak with rheumatic warning. He stopped, short of breath, and shook his head and went on again, almost unbelieving.

Those bush bums weren't just stopping for the night, they were staking out claims here

and meant to stay. Location stakes—that's what they were driving into the ground. Job Piny had already driven his, likely early in the afternoon, then had rushed back to the hills to tell his friends, show them samples of gold he must surely have found in the creek. Apparently, he had returned here while the others frantically loaded their pack-train for the new diggings. Maybe they had brought along some of Piny's own gear. A lot of these prospectors were in cahoots. Thinking he had stumbled upon something mighty good, Piny proposed to share his good fortune with them. But the trouble was, the danged fools didn't realize what peril they were in. Law or no law, Hugo March and his wild crew—every man literally busting for a fight any time day or night—would drive them to hell and gone at the first opportunity.

"Hugo'll kill 'em!" Pop muttered under his breath. "He'll shoot their guts out. He'll go crazy at the thought of anybody darin' to come here and muss up his precious Lazy Time spread."

Cold trickled along Pop's backbone. He had heard that, in general, prospectors were an easy-going, peace-loving crowd. They stuck to their hills and creeks. They were like scared deer, more at home in the woods, miles from nowhere, than among other men's company. And you could bet Hugo's fire-eaters, veterans of a hundred drag-down fights, would have all the advantage.

HIS old legs almost crumpling under him, Pop negotiated the last few yards to Piny's tent. Piny was outside starting a fire. His shapeless hat hung on the back of his head. His strange eyes avoided Pop, completely ignoring him. But Pop knew somehow that Piny had marked his approach, had given him careful inspection. He was only waiting for Pop to state his business; then Pop, mindful of another man's seclusion and privacy, could get to hell out of the way.

Feeling embarrassed, Pop cleared his throat.

"Evening," he said.

"Evening to you."

"The boss is kinda interested," Pop began, "to learn what you're doing here. So he sent me."

Piny broke up a handful of twigs, put them on the starting blaze, then threw on more wood.

"Well?"

"I'm here," Pop said.

"You can see what we're doing, can't you?"

"I can now. Sure. Certain."

Job Piny shrugged. What more was there to do or say? He had business with the fire, he had thoughts of his own. He couldn't be bothered with silly questions. Suddenly, he was showing Pop long, frayed ravel of hair

sprouting down the back of his neck. Next Piny called softly to a man, a big strapping fellow, clambering up the rocky bank of the creek.

"You finished, Baptiste?"

"Sure, dey's all sunk. I locate mine jes' below your'n. Gristow he go on de udder side." The Frenchman paused and stared at Pop. "What to hell dees ol' wreck want?"

Pop didn't like the Frenchman. He said stiffly, "I think you fellers are makin' a mistake. This land is all leased. It's part of the Lazy Time Ranch."

Job Piny drew around. "Leased land can be mined anywhere," he said. "It's the law."

"There ain't no law around here," Pop countered. "That's the trouble."

Piny stared amusedly in the fire.

"There's law ever'where," he said.

"If you can enforce it," Pop said.

Piny stared sharply at Baptiste. The Frenchman was chuckling deeply in his chest.

"Dees feller has got a loose board in de roof of hees head," he told Piny. "Why we waste good time on hem, I don' know. Et would be bettair we should carve hem up queek an' throw hem in de stew."

Pop felt a twinge of rheumatism and a blaze of anger simultaneously. He swore. It surprised him to hear himself—a strong, ripping oath. Then he continued, "It was only I wanted to save your necks, dang it. There's a law, sure. But Hugo, my boss, won't pay any attention to it. He's proud o' this ranch, won't have it cluttered up with a bunch of bush bums. You're takin' your lives in your hands if you stay."

Job Piny smiled faintly.

"We'll stay," he said.

Baptiste spread out his huge hands, grinning like an ape. He cocked his tawny head, showing Pop the broad expanse of his open palms. "Dey's plenty room. You see dat?"

Pop didn't even answer him. He appealed to Piny, "Our boys are a rough fightin' lot. They would welcome a tussle. You don't want to die and I don't want you to die neither."

Job Piny grunted. "I guess you mean all right."

Pop became eager. "Then you'll listen to what I say?"

"'Course not," Piny said. "There's gold in this crick. We have a right to it under the law. We've staked out our claims. Maybe other folks'll come to stake out theirs. Neither your boss or anybody else short o' Goda'mighty can move us outa here."

Pop had his own private opinion about that. These bush bums didn't know Hugo and his hard-riding, rip-roaring crew. They didn't realize how the odds ran. Four prospectors pitted against eight or ten Lazy Time hands. Lord knew Hugo and his outfit needed a

blamed good licking to take some of the conceit out of them. But these poor stubborn fools weren't strong or experienced enough even to make a showing.

"It's too bad," Pop said, shaking his head and addressing himself to Piny. "I hate to see any unnecessary killin' done. But I'm plumb afraid Hugo an' his boys are gonna put the death-brand on you."

Baptiste snorted. Job Piny laughed. It was getting darker, time to start back. The yellow glow of twilight had shaded off into deep, clinging violet. Pop swung around, dreading to think of the chuck-holes between here and home, of the exposed grass roots he might snag his feet on. Even the best of eyes weren't much use now.

"So long," he said, moving away from the firelight. "I wish you luck."

DEAD tired he flung open the door of the bunkhouse, a half hour later, and limped over to his bed. Hugo rode into the yard next day ahead of schedule, just four in the afternoon by Pop's watch. Hugo got down, rubbing his bristling chin. He seemed pleased with himself.

"It was luck I got back earlier than I expected," he said. "Best luck I've had this week. Last two miles I rode along with a pleated skirt, divided in the middle, an' a shirtwaist showing some nice thoroughbred curves." Hugo laughed and winked at Pop. "You wouldn't know what I was talking about, an old dried-up codger like you. But I'll tell you this much, she had nice hair an' eyes, too. And a dimple on her chin."

"It was a girl," Pop said, grinning. "That's easy. It was a girl."

Hugo poked Pop playfully in the ribs. "A stunner!" he said. "A purebred prize heifer every inch. I'd like to get my rope on that one."

"Or your brand," Pop suggested.

He liked Hugo in this mood. But somehow it didn't seem to fit the rancher at all. It didn't seem to fit him because Hugo had never been a lady's man—he was a man's man. Seldom had he shown any interest in girls whatsoever. He never talked about them and avoided them when he could.

"Lazy Time brand," Hugo mused. "That's an idea, Pop."

"It may be what you need to—to sort of settle you down," Pop said.

Hugo jerked at the brim of his hat. Suddenly, he was different. His voice snapped, "To hell with that! I don't need settling. What's wrong with me the way I am? What the blue blazes you driving at?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all," Pop said.

Hugo frowned and headed for the house. He turned back. He was smiling again.

YOU CAN'T STOP A GOLD RUSH!

"I want hot water for a bath," he instructed. "While it's heating, I'll shave."

"Okay," Pop said.

"And you can forget about the girl," Hugo said. "I don't want any of the hands kidding me. Understand?"

Pop nodded. Then he asked, "Did you find out her name?"

"Nell Piny. Her pa's a mining man."

Pop swallowed hard. "Bush bum! Why it's that there feller—"

"Damn you," Hugo interrupted, snarling, "I said, mining man. And I mean mining man."

"Uh-huh," Pop gurgled, swallowing some more. "Mining man. There's a difference, ain't there?"

"There sure is."

"Where was she heading for?"

"Listen to me, you hornlocked, nose old fool—think I'd ask her her private business first time we'd met?"

Pop stood his ground. "Why not?"

Hugo glared and went up to the house. Pop followed him. He started a fire under the water tank. He sat down on a stool and fumbled for his pipe. He broke two matches lighting it.

When he asks me about that feller over on Dry Creek, he thought, I've forgotten his name is Piny. Let Hugo find out himself.

HUGO shaved and bathed and presently Pop heard the front door bang, then clattering feet on the steps, then the door banged again. A towering, handsome devil Hugo was even when he was mad. He looked madder than Pop had seen him in a long time. He was so mad he didn't yell.

There was a deceiving quiet in him, a forced-in quiet. But Pop could tell there was a struggle to keep it there. Muscles in Hugo's jaw quivered. His lower lip protruded slightly above the straight line of the one on top. He forced some air between white teeth, then two words came out strangely controlled and soft:

"Bush bums!"

Pop nodded. "They struck gold on the creek an' have staked out some claims. Four fellers over there."

"Skunks!" Hugo said. He raised his voice a little, "Did you warn 'em they were trespassing like I told you to do?"

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"They quoted the law to me. They got a right there under the law, they said." Pop crossed his legs and pulled somberly on his pipe. "I guess that's all I can tell you."

Fascinated, Pop stared into the black pits of Hugo's eyes. He watched Hugo's face



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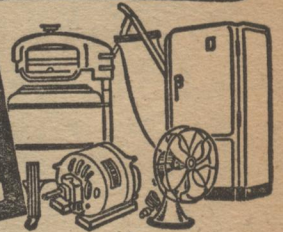
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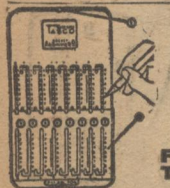
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grow lumpy and broken like a field of rocks.

Without speaking, Hugo turned and strode into his room. He reappeared, buckling on his cartridge-belt with side-holsters heavy with guns. Then he slammed outside. His long, fast steps were as fast as a boy could run. Through the window, Pop's eyes followed him to the barn, where he disappeared. There was a wait of a few seconds while Pop listened to his own thumping heart. The dang fool was reacting just like Pop had expected he would. Hugo led out a fresh horse, mounted, and rode off toward Dry Creek.

He's gonna get the surprise of his life, Pop thought. He fell heavy for that girl. Now he'll find her plump in the midst of the men he's gone gunning for.

Pop left the window and went back and settled in a chair. Here was a situation only the good Lord Himself could know for certain just how it would work out. But there was some hope now where there hadn't been any before. Hugo's liking for the girl could conceivably change the whole course of events. Mad as he was, could Hugo shoot down, say, Job Piny, the girl's dad? Could he shed blood with her looking on? Could he stand to see her white, scared face and feel her hate and terror?

Pop laid both hands on his aching knees and suddenly all the answers seemed clear to him.

He said, aloud, "Hugo won't shoot. He won't dare—not with her there."

It was a relief to know this after the strain of the last two days. Rising, Pop walked into the kitchen to help Domino, the cook. Domino, fat as a cornfed steer and always out of breath, pushed a panful of spuds toward Pop from across the table.

"Peel 'em," he said.

SUPPER came and went. Once more the sun dropped down on the rugged shaft of Shadow Mountain. The twilight was gold, then rose. Silence stood around, towering to the sky. The least sound carried clear and sharp, sort of brittle, like the rattling of chinaware. Sitting on Hugo's front steps, Pop heard voices in the bunkhouse now and again, and the clinking of poker chips. Ponies stamped in the corral. As the dark thickened, Domino lighted a coal oil lamp in the kitchen and his fat shadow propped itself up against the wall.

Pop smoked and stretched his legs, feeling pretty good. Everything was turning out even better than he had hoped. Must be, of all things, that Hugo had been so won over by the girl he had stopped there for supper.

Pop grinned into the dark. "There won't

YOU CAN'T STOP A GOLD RUSH!

be any fighting now," he said. "I'll bet Hugo has given his permission to them bush bums to stay. The trouble is settled."

Off from the yard gate a hundred yards or more, unexpectedly Pop saw something move. Came the thud of pony's hoofs. As Hugo's mount passed through the gate into the yard, Pop saw Hugo slumped low in the saddle. Obediently, the pony stopped in front of the barn door. Hugo didn't get down. He just sat. Wonderingly, Pop hobbled over there quickly as he could. In a queer, choked voice Hugo spoke to him:

"You'll have to cut me down."

In amazement, Pop ran gnarled hands over the ropes that bound Hugo in the saddle. An expert saddle-packer had looped and diamond-hitched the rancher in his seat. He was held there firmly and securely, a prisoner on his own horse. For a man as proud as Hugo, it must be horribly embarrassing.

It must be hell.

Pop took out his pocket knife and carefully cut the ropes.

"You can get off now," he said.

They put up the pony and walked slowly toward the house. Pop noticed then that Hugo staggered. He was making funny noises in his throat. Inside, he found a chair and slumped into it. Pop lighted a lamp, back toward Hugo, trying to imagine what had happened over at Dry Creek. He turned and now the light was full on Hugo and, involuntarily, Pop cried out.

Never had he seen a worse mess than that. Hugo's right cheek was laid open to the bone. His face was puffed and purple. The lobe of one ear was cut to shreds. One eye was closed. Looked like his lips had passed through a meat grinder.

"It—it was Baptiste," Hugo said fiercely and sullenly. "Damn his rotten heart!"

Pop got water and towels and salve. He worked hard over Hugo. He gave him a drink of brandy, raw.

Hugo choked. He sat in his chair, a picture of gloom, despondency and injured pride. His one good eye turned toward Pop. In its dark-shaded depths there was none of his former self-assurance and conceit. Instead, there was a kind of dazed incredulity.

He opened his bruised lips. It was painful for him to speak.

"First time in all my life," he groaned, "I ever been licked. Pop, he—he was too much for me."


"You can't always be the winner," Pop tried to console him.

"He was big as an ox. I—I never met a man who could fight like he could."

"I guess them bush bums are tough all

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right," Pop commented. "It would be some job to shift 'em all, wouldn't it?"

Hugo seemed to slump even deeper in his chair. "It wouldn't be a job," he croaked, "it would be an impossibility. Four more of those bush bums, big and burly as Baptiste, arrived to stake claims just after I showed up."

"Yes?"

Hugo gingerly stroked shattered knuckles on one hand. He winced. "You can't stop a good rush, Pop. If there were only one or two, it would be different. But they'll keep coming and coming. Every day they'll keep coming—men like Baptiste."

The prospect was bleak, the future looked so dark, that Hugo closed his good eye, too, as though, Pop thought, it was too much to contemplate.

Suddenly Pop jumped and grabbed hold of a chair. Someone had knocked on the outside door.

He called, tremblingly, knowing it couldn't be one of the hands, and fearing it might be the bush bums:

"C—come in."

A young lady walked in. Pop's heart went back in its regular place and beat out in admiration. She was exactly like he had drawn her in his mind: slim and neat and beautiful and—well, sort of comforting to the senses.

He remembered now what Hugo had said,—every inch a thoroughbred. Yes, that's what she was, a thoroughbred.

"M—make yourself right at home, Miss," Pop said. "It was nice of you to come."

Nell Piny walked straight over to Hugo and laid one hand gently on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mr. March," she said. "I was worried. I was afraid you might not have got home."

Hugo sat with his head bowed. He couldn't talk. After all, Pop wondered, what was there to say? Sometimes silence is much more expressive. That little hand so comforting on his shoulder, the understanding she had—

Pop grinned. Just then Hugo raised his dejected shoulders and looked up hopefully in Nell Piny's friendly face.

She smiled down at him. And Pop thought he saw an answering smile on Hugo's bruised lips.

ARE YOU BUYING BONDS?

ON THE TRAIL

(Continued from page 54)

where it is forked into the feed rack of poles built into a V shape, so the hay will keep falling down as the lower part is eaten away. Thus preventing the waste caused by the stock eating from a haystack directly. All a corral usually has in it, is a snubbing post in the middle, but no hay.

17. I am a true horseman and horse lover. They saved my life many times in the old days, and no horse has ever injured or betrayed me. I always tried to have a little more intelligence than a horse, so we were always fast and true friends. "Outlaws" were only the result of outlaw handling, and I have broken many of them to be as gentle as kittens, but hell on wheels again with ignorant fools.

Therefore, the term "thumbing" makes me froth at the mouth. You ask what the "purpose" of thumbing is. You might as well have asked what the *purpose* of "wrowling" is, but you are mistaken about *where* thumbing is done, usually. Thumbing is done *before* mounting, and is done by running the thumbs or a stick along the flank, to make a horse go crazy and know what a dirty heathen you are. It is to make him buck, sure, to get rid of the filthy heathen on his back. But once in the saddle, it is roweling with the spurs in the neck, to make a horse bust himself to get rid of you, when a smoking gun would do the job much better and more appropriately. I wouldn't have mentioned that if I had been you. It is so dirty and beastly as to be unmentionable.

18. You are only partly right about the "tall grass country." Starting at say Tulsa, Oklahoma, draw a line north to the Kenuck border. West of that, until you came to the Buffalo grass country and beyond that, westward, was the sage brush country. It was called the 'long grass country' advisedly, because it was the land of the blue stem and the slough grass. Buffalo grass country never was called 'long grass country.'

19. Utterly wrong. What you mean was called simply the "Seasons." The term "Works" or "The Works," means the same today and everywhere, as it has always meant—simply giving a person what is supposed to be coming to him, in no uncertain way, from a good beating to a good smoking. Everybody who knew anything, knew what was to be done with the coming of each progressive season. Therefore, when a poke hired out "For the season," it could mean summer herding; the round-up or winter with its various chores. "Work" as such, was under the ban as applied to cow punchers. There were references of "Working the round-up";

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

"Working the summer herd" and "Working the ranch turn," however.

20. Now we come to "REMUDA." What a mess you make of that. Yes, it was sometimes called "Ramootheer," but to accuse true Westerners of "usually pronouncing it *re-mootheer*," would be and ought to be to get yourself shot. The honyocks of today—may-beso—I don't know, but it is totally unfair and ignorant of the old West to make such an accusation, bald facedly and without reservation.

The word is a putrification of a Spanish word but it is not and never was pronounced as you say. It was ALWAYS pronounced exactly as it is spelled—*ramooda*, not *re*, and the o's short, as in snoot, and the accent on the oo', with the *a* sounded as in raw. Ramu'da.

As an old-timer who took particular interest in these things, even in the years that I sold groceries to the old ranchers, all over hell's acre, you are getting the lowdown. You may not know it, but the youngsters with adenoids and lacking a palate, naturally gravitated to the cow country and became cowpokes, for the simple reason that thus they could make a living with the least annoyance and human circulation. Their pronunciation of words and terms were often very comical and other waddies mimicked them, and that is the way many of our best and most appropriate words and terms were born.

The pronounce words and terms as those poor devils had to, was simply a slur against their misfortune—thus we had "*ramootheer*."

Now let us get after those examples that I proposed.

1. "Cow shy." A poke who was scared of critters with horns and always afraid he might be cast afoot in their midst. Rather sensible. A poke who was clumsy about getting the rope off a doggy he had pulled out of a mud hole. They always attack the man who did them the good turn, as soon as they can get to their feet, so it was a scramble to get mounted quickly. Some pokes wouldn't do it. They were "cow-shy."

2. "Waddy," "Wady" or "Wadi." A person supposed to be forever looking for water, water holes or any place where man or beast may drink.

3. "Cow-poke." Has two references. One who pokes cows with a sharpened stick to make them travel faster, and one who pokes along behind a slow moving bunch of cattle.

4. "Tail-up." Sometimes, when a critter was stuck in a mud hole, or lying down and too weak to rise, it was the practice to twist the tail until the critter was willing to make a supreme effort. When we say tail up a person, we refer to this practice, meaning that we help them in such a way as to shame them into

ON THE TRAIL

unusual efforts to help themselves. "I tailed him up, but it was hopeless," for instance.

5. "Long loop." This refers to a rustler, as does "Long iron." (6)

7. "Creep loop." "Snaky loop" and "Underhand loop," all refer to throwing a loop in such a way as to catch a running critter by the front feet and throwing them. Who the hell ever heard of calling it "mangana"?

8. "Toss a half hitch." When you roped a wild fighter in the corral and had him snubbed close up to the post, but were afraid that he might go the wrong way around the post after you, thus unwinding the rope from the post, you tossed a half hitch or two over the post, and Mr. Horse was secure.

Sometimes you roped a mean horse out on the range and were unable to lead him without choking him to death. It was the custom to toss a loop with a spare rope, while holding him on the choke rope, and then toss a couple of half hitches over his head, so that you wouldn't choke him any more, but could pull him wherever you wanted him to go with the saddle horn, leaving the choke rope free. Experts could even throw a half hitch over his nose as a final persuader.

Tossing a half hitch under any circumstances or for any purpose, took long and tedious practice.

Like the silly little dude boots that the range has affected in the later years make me wonder whether or not the old range country has gone completely to the devil—and your explanations of the meaning of old time expressions seem to verify my worst fears. So all I have left to say is that I hope I have *learned* YOU something, anyhow, Mr. Hal-lack McCord.

Very truly yours,
(W. E. Duncanson)
Gary, Indiana.

Editor's Note:—We sent the above to Mr. McCord who will reply next month.

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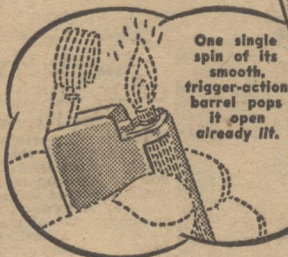
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