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WESTERN TALES

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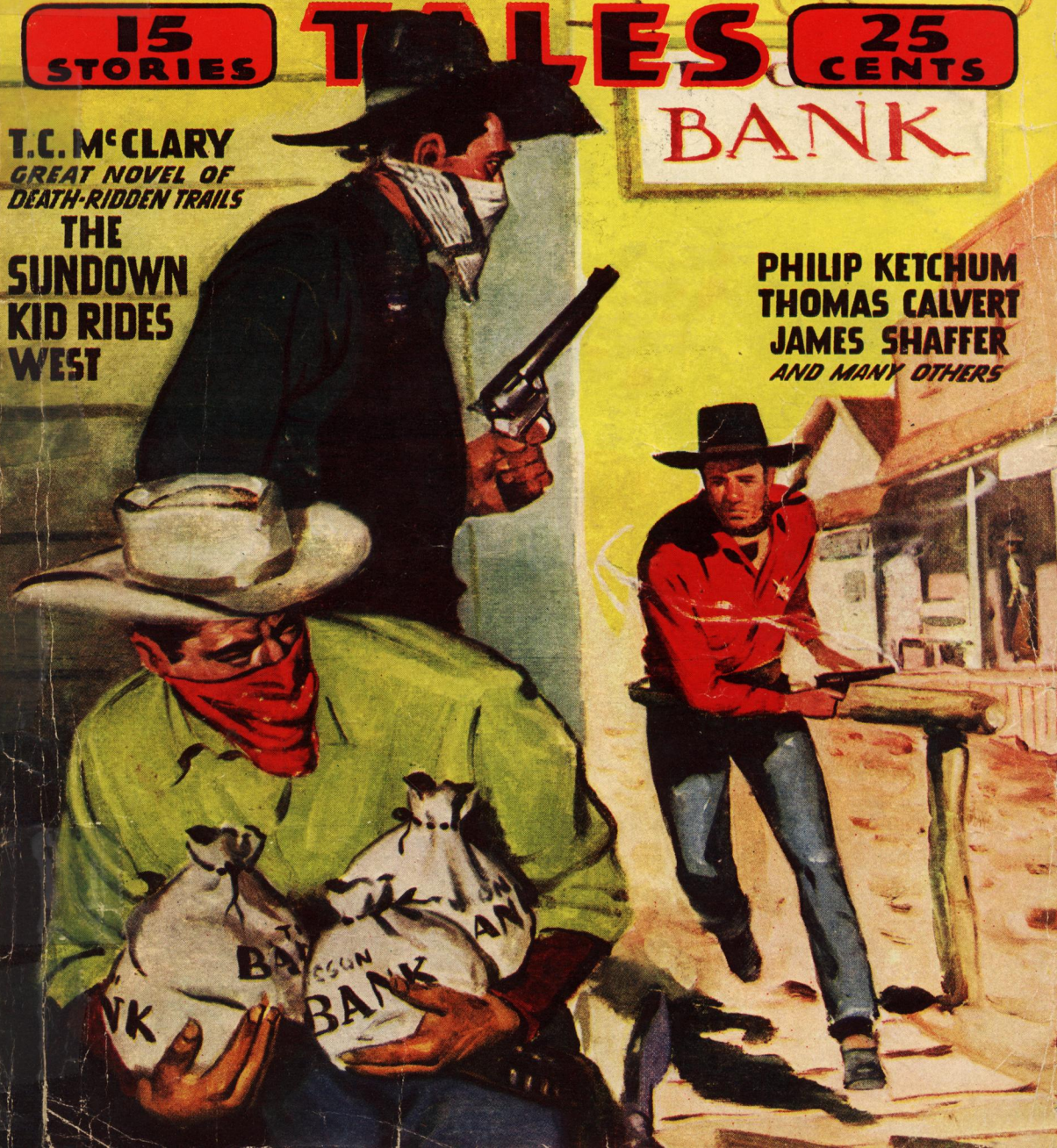
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T.C. McCLARY
GREAT NOVEL OF
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SUNDOWN
KID RIDES
WEST**

BANK

**PHILIP KETCHUM
THOMAS CALVERT
JAMES SHAFFER
AND MANY OTHERS**





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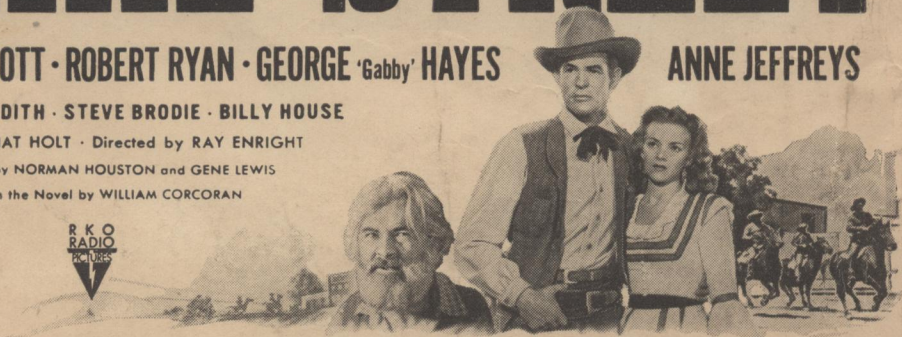
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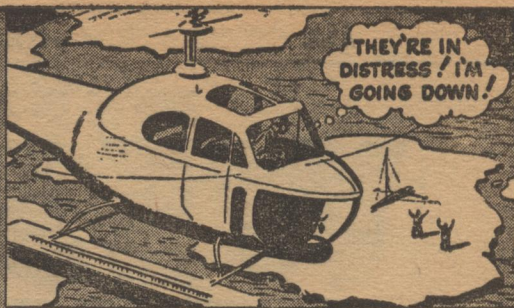
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Based on the Novel by WILLIAM CORCORAN



LAKE RESCUE STARTS THINGS MOVING . . .



THEY'RE IN
DISTRESS! I'M
GOING DOWN!

DICK WERTH, FLYING HIS HELICOPTER CITY-WARD
AFTER ROUGHING IT IN A NORTHERN MICHIGAN
CAMP, SIGHTS ICE-BOATERS MAROONED ON ICE
FLOE IN LAKE HURON.



WE'LL HAVE TO MAKE
TWO FAST TRIPS. THIS
ICE LOOKS BAD.
COME ON, MISS!

OUR CABIN'S ON THAT
CLOSEST NECK OF LAND.
MY DAUGHTER'LL
POINT IT OUT



WHAT A HAPPY
ENDING TO A NASTY
FIX. MARVELOUS
MACHINE

MY FOLKS WORRY
IF I'M LATE. MAY I
USE YOUR PHONE?

2 HOURS LATER



TELL THEM YOU'LL STAY ALL
NIGHT, IT'S ALMOST DARK
AND WE'VE NEVER HAD A
MORE WELCOME GUEST

NOR ONE
WITH MORE
WHISKERS



...AND HERE'S
A RAZOR

THANKS. I
NEED IT



WHAT A FAST, SLICK SHAVE!
THIS BLADE IS PLENTY
KEEN!

I THOUGHT YOU'D LIKE
THAT THIN GILLETTE.
I NEVER USE ANYTHING
ELSE



HELICOPTERS HAVE
BEEN MY HOBBY, AND
NOW I HOPE TO START
A FERRY SERVICE

WHY, DAD! THAT'S
THE ANSWER TO
YOUR INTER-PLANT
TRAFFIC PROBLEM!

HE'S
HANDSOME



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G

THURSDAY MORNING
AT MY OFFICE,
THEN . . .

AND NEXT
SATURDAY RIGHT
HERE, DON'T
FORGET!



FOR SLICK-LOOKING SHAVES THAT
REALLY RATE, GET ACQUAINTED WITH
THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE SMOOTHEST-
SHAVING, LOW-PRICED BLADES YOU EVER USED.
THAT'S BECAUSE THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR
GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY AND PROTECT
YOU FROM THE HARSH, IRRITATING EFFECT
OF MISFIT BLADES AND FAULTY
SHAVING METHODS. ASK FOR
THIN GILLETTES



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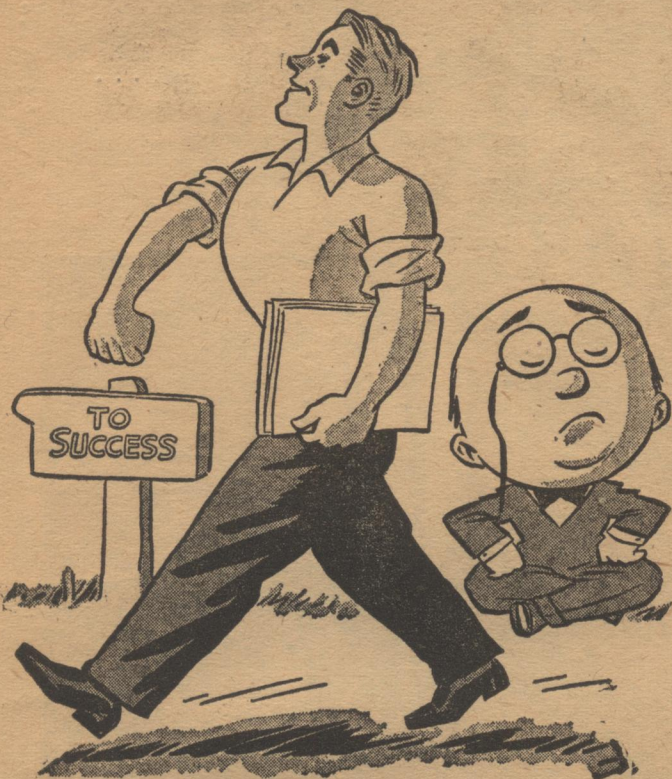
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Published monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter August 22, 1945, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1947, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under international Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$3.00; other countries 75c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

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By T. C. McCLARY

THE SUNDOWN KID RIDES WEST

"Cantrell," the Kid repeated softly. "The Cantrells I knew could hold the devil by the tail. . . ."





CHAPTER ONE

Blood of the Sundown Kid

He was a legend of gun-glory, a crimson leftover from the bloody dawn of the frontier—but before he faded, the Red Kid's sixes blasted a grave for himself—in the heart of his son!

DAWN'S first breeze drifted out of the jet creases of the hills and the boy's head lifted like a shot. For a space he huddled against morning's chill to romp his dog before feeling for his pants and boots. He took his home-made .22, pausing to sniff at the damp sage smell and to cut sign upon the pale tide of rose and gray washing over the solid black line of the horizon.

"Rabbit morning," he said to the dog. The

dog jumped and spun in a circle and they set off up the steep hill behind the town.

Night still clung thick within the valley, but morning's sounds floated in from the range beyond—the beat of an angle iron, two signal shots, a cowboy's high-pitched trail call, the days orders and grumps and greetings zigzagging from fire to fire through the fluid shifting darkness of the hills. Smoky yellow squares of light cut windows in the darkness way out at Lazy E and, thinking of tough and grizzled J. T. Emmett, the boy said to his dog, "Geronimo, that old gila monster don't miss a trick! Some day we'll have a ranch like that."

The dog found fresh rabbit scent and flushed a jack, and the boy got it on his second shot. He looked disgusted, but it was like him that he blamed himself and not the gun. Daylight flushed the East and mists began pearly in the valley. The boy was taking bead on a second jack when the drum of a fast running horse reached out of the banks of mist down along the creek.

The boy paused and uncocked his gun and studied the rhythm of the sound. There was a trail down there, but it came from nowhere and led nowhere; this line of steep pitched low hills was used only for pasture by the small places near town. Beyond the creek the country turned to desert clean back to where the range spurred in. Anyone wanting to reach the range rode out across the desert or took the main trail that ran through town. But this horse had the sound of running with a rider and running parallel to the regular trail. The sound had another quality he identified as the drum petered out—the rhythm was the loose, flowing run of a horse that had been going for hours, maybe all night.

He pondered this and then full day flushed the rabbits out of sight. He cut down behind MacQueen's to the main trail edging the line of hills. His feet caught the vibration on the trail's dust-coated hardpan before he heard the steady jog of a horse coming into town. He stopped and listened attentively, and he could catch the difference. This horse was still stiff with morning's chill.

A rider formed out of the swirling gray and slowed. J. T. Emmett called with his dust-raw voice, "Hi there, Tim-Jim! Want a lift back to town?"

"I'd be obliged," the boy said, and taking the rancher's horny hand, swung up behind the cantle.

"You ain't been out to see yore hoss," Emmett grunted.

"I been busy," Tim-Jim told him, "trying to earn me enough for a real store saddle. I ain't far from it, either!"

"Bag you any jack this morning?" the rancher went on.

"Aw, not but one, Mr. Emmett," the boy answered. "I got me all tangled up listening to some rider down the creek trail."

"The creek trail?" Emmett grunted. "That is a damned funny place to travel!" He considered the possibilities and then grinned. "Mebbe some galoot was courtin' a little late and don't hanker to be seen."

"He'd been traveling a spell," the boy allowed. "But I didn't get a look at him."

The trail swamped out into the shacks and shanties that fringed the town and Emmett reined in his big gray to let the boy off. For a moment, he looked at the poverty-stricken shack, thinking that a woman who could keep a dump that neat and raise a boy that well was entitled to something better in life than taking washing for a living. A handsome woman, too, but one who kept strictly to herself. He had never heard of Mrs. Cantrell attending a social, or of a man being asked inside that house, since she first moved there giving no information of herself except that they had lived along the Pecos.

Emmett took a long sniff of the air and his severe mouth eased as he looked down at Tim-Jim. "That smells like a real bang-up breakfast," he grunted. "Real sausages or I'll be damned!"

"And eggs," the boy nodded with decent pride. "We got us three good layers, Mr. Emmett."

"Dawgoned if you don't eat better than I do!" Emmett growled, and put his horse into movement, considering with mixed irritation and humor that, for all that he was rangelord, what he had just said was likely true. For a moment, he wished he were a younger man and considered the possibilities of getting Mrs. Cantrell and the boy to move out to his ranch, and then put the thought from him with an older man's regret.

The item of that rider on the creek trail came into his mind again; he was still trying to figure who it might have been when he racked in front of the Maxwell House, and crossing through early morning's pure golden light, stepped into the warmth of the lobby and met Bob Randall.

TIM-JIM CANTRELL bolted his breakfast, counted a boy's treasures into his pockets, and was breaking for the door when his mother's gently rising voice brought him up sharp. He swung, mumbling, "Aw gee, ma, chores on Satiddy?"

"Only one," she told him. "Those shirts Mr. Randall wanted special."

His dark expression broke. "Oh, them? I got me some business with Bob Randall anyway."

"He's a coming man in this town," she told him. "I'm glad he likes you, Tim-Jim."

"Likes?" he snorted. "Heck, we're regular pardners!"

She handed him the shirts, wrapped carefully in newspaper, but he lingered, his brown face screwed up in thought. "My pa wasn't much like Bob Randall, was he?" he asked abruptly.

For an instant, emotion caught and held her face. There was still youth in her and beauty too, but it was dimmed and pulled by something more than work; she had the taut look of a full-blooded woman who had set herself to live without a man, and the hard loneliness that comes of it.

After a space she said very carefully, "Yore pa was a pack of trouble wherever he showed up, Tim-Jim, but there was good in him for all of that."

"Then why did we have to move off the Pecos?" he demanded.

"Some day," she answered, "I will tell you all about that, but not now." She dropped unexpectedly and gave him a hard, possessive hug, and then slapped him soundly on the backside. "Vamoose, now, and don't you let those shirts get wrinkled."

"No m'am," he told her and turned outside. He snapped his fingers at the dog and scuffed out through shanty town into the main drag of Capitan. The musical beating of an anvil was already coming from the blacksmith's, and he followed the sound without lifting his head until he stood on the cinders inside the door. He looked up then, admiring Big Tom Billings' corded muscles, glistening bronze with sweat in the red glow of the forge.

Big Tom paused to spit and eyed him. "You want to earn fifty cents next week?" he grunted.

Tim-Jim's eyes grew big. "You betcha, Mr. Billings!"

"Hard work and a heap of it," Big Tom warned.

"Hell—I mean heck—I ain't too proud to work!" the boy told him.

A rough grin touched the blacksmith's solid features. "School to supper pumping bellows, and if you don't lay out with a bellyache, we'll make the week an even seventy-five."

"Boy, yo're a real prince!" Tim-Jim yipped. Ducking his head in agreement, he scuffed along his way. He passed Mr. Yardley, the stage agent, and Yardley growled, "That oak keg you wanted is empty."

"Thanks, Mr. Yardley, I'll come fetch it home this evening," Tim-Jim said.

"No thanks due," Yardley told him dryly. "You earned it."

The boy grinned to himself at Yardley's sourness and angled across to the horse trough to look for whatever treasures drunks or horses might have dropped. A shiny star

blinked at him and he fished it out, buffing it dry upon his coatsleeve. "Gee willikins!" he said to Geronimo. "That come off a fancy bridle! You keep out of mischief with that no good Hastings mutt all week, and mebbe I'll brad this in yore collar."

He angled back through the thick sienna dust that filled the street and scuffed with absorption to the hotel. He was passing the dining room when Bob Randall's voice sang out at him, "Tim-Jim, lite for sinkers and java!"

They had the best sugar coated jelly doughnuts in the whole world in that hotel and his mouth was watering as he looked in. But then he saw Randall was at breakfast with J. T. Emmett, and he wouldn't bust in on a friend. He swallowed his hunger and shook his head.

"Obliged, Bob, but I got me our business to attend to."

Emmett watched him pass from sight with a twinkle in his sun-bleached gray eyes. "That boy," he allowed, "will amount to something some day."

"Does already," Randall told him confidentially. "That business of his is a quiet little eight cent deal we're pardners on!"

The men laughed and Emmett allowed himself the luxury of a morning cigar. After his first deep draw of smoke, he said abruptly, "You have got me half sold on this railroad spur, Bob, but not all the way."

Randall gave a wry grin. "Until I can ride and shoot better than now, I'm all right to know, but still a dude, eh?"

Emmett chuckled. "Called me, eh? Well, it is not as bad as that, although it was twenty years ago. Times are changing and I am taking stock of that. But frankly, the range is not yet quite sure yo're the man to protect our interests."

Randall made a gesture. "How can I prove it?"

"Bide yore time, Bob. Something will come up that lets you prove yoreself if you are able."

"In the meantime, all you ranchers are crowding the range for want of a local market and easy transportation," Randall pointed out.

Emmett made no denial and, finishing their coffees, the two moved outside. Saturday's traffic raised dust trails converging on the town like spokes. Ranchers came by, stopping to chat, friendly enough to Randall, but holding that slight barrier of not having reached judgment upon him. Sunlight mixed with the dust smoke of the busy street and formed a pulsing golden stream; it bleached into a lemon colored screen that blotted out the other side of the street. Mid-day's heat formed and pressed upon them and Tim-Jim came

back, rolling an old wagon tire he had found near the creek and lugging a string of catfish.

Emmett chuckled to Jay Bone, "Damn'dest little busybody I've ever seen! He will own our ranches one day if we're not sharp, Jay."

"It is a long ways from his age to tomorrow," Jay Bone grunted cynically. "And he has no pa—at least, on hand."

"He has got as good as one in Bob Randall," Emmett noted.

Jay Bone looked at him. "But how good is Bob Randall?"

"Ah!" the range lord breathed, and let it go at that.

PRENTISS and Reilley came along to complete the representation of big ranches and stopped for gossip. In the course of talk, Reilley growled, "I have been raising hell with the desert bunch for stealing cattle, but now I am wondering."

Prentiss gave a thin snort. "What is there to wonder? Every damned shack and corral out there is tied together with our hides!"

Reilley's eyes sparkled. "Then you haven't heard the rumor that Grace Volmere is on the range?"

The effect was satisfyingly electric. The other three froze with their eyes upon him. Jay Bone tilted his barrel body forward and grunted, "Two Gun Volmere?" and held that position while he considered. "If he'd been rustling you, you'd know it, Reilley! You'd be lucky to have a cow left."

"I have been losing," Reilley said, "just about what it would take to keep an outfit in fresh meat. Mebbe he is holed up and ain't ready to raid yet."

Emmett recalled what Tim-Jim had told about the creek trail rider and gave the information. "There'd be no reason," he pointed out, "for anyone but a longrider or a refugee from some old man's shotgun to use that trail."

Prentiss scowled, "Damn it, I thought things had been too quiet! And my beef is bunched thick as sheep—I can't scatter it and I can't move it!"

Jay Bone snapped, "That railroad spur and stockpens right here in town would look powerful purty right now!" He cut a chew from a black plug and poked it in his cheek. "Well, what do we do?"

"Volmere," Emmett scowled, "is supposed to be up around Jackson Hole country. I am going to send an express telegram by late stage and check."

The palaver went on. Heat grew harsh and throttling, and light turned to a colorless glare. As suddenly as a turn of tide, the heat began to lift off the land in waves. Evening's softer rose and yellow light slanted

down. The sun dripped out of a wound in the cooling molten sky, and hung like a great drop of crimson blood at the dead end of the street.

The ranchers had shifted down to the Cattleman's Supply, and were still palavering about Volmere when Bob Randall strolled in. He said with a small chuckle, "That pilgrim sure picked the right light to ride in by! On his red horse, sundown makes him look redder than an Injun."

For a long moment, not a man in the room moved. Then chairs scraped and boots pounded and stolid ranchers raced like young cowprods for the door. Beyond the deep stripes of sienna shade a rider was coming smack out of the sun, following his long, crimson-tinted shadow. He was small of build but rode straight in a hand-tooled saddle with his gun hand loosely balled in a fist just above his pistol grip. His gaze moved neither to right nor left, and careless contempt was on his thin lips. Yet his bleak gray eyes took in every face and movement and did not miss a trick.

Emmett muttered on a harsh breath, "The Red Kid!" and tension mixed with a grudging respect in his tone. "What is he doing here from the Pecos?"

"Whatever it is," Jay Bone growled, "somebody will regret it in the end!"

"It is almost worth the trouble," Prentiss murmured, "to get a good look at his hoss. There is not another man in this country who could ride Speedy and live—an' him the orniest killer that ever came out of the llano!"

"You can say that for both of them!" Reilley commented. "But he is riding in clear and plain to see. There is something brewing behind this."

Randall listened to this brief exchange, still surprised that in this barren country every man was so thoroughly intimate with the history of every other man, even though he ranged five hundred miles away. He looked back at the Red Kid and the man was, he thought, well named. His hair was fiery and brick red color ran beneath his weathered tan. He wore a deep red shirt and maroon chaps and red Cordova boots. And he had intentionally ridden that red horse out of the blood red sun, a man could bet on that.

Randall had never seen anything like that horse; it was something beautiful, yet monstrous, out of a horseman's dream. Its coat was not roan, but red as any cow's, and it had a pure golden tail and mane. Its eyes were gold, but not with gentleness—they held the quality of raw molten metal, still seething. The animal was, he judged, a full seventeen hands, its legs long for its height, its body long in the reach.

He heard Jay Bone say, "Nothing this side of hell could catch that mare!" and he could well believe it. But it was the neck and head that held him fascinated, the neck arched and long with the rippling muscles of a wild stallion, the head small and cut like a cameo, with all the intelligence that breeding and wildness together could give a mare.

CHAPTER TWO

The Cantrells Are Comin' . . .

THE Red Kid swung in front of the Star, and the crowd went pounding to surround him. Randall watched Tim-Jim, all eyes and excitement, go scurrying through the crowd to find an advantageous perch upon the stoop. The Kid saw the boy and for a moment his gaze trailed him. There was a faint break of humor—interest, curiosity—some inward feeling that briefly stirred the inscrutable iron mask of the Red Kid's face.

The Kid waited for a crowd to form and then sang out, "I am looking for a son named Grace Volmere who was fool enough to take my name in vain back trail."

"So Volmere is here!" Prentiss muttered. "This range ain't going to be at all healthy for a spell!"

"If that sidwinding two-gun brush mustang has friends in this crowd," the Kid went on, "tell him to come in and meet me face to face by Tuesday sundown, or tote a yellow brand from Corpus Christi to Cheyenne."

"He ain't been in town or I'd have knowed him!" old Gabby Flint put in.

"He is on this range," the Red Kid stated. "But he will not leave it if I ever see him!"

"The devil has got his arrogance, but he can back it!" Emmett grunted. "He is a bad hombre, but damned if you can help but respect him!" He put his gaze upon Jay Bone. "How does that story set with you?"

"There was bad blood between them on the Pecos," Jay Bone said. "It may be true. At least, those two mustangs will not be in cahoots."

Randall moved away, wedging into the crowd, drawn by a dude's fascination at seeing his first real badman. The Red Kid was wicked and there was no doubt of that; the cold and implacable pride and arrogance of a gun king was etched upon his wild face like a brand. For all that, there was something decently human to him—he was hard, but he was not a tough—and it showed as he looked back at Tim-Jim.

"You, littlebit," he called up to the boy. "What do they call you—Red?"

The boy turned scarlet at this attention and had difficulty finding voice. He answered shrilly, "Tim-Jim's my handle, Mr. Red Kid."

The Kid laughed. "Well, I'll call you Red!" he sang back. "And us reds ought to hang together. How would you like to guard my hoss?"

Tim-Jim's eyes grew big as saucers. Excitement knocked the self consciousness clean out of him. "You mean you'd let me do that, Mr. Red Kid?"

The school bully broke in hotly, "Why, hell, Kid, that little half pint ain't dry behind the ears yet! He ain't even got a hoss and saddle!"

"I've got a hoss!" Tim-Jim growled truculently. "And I'll soon have me a saddle!"

The bully let out a sneering snort. The Kid laid his flat gaze on him. "I reckon you mean you'd be a better man to mind my Speedy?" he asked the bully.

The bully was a big, overgrown boy named Hastings, already heavy in the chest and shoulders, and now he strutted with a swagger. "I've done held the best of 'em at rodeo!"

The Kid swung out of the saddle and stood there flexing the trail soreness from his muscles. "Well, let's see if yo're good as you think. You hold my Speedy thirty seconds and the job is yores."

Tim-Jim's face fell and the bully swaggered forward as the Kid ducked under the rail and drew out a gold turnip watch. But Speedy watched the Kid turn his back and a sudden wicked look was in her eye. Her ears twitched, and there was a quiver in her upper lip as Hastings put his hand forward toward her bridle.

The boy got a sudden attack of buck fever, but there was the crowd and his prestige was at stake. He reached once and missed the reins, and turned crimson under the crowd's hoot. He moved in belligerently with dutch courage and caught the reins hard and short this time. He ran his hand close beneath her jaw and gave the jingle chain a half twist to make doubly sure.

The Kid said without even turning, "Speedy, I wouldn't take that off nobody!"

There was something in that the horse understood and it was all she needed to go into action. Her neck stretched forward where it should have pulled; her head dropped where it should have jerked. She flung it sidewise, catching Hastings full upon his stomach, and then flinging her head, she burned the reins through his fist. He sprawled and she let out a bugle as fierce as any stallion's and, rearing, pawed air right over his head.

Hastings turned putty gray and ripped out one frightened scream and rolled, and catching his feet in the same movement, lurched wildly through the crowd. The crowd guffawed and the Kid quieted the horse and

jerked his head at Tim-Jim. "You still want a try, Red?" he grinned.

Tim-Jim nodded because he could not speak.

"Scared?" the Kid asked.

"N-no-no," the boy stammered. "N-n-not much, that is."

The Kid chuckled and moved a step from Speedy's head and put the reins in the boy's hand clear for her to see. "She gets spooky you tell her plain she can't get away with that with us Reds," the Kid said. "And hold her easy."

THE crowd cleared a path for the Kid, but one man blocked him. Randall stood on the edge of the walk with his face tense and outrage in every line of it. "You don't mean to leave that little shavetail alone with that killer?" he demanded. "Why, she'd fling him clean across the street!"

The Kid stopped dead and sundown put a savage light upon the angular hardness of his face. "Just what is it to you?" he grunted.

Randall darkened at the tone but held his place. "Tim-Jim Cantrell is a friend of mine," he said. "I don't want to see the boy hurt for the amusement of the crowd, is all."

"Cantrell, eh?" the Kid repeated softly and looked back at the boy. "I knew some Cantrells once and they could have held the devil by his tail. And damned if he don't look like he'd make a right good try!"

"Man, he only weighs sixty pounds," Randall persisted. "What's going to happen if he gets in trouble?"

The Kid turned back with the deadly speed of a rattler's strike. He laid a flat stare straight on Randall. "No man or boy with guts gets in trouble," he stated metallically. "If he has the good sense to mind his own business, friend!"

Randall looked earnestly around the crowd for moral backing but found nothing but amusement floating on men's eyes. The Kid rolled a smoke and put a light upon its tip. He said then with ripping scorn, "Mister, you are standing in a powerful unhealthy spot."

Randall opened his mouth to speak; he saw the silver lights splintering from the Kid's eyes, and closed it quickly. He darkened and swung back through the crowd with its jeering laughter following him in a scalding wave. The Kid did not even bother to look after him. He moved with his stiff, yet always balanced gait into the Star, contemptuous, and yet demanding the homage of the crowd that followed him.

The boy watched all this and felt kind of sick that Bob Randall had been put out of face that way, but still doggone sore that Bob had stepped out of place to make him look

just like any ordinary boy. Against these feelings he was conscious of the manhood the Red Kid's trust had placed on him. And the horse. . . .

A boy's natural fears surged up through him fresh and he turned, expecting with every inch to be busted down or half chewed up. It was horse country history that no man could get near Speedy, and what she had done to Hastings was still clear in his mind. But the horse had watched the Kid give him the reins and understood, and now she had her long neck stretched out and twisted and was sniffing him up and down. After a questionable space, she lifted her head and let it hang at shoulder level.

"Gee willikins!" the boy mumbled to himself, and felt pride and adventure warm his blood. "I think she kinda likes me—uh, some."

He raised his small hand slowly and the horse sniffed at it and let him stroke its nose three times. Then with a true queen's hauteur, she simply lifted her head out of reach. She didn't spook and she didn't get ugly, and a laughing cheer rose from the crowd. There were calls and compliments, and men grinned at Tim-Jim with respect.

That was with the sun splashing its last gold and crimson glory beyond the deep blue hills and with the tide of purple dusk racing down across the town. It being Saturday, most of the stores were open anyway, but in the Red Kid's honor, there was not a window that was not lighted up along the drag. Hermits who had not been seen for three months were drifting into town, and men who had been planning to take their womenfolk home sent them home alone. Carnival spirit swept like a strong smell, but there was something more than just excitement at a possible gunfight; there was that strange and unexplainable hero worship of the crowd for a gun king. Men jostled for the privilege of standing within the circle of his immediate contempt, and there were fights over precisely what he had said. The tough element had formed a guard of honor without the asking, and men who had talked directly to him, or bought him a drink, swaggered in his reflected glory. But most of all, his glitter spread over Tim-Jim. This was the boy who had caught his fancy, the one he trusted with his horse, and the one he had renamed Red. . . . This boy was close to the gun god.

It was two hours before the Red Kid came out wiping his mouth. From the horse's temper he formed a good picture of how Tim-Jim had acted and, pleased, he flipped him a five dollar gold piece.

The Kid said, "That ain't nothing! What I figure you've really earned is a ride home

on Speedy—and Red, you know what this ride is going to make you?”

“It is sure going to make me might chesty!” the boy admitted.

The Kid laughed. “And you’ll have reason! It is going to make you the only man on earth or in hell, barring me, who ever stayed on Speedy more than thirty seconds!”

He swung into leather and put down his hand, but he didn’t draw the boy up behind the cantle. He swung him over the pommel and let him hold the reins and do the pacing. Letting him down outside his house, he said, “Well Red, I aim to see a heap more of you, mebber more than you’d guess!”

Tim-Jim said, “That is sure swell of you!”

The Kid chuckled. “You feel minded, come by in the morning,” he said. “And you can earn ten dollars giving Speedy a scrub-down!”

“Ten dollars!” the boy gasped. “Why, I ought to be giving you ten dollars for the privilege, Mr. Red Kid!”

“Just call me Kid,” the gun king told him and turned his horse along. “That is good enough for a real pardner to use, Red!”

TIM-JIM was later than he’d ever been for supper, but too filled with excitement and rush to notice the graven stillness of his mother’s face as he told the story. He couldn’t gobble fast enough to get back out; this was one of the biggest nights Capitan had ever had and, though it was late, she let him go.

The Red Kid watched him leave on the run and then came forward from the deep shadows of a pine. He came in the shed door without knocking and without taking off his hat. The woman was at the sink, and her hands stopped movement at the drag of his spur upon the floor.

Without turning she said, “So you finally dropped by, Kid?”

He pulled the shades and poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. “Why the harshness, Matty?” he grunted. “It was you who ran out on me, I recollect.”

“That was five years ago,” she murmured. “And you’ve known where we were.”

“What did you run for?” he demanded.

She turned then; her gaze laid upon him with a molten glow. “The boy was getting where he could understand,” she told him. “I didn’t want those talky neighbors hurting him.”

His eyes splintered icy fire. “They’d not have talked behind my back but once.”

She shrugged. “The harm would have been done,” she said. She searched the swift violence surging beneath his contained expression. “You did not come to Capitan just to see us, Kid.”

“No,” he admitted. “I came on business. But that was before I saw the boy. He has got my heart and blood and pride in him, Matty. I aim to take you two with me when I ride out Tuesday night.”

Her hands gripped the sink until the knuckles stood out white. “Why don’t you leave us alone, Kid?” she breathed heavily. “He’s got friends in Capitan and a chance to amount to something—you can’t bring him anything but harm.”

“Harm my own boy?” he growled. “Are you loco? Give me ten years and I’ll make him the greatest rider in the West!”

“Longrider,” she corrected.

“Every ranch in the southwest was built on rustling!” he bit out. “Why play games? If it is a ranch you want, I’ll give it to you.”

“No,” she murmured. “I want him clean. I don’t want him hunted and hiding from posesses to feed his glory, Kid. I want him to earn his way honestly and know just where he stands.”

“Why argue?” he demanded irritably. “We ride out Tuesday and this is one thing where the law would back me.”

Her head lifted and she gave a long breath of scorn. “He will hate you when he finds out what you are!” she said. “You could not take him without force!”

“Is that so?” he rasped at her. “I reckon you mean he’d pick some milksop like this dude Randall, strictly as man to man?”

“I think he would,” she nodded. She made a woman’s sudden bitter gesture. “Whatever you touch is hurt and poisoned, Kid. What do you want to do that to him for?”

He came to his feet and stood there teetering on his heels, with a solid silver blaze firing in his eyes. “Did I ever hurt you?” he rasped.

Emotion tore the quiet beauty of her face. “I reckon you didn’t mean to, Kid!” she choked. “Mebbe it isn’t you—it’s yore life and you just can’t help it! But wherever you go there is trouble. Leave the boy alone!”

“No,” he snapped on a flat metallic key. “I will win him, and without telling him who I am or why.”

For a long space her eyes fought him, until his ruthless power licked her. She sat down hard, suddenly limp and spent. “I can’t fight you,” she told him with a toneless murmur. “But you will hurt him, and that will be its own punishment when you understand. Kid, you will wish the good Lord had struck you dead when you had glory, because it will drag you in the dust and leave you crawling, as you did once to Grace Volmere!”

His eyes dilated and the chill containment of a gun king dropped back over him. “I have given it out that I am on his trail,” he told her.

She looked at him with weary disillusion. "What is it, another cover?"

He nodded, watching her. "Tuesday," he said, "and don't try to turn the boy against me!"

"You will do that yoreself!" she said bitterly.

The Kid turned and swung out through the deep mottled shadows, and someone watching might then have realized the reason he wore red color. In shadow he scarcely showed at all, and in the moonlight, he formed an uncertain blob.

CHAPTER THREE

Too Big to Fight

WHEN Tim-Jim left the house he moved busily toward the main drag, and six men stopped him to ask questions about the Red Kid before he reached the main street. He was coming conscious of himself and the figure he cut; for the first time in his life he felt the demanding thirst of vanity, and pride bugled shrilly through him. His head was up and he walked with a truculent swagger, his mind occupied with thoughts of how long it would take him to save enough to buy a real six-shooter.

He came upon Bob Randall unexpectedly. Randall was leaning back in the deep thick shadows of the blacksmith door. The boy stopped dead, as if he might turn through the alley, but Randall had already seen him, and he hung his head and jammed his hands into his pockets and came doggedly on.

"Good evening, Tim-Jim," Randall greeted, and the boy answered a shade gruffly. He refused to look up, not wanting to see the friendliness of Randall's eyes.

Randall said, "I don't want a falling out with you over today, pardner."

Tim-Jim stared down at his dog. "There's nothing to fall out about," he said glumly. "You stuck yore nose out of place and got told off proper is all."

Big Tom came scowling from the forge, with a red hot piece of metal in his tongs. "If you used that tone to me," he grunted, "I'd blister yore little backside! Yore riding too high for one day's luck, chipmunk!"

The boy looked up stubbornly then. He said, "I made me five dollars today, and I am getting ten tomorrow for a job the Kid wouldn't trust anyone else to do!"

"That's no earning," Big Tom scoffed. "It is a common tip!"

Tim-Jim felt the heat flush up into his face and anger glossed his eyes with a damp shine. "What's wrong all of a sudden?" he demanded shrilly. "I been minding my own business and doing all right. You scared you

might have to pay decent wages after this, Big Tom?"

The blacksmith took a step forward and drew back his leg to land a well placed boot. Then something struck his thoughts and stopped him; he put his foot down carefully. "Don't," he warned on a thick, harsh tone, "come in here again until you've learned to hold a civil tongue!" He turned back through a wedge of deep shadow and came clear again in the deep red glow of the forge.

Randall said quietly, "Freshness has cost you a good friend, Tim-Jim. Don't let yore luck go to yore head!"

"I reckon I'll take care of myself all right!" the boy mumbled and scuffed across to the water trough. He stood there, near to bawling at his sense of loss, but behind that terrible hurt, something else was perking. Big Tom had meant to kick him and it was not kindness that had prevented him. Then light blazed through the boy's perplexity—tough and unyielding as he was, Big Tom was afraid of how the Red Kid might take that if he heard about it. The Red Kid's power and glory were already spreading to the boy and, clasping that fact as a guard against his inward ache, Tim-Jim told himself, *All right, let 'em think what they want! The Red Kid likes me and thinks I'm worth good money, and he's worth every man in this damned sand tank anyway.*

The Red Kid stabled his horse at Mulligan's and took the only suite at the hotel, and lay down for a time to smoke and have his black private thoughts. Not in five years had he really missed his son, but now he would miss him like the devil. He thought of Matty's harsh claim that the boy would hate him and tried to puzzle out her viewpoint.

He scowled and felt violence fluting through him, and then mashed out his cigarette and brought his rising temper into check. *She's a woman and afraid of danger and insecurity,* he told himself. *But the boy is a man, and he will see things my way. Hurt him! God, I'd chop off my right hand first! That boy has what it takes!*

He shaved and changed his shirt and went back to the Star. The crowd elbowed in to buy his drinks but he was still moody, and it showed up in his drinking. He was edging on nastiness when Randall came into the bar in company with J. T. Emmett and Jay Bone again.

The bar was crowded and noisy and thick with movement and the group moved almost against the backs of the men lined along the bar. As they passed, the Kid lurched back, coming up hard against Randall's elbow. He turned with a curse and then saw who it was and his body went cold sober. Liquor showed only in the wicked deviltry floating

hot upon the surface of his hard gray eyes.

"Why, damn you, Randall!" he exploded. "You are the pushingest hombre I ever met on any trail. They tell me you pushed into town and into local business and then tried to push a railroad through; this afternoon you were pushing yore big nose in the boy's business, and now, by God, you are pushing me with yore elbow! You need cutting down to size, mister."

RANDALL paled slightly and licked his lips. With fists he might have stood a chance, but no real gun king would stoop to dirtying his hands that way. He could feel Emmett and Jay Bone standing aside and watching him; they might have said a word to help, but they wanted to see how he handled this. He was surprised more than frightened and had no idea himself, and out of his surprise murmured thoughtlessly, "It was an accident," and hoped that was a decent way out of things.

The Kid poked his hat back upon his fiery mane and leaned his elbows back against the bar. He lifted a loud derisive snort through the dead quiet. "Like hell it was! I smashed plumb into you!"

This threw the fight square at Randall and anger at the damned foolishness of the whole affair was kindling in him slowly. He said now, straight and clear, "If it is the boy you are mad about, you should be mad at yourself. In one afternoon you did him more harm than any beating you could give him."

The Kid was taken aback and slowly stiffened at the bar. This put a wrong upon him in public, but worse, one privately close to his heart. For a moment, he had the crazy notion that Randall must have been listening to the conversation down at Matty's. The deviltry left him and his eyes turned chill as old gray ice.

"What I did was give the boy some pride and manhood!" he rasped out.

"And easy money," Randall told him. "So that never again will he be satisfied with what a boy can make honestly!"

"Mebbe he was worth it!" the Kid growled.

Randall shrugged. "A young boy can't always get what he is worth, and now you've spoiled his pleasure in making his way up. If you really like him, you have done him a terrible injustice, Kid; you have brought him trouble and cost him friends and put a fresh chip on his shoulder that he never had before."

Small squares of red mottled the Kid's cheeks. He said with stubborn temper, "A boy needs a little roughness in him, and I'll be the judge of what I do for him. But you give me a wide trail hereafter, Randall, and keep yore big nose in place or I will put

it there for you. I will put it two feet deep right out on Boothill mister!"

For an instant longer, the Kid laid the silver fire of his killer's gaze straight on Randall, but he was held in check, for by now doubt beat at him. Matty had said it and now this damned weak-gutted dude had accused him of it. . . . what in hell was going wrong with the world? He pivoted back abruptly to his drink, but his mood was explosive and dark; a gun king could be bad and not give a damn, but it was not within the vanity of a man who meted out death to be wrong. He could not tolerate a reflection or a doubting of his judgment, particularly from this man.

Randall moved on by, face flushed with anger, and yet conscious that nothing had been settled. His jaws hardened as he saw Emmett and Jay Bone avoid his eyes and followed them back to where Prentiss and Reilley were waiting at a table. Emmett signaled for a bottle and cards and sat chewing at his iron gray mustache without a word until they came. In a way, Randall had stood up to the Kid, but it was not the rough and tumble, four-square way of the range.

It was Randall who broke the taut silence, demanding, "Well, what should I have done, then?"

Emmett lifted his glass and studied the deep red color of the liquor and then tossed it neat. Wiping his lips he grunted with suspended judgment, "You should not have made a play this afternoon, Bob, which you could not back."

"Damn it, a man can't stand by and see harm done!" Randall scowled.

Emmett shrugged. "If he can't stop it, then he has to. You put the Kid in the wrong just now and stood him off with that. But if he sticks around, he will find ways to make you crawl and squirm, and the toughs will not forget it. Yore life will be miserable until you've had some kind of showdown. The whole range is here tonight and you've left this hanging as unfinished business, Bob."

Randall made a wry face. "In the meantime, I have lost what respect I had with you gentlemen!"

Jay Bone said fairly, "Nobody is accusing you of being yellow; yo're no gun hand and it was a tough case to handle. But a man can sometimes do more harm than good trying to do the right thing, Randall, and a smart man has to figure those things in advance."

Randall murmured almost to himself, "What I am really most concerned about is the boy. I don't want to see him get in trouble."

Jay Bone blew against his upper lip with cynical thought and said, "Ten trigger-happy kids will grow out of the Red Kid's visit to Capitan—unless Grace Volmere comes in and

drops him dead. Tim-Jim would not be the first case where a burst of gun glory has turned a young boy's head."

Emmett poured another shot and said philosophically, "This is deeper than just you personally, Randall. In a way, this is a test of whether the country has really changed or not—a showdown between good and bad."

"With bad taking the pot," Randall grimaced. "Well there is still time to use my head."

He nodded and got up and left the party, and the men watched him move through the thick blue tobacco smoke that waved in layers down the bar. Emmett scowled, "Feeling the way he does, I'd have no use for him if he had not stepped out today and breasted the Kid. Yet he has made a fool of himself."

Jay Bone growled, "The trouble is, you want that railroad but you ain't sure enough of Randall."

Emmett gave an irritated grin. He said, "Remind me not to play poker with you, Jay!"

AT SUNDAY breakfast, Mrs. Cantrell said very carefully, "You know, when I was yore age, Tim-Jim, this was still outlaw country. Every man took what he could any way he could and held it only as long as he was able by his gunhand. Nobody thought of what was right or wrong, and nobody gave a hoot about building the country up, and it was not unusual for a man to rob his best friend."

The boy's eyes had been sparkling, but they went wide and indignant at that. "That was pretty low and rough!" he muttered.

"Then men like Mr. Emmett cleaned things up," she said, "and later, a new crop of young men began to come along, men who wanted to build the country and make it prosperous, so there would be enough work for everyone—men like yore friend, Bob Randall."

The boy hung his head and pushed a potato around his plate. "Bob's all right," he conceded. "But he bit off more'n he could chew last evening."

"Doesn't everyone do that sometimes?" she asked.

"I bet the Red Kid don't!"

"He is mighty brave, they say," she told him lightly. "But how about the bunch that hang around him, Tim-Jim?"

"The toughs?" he grunted. "Shucks, ma, he treats 'em like dirt! They don't mean a thing to him." He forked his potato and held it in a ray of sunlight. "He's like those knights you used to tell about—he'd fight anything, I'll bet, but he wouldn't mess with a dirty trick." He looked at her suddenly, wanting her to believe him. "Why, gee willikins, look how he rode in here to bust up

Volmere! The way the ranchers figure that's all that can save 'em from a heavy raiding."

"You don't think the Red Kid would pull anything like that?" she asked.

He colored with indignation. "Why, heck, no! He's got too much pride to stoop to thieving."

She smiled then and the tight fear at the corners of her pretty eyes eased out. "Don't ever let yore honesty go, Tim-Jim. It is a mighty solid thing to have."

"You betcha!" He nodded. "But I'm learning something—a man needs real guts to back it."

"Yes," she answered. "And often that kind of guts don't show."

He looked at her curiously, but her mind had gone off on something else and he busied himself at small chores until ten o'clock. The Kid wasn't down yet and he told the clerk at the hotel he'd wait, but the clerk said with curious, wide-eyed respect, "He left special word for you to go right up."

That was the way the day began and within the hour the word had spread and he was right on top. The Kid took him to second breakfast and then around to the stables and let Tim-Jim bring the horse out by himself and give her a morning warmup with a halter rope. He started him off with the scrubbing just to be sure Speedy would not act up and then, leaving him to run the show, told the stable boss and all and sundry, "Anyone Red thinks is bothering Speedy, he can say so and they better damn well shove off!"

He left then, and Tim-Jim got his first real fill of pride and glory. He was no longer just a friend of the Red Kid's, he was the man who could handle Speedy, who could scrub her and lift her tail and hoofs and, with nothing but a halter rope, make her pace off.

He was a celebrity on his own and top wranglers came in to hang around and talk seriously with him about Speedy's mouth and hoofs and spirit, and the endless things horsemen give great importance to and talk about. He had to tell two boys out of the stableyard for fooling and making Speedy nervous, and arrogant authority rose through him as he did it, and where they had meant to mimic him, they felt the sting of a full man's force and got. He swaggered a little, surprised at himself, but liking it, and no grown man who drifted back there gave him any lip or accused him of sass. They accepted the fact that he was boss and paid attention to his wishes, and there was no hazing or horseplay, and no ill will that he forbid it.

What with talk and all, the job took most of the day. The country was shaking out of its glaring sea of haze when the Kid drifted back. He noted that even Speedy's hoofs were polished, and he grunted with honest

admiration, "Red, that is a damned good job! If she would let you do that, she'll let you ride her."

Tim-Jim swallowed hard. "You mean, alone?"

"Nothing else but," the Kid nodded. "Break out her bridle and saddle."

He cinched her himself, but he let the boy put on the bridle, and his only help was to lead Speedy through the alley after the boy had hit the saddle. Tim-Jim took her for a walk and then a canter, and at a signal from the Kid, rode her a mile out and back at a hard gallop. The Kid watched the boy's handling, a real amazement mixing with his pride and humor. "There ain't nobody, man or boy," he vouched twice, "who could ever make her behave that way before Red!"

The boy was darned near choked with self importance when he went home, and feeling the respect due his new status at school next day, he took offense at a rib from Hastings, and built a fight out of it. They had fought before and Tim-Jim had come out the worst of it, but today he gritted his teeth and fought with a spirit he'd never had. The bully felt it with surprise, but he had nearly double years and weight and had Tim-Jim flattened out and gasping, when anger rose through the smaller boy in a blinding flame. He saw a loose picket from the fence, and, squirming loose, ran and grabbed it and slammed the bully on the head.

It laid Hastings out cold, and not even Miss Spriggs but was secretly glad. But it showed a new side to Tim-Jim, something never before suspected, and solidly behind him as their hero, the other schoolboys were still a little shocked. He felt the distance that it put between them and in that moment it came to him that never again would their relationship be quite the same. They might respect him more, they might follow like a herd and lick his boots, but the days of close and intimate and careless comradeship was gone. From here on, he would walk not only in the glory of the mighty, but also in the solitude that held them from the crowd. In that instant, he knew the full importance and the vast loneliness of kings.

He felt kind of bad, when his temper cooled, to think he'd taken a weapon to Hastings, but the other boys were giving him a new and rather awed respect. He was still uncertain when he drifted into town and found the news had proceeded him.

Bob Randall stopped him on the street and said with quiet disapproval, "I hear you beat Bully Hastings, Tim-Jim."

"Yeah," the boy admitted and glowered at the boardwalk. "He got out of turn and he had it coming anyway, I reckon."

"But you should not have struck him with

a club," Bob Randall chided him. "He is a lot bigger and needed a good lambasting, but that isn't fair play, Tim-Jim."

The boy moved awkwardly in his boots and grunted harshly, "But damn it, he asked for what he got!"

"But not with a club," Randall insisted.

"No," the Red Kid's metallic voice cut in on them. "You should have taken a hoss and ridden the damned bully into the dust!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Rustler's Range

THEY looked up and the Kid was lounging against a post upon a stoop, a hard and unyielding approval in the glance he shot at Tim-Jim. "When a man rides you or crowds you or throws around his weight," he said, "you catch him any way you can, except the back, just so long as you win, Red."

The boy's face lighted eagerly. "You don't think I done wrong, then?"

The Kid gave a snort of derision. "What did yore school chums think?"

"Well, they were kinda surprised but awful glad," Tim-Jim told him.

"Then there's yore answer," the Kid said. He put his gaze on Randall and arrogant mockery floated in his eyes. "You've got to beat respect into the world," he said. "There is only one thing worse than losing, and that is a man who won't fight at all!"

Randall said, "When the reason is there, a man fights and fights fair and does the best he can!"

"The reason is there when any other man breasts you or doubts you or says be damned!" the Kid grunted.

Randall darkened but his jaw line was hard. He turned to the boy. "What do you say, Tim-Jim?"

The boy squirmed with discomfort at this veiled feud between two friends, but he felt the Red Kid's eyes upon him and the Kid had spoken clear enough and made it stick. He said, "Well, gee, Bob, I'm the smallest fella in school and I been taking an awful hazing and got no respect for it. But today they were all for me, no matter how I won! 'Course, I wouldn't do a trick like that except with a bully!"

The Kid chuckled, and Randall's jaws gripped harder. He murmured stiffly, "A man picks his own trail," and moved along his way. The Kid asked confidentially, "Sorry, Red?" and the boy raised his head and swallowed some part of his youth into the past and shook his head.

"No," he muttered, "I aim to win from now on, Kid!"

The two spur-dragged along the clapboards, the Kid with his stiff, truculent gun king's gait, the boy unconsciously doing his best to copy it. They came to Merritt's alley where the blaze of sun slashed through, and Geronimo stopped dead with ears forward and hackles rising and gave a deep throated growl. The Hastings dog was down the alley, a big dog with big bones and big muscles, and the light of an unchallenged bully in its eyes.

"Geronimo, you stay close now!" the boy commanded.

The Kid stopped and sized the two dogs up and murmured, "Why don't you let Geronimo clean him up and make it a full day with the Hastings, Red?"

The boy moved awkwardly in his boots and his face grew a little tense. "Geronimo is awful small," he answered.

"You have got fifteen dollars you've done made," the Kid allowed, "and there is a classy saddle and outfit down at Stamms for fifty. You let me do yore betting for you and get a good dog fight started here, and we'll make us that saddle and give yore dog some pride besides."

He's game," the boy mumbled. "But look at his size, Kid!"

The Kid grunted, "Look at my size alongside some of the hombres I've humbled!"

The boy looked white, but he pulled his fifteen dollars from his pocket and gave it to the Kid, and the Kid turned and ripped out a high pitched trail call that quickly gathered the loafing crowd. "Red Cantrell," he said, "aims to back his dog agin that big Hastings maverick, and I am with him. Where is a man that says two-to-one on Hastings' mutt?"

"Why, Kid, that Hastings dog is cock of the walk in town!" some loafer said. "I got me ten dollars says so, but I didn't ever hope to see the day I'd be taking money off the Red Kid!"

"You ain't taken it yet," the Kid told him and put the stakes in old Buzz Neidler's hat. Others came forward and the two Reds finally had laid out a hundred and five dollars. The Kid said to Tim-Jim, "All right, sic that half pint of dynamite on that big yokel, Red!"

The boy said on a tight, sick note, "Sic him, Geronimo!" and then at the dog's fast glance of surprised glee, he came excited and yelled shrilly, "Rush him and rip the guts out of him and make him crawl!"

Geronimo filled the alley with his bark and dove in fast, getting the advantage of surprise, for Hastings' dog was used to smelling fear instead of fight, and was not fully expecting this. The crowd yelled and whooped it up, and the dogs knew they had an audience and gloried in it. The fight spilled out of the alley into the street, and the thickening

crowd jostled and one of the Beedler boys crashed through Jane's Hardware window, raising a laugh, and giving an opportunity for pilfering that cost Jane close to fifty dollars.

Tim-Jim was following the fight with the intent excitement of a trainer. He was unconscious of his crowd, his face deep with color, his shrill voice hoarse as he yelled encouragement and orders. Both dogs were covered with blood, and Geronimo's strength was ebbing under the other dog's driving weight. But he was smaller and cooler in his fighting spirit and, watching his chance, finally dove in under the big dog's guard and got a real hold on his windpipe. The big dog went berserk and threw his weight around, intent now on nothing but freeing himself of that tightening hold. Geronimo's small jaws did not have the strength to close, but every throw of the big dog's head acted on his teeth like a hammer. Suddenly, the Hastings dog leaped high in the air with a convulsive moment so hard it knocked Geronimo loose, and the boy's face fell, but the Hastings dog did not come back at Geronimo with killing temper. It dropped in its tracks, and wheezed a pitiful yelp, and crawled a way, and then fell with its legs under it grotesquely, blood bubbling from its throat and its eyes glazing.

Geronimo walked in a circle around it, stiff of leg, and proud, truculence in every line of him. He stopped suddenly and then lifted a bay of victory to the skies.

The Kid said, "That Hastings mutt is good as dead," and looked around the crowd. Nobody moved for a moment, and he snapped out his gun and put a shot into its head and, looking at one of the toughs who formed his court, grunted curtly, "Get the carcass out of sight."

TIM-JIM stood there trembling and wide-eyed; he hadn't meant the fight to end like this. He dropped on his knees and saw to Geronimo's wounds and some of them were pretty bad, and he picked him up and took him to the horse trough for patching. But this was automatic; that last pitiful look in the Hastings dog's glazing eyes filled him as a cold storm wind fills the mountain valleys. Death, even a dog's death, had no place in the golden sunlight of late afternoon.

The Kid came over with the winnings in his hand and the grinning crowd following. Geronimo squirmed loose and licked himself; he was spent, but he was proud and he knew the crowd was admiring him, and from time to time he let his wounds go and took a stiff, truculent walk around as if looking for another battle.

The Kid said, "That dog of yores will never be chased again, Red!"

The boy murmured, "Yeah," and gave a hard grin to cover the terrible feelings in him. What he wanted to do was go find that big dog's carcass and take it home to Bully Hastings, and blubber right out to him that he hadn't meant this to happen. But the Kid's ruthless mettle lay upon him, and the crowd was watching for some sign of weaknesses and, vaguely surprising to the boy, Geronimo was more friendly than he ever had been. He couldn't let the Kid down and mope out on this, and the only way he could keep from busting wide open was to get up and swagger and talk rough, which he did.

Just once he caught sight of Bob Randall's face, and Bob's expression was concerned and hurt as if it had been Geronimo, or even the boy himself, in the big dog's place. For that instant their glances met, and Randall's gaze drilled him, and the boy felt something heavy jump and thud inside of him, and thought he was going to crack. But right then the Kid told the crowd boastfully, "Well now, I reckon Geronimo's finished up what Red here couldn't do to them that crosses him! That leaves it to me to clean up that skunk Volm-
mere if he comes in, or else trail him and cut off his hide!"

Somebody called out, "What do you aim to do about him, Kid?"

"I aim to wait in town until full dark tomorrow night," the Kid sang back. "He is a skunk, and his friends can tell him I said that, but he claims he is not yellow, and if he isn't, I have a hunch he will ride in to meet me about sundown."

Excitement ran through the crowd like a driving sandstorm. The crowd's high temper would show in its drinking before night, and there would be fights and general hell and mayhem, and out of the hell and racket and high liquor, there would be damage and thieving and maybe worse things the town would remember for a long time after he had gone.

On the edge of the crowd, Wyatt, the banker, turned away with Bob Randall and Tom Billings, scowling thoughtfully, "If that gun king stays around another week, every small depositor in this country will be busted. Men who can't afford fifty dollars for vittles or building have been in town all week-end, guzzling and gambling twice that!"

Billings growled, "The toughs will be night-riding for a long time after he has left. It has been fifteen years since they had Vigilantes here, but I am thinking it may come again."

Randall's face was gray and set like iron. The boy's bravado and swagger over the dog's death were still on his mind. Now it struck him the Red Kid's effect upon the boy was the same as his effect upon the whole town, ex-

cept that in Tim-Jim's case it was clearer cut and sharper.

Out of his thoughts, he said aloud, "Damn it, he just doesn't get the picture! He has never shown any signs this way before."

Big Tom Billings looked at him and scowled, "The Kid has gone to his head, Bob and you might as well forget him. A thing like this is like a rotten apple—once it has touched another, the other one grows rotten too."

"No," Randall answered stubbornly. "Any woman will tell you you can cut out the bad spot if you catch it soon enough. There is a way to make the boy see things clearly somehow, and I will find it."

"Be careful," Wyatt warned, "that in the doing, we don't get to see daylight through you."

Randall gave him a bleak look and then nodded and turned off on some business. Watching him go, Big Tom grunted, "I dunno if he is brave or a damned fool, but if he is set to do something about the boy, he will have to bring it to a showdown before the Kid lights out, or he will never rate in this town after."

Wyatt said, "He is real liable to be fertilizing boothill by then," and shook his head. "It is too bad he hit the wrong country. He is a man who would build a country instead of leeching on it, but I am afraid this range is too tough for him."

THE dog fight had started the crowd's blood lust hammering and row liquor added to it; there were fights and robberies that night. One man crippled, and two men held up and frisked right in Merritt's alley. In the midst of this roaring hell and mayhem, the Kid preened his vanity and found amusement; he got two young bucks fighting with lasso rope wrapped around their knuckles, so that they finished the fight with flesh shredded clean to the waist in ribbons. Intermittently, he dropped a word that kept alive the idea that Grace Volm-
mere would ride in to meet him tomorrow sundown.

Out of the liquor and gab, this story grew of itself, until suddenly the town was electrified with the statement from somewhere that Volm-
mere had sent word in he was coming and would shoot on sight.

The Kid's hard gray eyes glossed with arrogant amusement, and he said carelessly, "I will be waiting when he gets here!"

That story ran out onto the range, and the ranchers heard it with curses. Emmett called in his foreman and growled irritably, "You'd best take the boys in town in a bunch and whip 'em back tomorrow night. They will sneak off for that fight anyway—wild horses couldn't stop 'em."

"What about you?" the foreman asked.

"It is my spread," Emmett told him sourly. "So I will be the one stuck with watching it."

Bully Hastings did not come to school next day, and the boys kept darting glances of profound respect at Tim-Jim, but at recess and lunch, their old friendliness was missing. They strutted for him, they followed him, they tried to impress him, and they hung on every cocky boasting word he said. But the old days were gone—he was something aloof and beyond them as a star, now, and they would follow his light, but never again would they approach him intimately.

He missed their wild colt closeness, he even missed their hazing, and would have changed things back, but now he knew there was nothing to do about it. Nobody fell in with him after school. Three of the boys hung around, awkwardly suggesting they might all go fishing, but that put him conscious of his new position and he swallowed his hot, crowding loneliness and told them arrogantly, "Naw, I got to see the Kid on business!"

He moved into town and found nearly every man on the range there. But the Kid wasn't taking part in the fun today; he moved alone, his mind occupied, face hard and contained, every thought and movement concentrated upon the business in the offing.

He relaxed at sight of the boy, but he was still distant when he said, "I will be riding out tonight and Speedy needs a warm-up to oil her joints. How would you like to ride her out to Emmett's and bring in yore hoss so we can get the right fitting on that bit and saddle?"

The boy was torn between the pride and glory of taking Speedy out alone, and thoughts of missing the big fight.

The Kid gave a short laugh. "Volmere will come in after sundown, if at all," he grunted. "He will hope to get me trigger nervous with the wait. You ride fast and don't dally and you'll have time to see the fireworks, Red."

Tim-Jim muttered, "Sure," and they moved around to the stables. "I'll ride out a half mile and walk back in," the Red Kid told him. "I need the air."

Riding around from the stables, the Kid stopped to call in, "If Volmere shows, tell him I am coming back to riddle him."

He put the horse into motion up the long liver colored grade, and from the hump looked out at the horizon and saw dust trails cutting from every direction. A faint smile touched the corners of his thin lips. "There ain't going to be many hombres left on the range," he commented. "That is Emmett's outfit now, ain't it, Red?"

"Yeah, every one of 'em!" the boy said. "But I reckon old man Emmett stayed."

The Kid swung out of leather and said a word to the horse to behave. The boy asked suspiciously, "You ain't just shoving me out of town for the trouble?"

"For the fun, you mean?" the Kid chuckled. "You be back by dusk and it will be time aplenty."

He wigwagged and started back down the hill past the grove of cottonwoods. Tim-Jim put the horse into movement, and was riding with fair self-assurance when he came up with the Emmett outfit. They stopped to grin and ask the gossip, and give their whole hearted admiration of the horse.

When he told them what he was after, the foreman said, "Hell, Tim-Jim, we done moved yore pony out of the pasture with the other two-year-olds, out to Clover Mountain."

The boy's face came sharp with worry and he asked, "Reckon I can make it there and back to town, leading, by sundown?"

"You cut across Flat Valley about a mile above South Saddle and you'll make it," the foreman nodded. He suddenly grinned. "You see Two Gun Volmere loping around out there, don't stop to chat with him. He'd take a mighty big fancy to the Red Kid's hoss!"

"He'll have to ride some to catch me," the boy answered boastfully, and they nodded and passed along their separate ways. The hills were full of riders coming in. Only two dust smokes plumed outward from the town, the boys', and a solitary rider far back of him.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Testing of Sundown Kid

HE PUT Speedy in a long-legged, easy run and cut down across the valley looking with interest at the scattered bunches of cattle, breaking out of their fan into little herds and drifting. It was going to cost a couple of days' real hard work to make up for the fence riders going off to town that way, but a cowboy would let the whole range go to the dogs rather than miss a big first rate shooting.

He found the cavvy of two-year-olds about where the foreman had said, and cut out his pinto pony. He cornered it and, after some difficulty, dropped a loop upon it and, fixing a halter knot, began the ride back in. He saw a rider along the ranch side of the valley, and was vaguely surprised any of the bunch had stayed on range, and then twice, saw riders on the other side of him.

What surprised him more was their activity; every once in a while he could hear them let out a whoop or shout, and there were bursts of faint drumming on the air as they gathered small herds in a bunch.

But most of his thoughts were on the

excitement that lay ahead, and he pressed the horses to get back for the gun battle. When he thought of it, something hard pressed in his throat and his heart rattled and stood still. The picture of the Hastings dog lying in its spreading blood was still sharp in him, and this picture mixed with a picture of a fallen man and chilled him—but it would not, he told himself, be the Red Kid.

The sun was lowering and the long shadows crept out as he reached his turnoff from the valley. South Saddle lay due ahead and to his right, a rocky pass into the maze of canyon country that lay south, a country so torn and eroded and rough that when cows drifted down in there, nobody ever bothered much to find them. It had been used as a hideout in the old days by rustlers, and a stronghold by Apaches, and it was probably where the Grace Volmere bunch had holed up.

The valley bottled in at this point, and twisted, and he saw the rider on his left again, riding back of him and parallel. Something in the man's ride struck him and he could have sworn it was Bob Randall. He squinted hard, but the rider was against the sun and it was hard to see. At the same time, he was dimly conscious of a hard and growing drumming sound, and then he caught the wild, berserk bawl of stampeding cattle as the head of the wedge tore around the bend in the valley.

He looked back and saw the low, charging level of horns ahead of the boiling cloud of dust and a boy's fright filled him. A high pitched yell suddenly ripped out of the hills running down into the saddle, and a call slammed at him across the valley, "This side, Red, and cast that lead pony free!"

Speedy's head was high and her movements growing nervous; she was sucking deep lungfuls of air and listening to that growing noise and her eyes were spooking. The boy didn't know who had called, but it was from the far side of the valley, and he reined up,

torn with indecision, trying to figure the reason for those orders.

Behind him, the full width of the stampeding wedge suddenly crowded the valley. He heard the yell again, but couldn't understand it, in any case, he didn't want to leave his pony. He tried to put Speedy into a gallop for the near wall. But Speedy spooked and suddenly fought him and, impatient at his attempt to rein her, threw him. She did it deliberately, knowing just how to do it, and lit out for the far side of the valley.

The boy lay for a moment, dazed with the impact, still clutching the lead rope of his pulling pony. He heard another yell, a different voice and nearer, but the words were lost in the booming drum of those berserk dogie's hoofs. A figure came racing down off the near side of the valley, angling against the oncoming wedge of noise and dust.

Tim-Jim clambered to his feet and saw now the wedge was almost on top of him, and pulled desperately at his pony's rope. Bob Randall raced up and pulled short and snatched him from the ground and, riding alongside his pony, plopped him on its back. He shot the boy a grim smile of confidence. "Can you stick?"

Tim-Jim nodded and threw one look back, and then didn't want to look back again. The lead of the wedge had seen the motion of the horses and veered as stampeding cattle will to follow any movement, and was galloping down atop of them. There wasn't time to angle back across the front of the herd; there was no time for anything except to light up the valley fast. Randall put his horse into full gallop, gradually bending toward the near side of the valley. The boy saw then why the other rider had called him; the valley wall was pitched at a steep angle in a high footledge for a full mile. A horse could slide down it, but getting up would be pure luck.

Randall was actually leading the crazed stampede now, and he thundered on past the



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entrance to South Saddle, to where the valley suddenly spread out into a plain, broken and gouged with big ravines and drybeds. They were near the slope of the other wall now, and he charged up; wheeling out onto a shelf. The boy followed, and the head of the stampede went by him near enough to touch. But the herd had not followed up here; dust and the rough land that lay below had confused and broken it; most of it went galloping off in a dozen splitting bunches, losing itself and before long, running its fright out in those gulches.

Randall was breathing hard, but forced a grin and said, "We made it!"

Tim-Jim was regarding him with big eyes and a somewhat shamed expression. "When did you learn to do that?" he asked.

Randall chuckled, "Well, just between the two of us, I didn't know what to do, Tim-Jim!"

"You mean you risked yore neck jist to help me if you could?" the boy asked.

Randall made a negligent gesture. "What would you do for a friend?"

"Whoever was across the way didn't try nothing," the boy muttered. "He just sang out to come over there and let yore pony go, Red."

Randall's gaze snapped across the purple shadows deepening in the valley. "He called you Red?" he muttered thoughtfully. "And Speedy took out that way, didn't she?"

"She was spooked up with the stampede," the boy said. "Gee, the Kid will give me the devil, won't he?"

Sundown was still bright upon the crests of the hills across the valley, but no horseman showed a silhouette. Once Randall thought he made out movement in the saddle, but dusk was rapidly filling the hollows and it was hard to tell. There was a vague pulsing of the air that might have been galloping hoofs, but the cattle were still milling and bawling, and some were spooking up in fresh bursts of stampede, and the sound was uncertain.

Randall said, "Well, we better be getting back," and moved his horse along. They came abreast of Emmett who reined up to find out what the racket was, and they told him, and Emmett scowled, "Those damned cows can get flooded out in those drybeds if there's a cloudburst! But at least, they're safe—I'll ride in with you and help to bring the crew back."

NIGHT lay black and velvet all around them. Due ahead, the town cast its carnival glow upon the dust cloud hanging overhead. They racked and the boy scampered away to find the Kid, and found him hard-breathing and red of eye in front of

the Star. He had the smell of dust and fast hard riding about him, and the boy noticed that, but lost the thought in his sense of guilt and shame.

He started to talk, but the Kid grabbed him by the shoulders and looked at him attentively and muttered, "So yo're all right, Red?"

"Why, yeah," the boy answered, puzzled, "But how did you know?"

Emmett and Randall had drawn nearby and were talking in low voices as they looked at Speedy, ground-hitched where the smoking yellow light slanted out in an oblique sheet from the Star. Wildness was still in her, and she gave off the heat of a hard run.

"She drifted back alone," the Kid grunted on a sudden flinty turn of voice. "I was down trail scouting to see if that skunk Volmere was sneaking in when she come along."

Yardley spotted J. T. Emmett from down street and sang out at him, "J.T., here is that express telegram you been waiting for!"

Emmett laid a hard and piercing glance upon the Kid, and then moved by to get his telegram. Something in his look brought Lazy E's foreman up sharp, and he grunted at a cowprod, "Round up the bunch, Larry."

The Kid's face hardened, and balance came into his whole body. The boy was blabbing out the story of the stampede, and the Kid could feel the town's good will reach out like a tide around Randall. This was the kind of thing the town had wanted to think of him and not been able, and the friendliness and pride of him it brought out had a solid, rooted feeling.

Emmett stood on the express platform, reading his message in the light from the door. Now he turned and called to Randall and there was a sharpness, but a note of respect too, in his voice. The crowd came aware of mystery and cross tides moving under the surface of things, and in its suspended curiosity, took much of its attention and worship from the gun king.

J. T. Emmett marched back upstreet, and said, clear for all to hear, "Grace Volmere ain't on this range at all, Kid. He has been seen riding south this side of Jackson Hole."

The Kid's face turned inscrutable as lead. "Then I will ride north and meet him," he rasped.

Emmett looked around for the men who would side him, but could not find them. He had not reached a full decision yet, but he said, "It is damned funny I had a bunched stampede down the valley this evening, and just at sundown. Those herds were scattered and somebody bunched 'em, and would have been sweet raiding if they had turned up through the saddle, which they would have done, except for Bob Randall."

He let his gaze linger speculatively upon the Kid a spell, and the town read what lay in his suspicions. The Kid had been missing a good bit of that afternoon, and come in hot and fast after he claimed he'd found Speedy. This fight with Volmere would have been a good play to draw hands in off the range, while his outfit made a raid and got the rustled stock moving. And the Kid would have been in the clear, with Tim-Jim out on his horse—it would have looked as if Volmere were there and rather do some rustling than fighting.

Everyone had known the Kid had rustled in his time. Suspicion of him drifted sharply through the crowd, and with it, the inbred hatred of cattlemen for rustlers gathered like heat pools through the town.

The Kid felt that, but knew he was in the clear for now. Emmett was his greatest danger, but Emmett would not move without the other big ranchers, and there was as yet no real proof against him. He looked at the boy, and the boy was kind of white and tense with things he felt but did not understand.

A hard smile traveled across the Kid's lips. He said, "Well, it was lucky and no harm was done, Red."

RANDALL'S eyes pierced the Kid with his thoughts. "Red," he repeated slowly, and turned his attention on the boy. "Does it have a familiar ring when he calls you that, Tim-Jim?"

The boy's face was working, and his jaws were set, and the shine of dampness was bright upon his eyes. He shook his head violently. "Not what you mean, Bob!" he blurted. "The Kid wouldn't stoop to rustling—would you, Kid?"

Something hard and metallic slipped into place within the Kid and his eyes turned bleak. "I don't get what you're driving at, Randall," he stated on a flat, cold note. "Unless you aim to say I was the one who called Red out there at the stampede."

"When Speedy spooked, she moved in the direction of the call," Randall answered. His voice was high; it held a crackling edge, but his jaw was determined. "And wherever you caught her, you rode Speedy back in town."

The Kid hitched at his belts and his eyes grew deadly. Affront came out of him like a strong smell, and fight was up in him like a trumpet sound. He said harshly, "Mister, I don't like that kind of talk! Get out in the street, Randall, and back it with lead!"

Randall turned white, but he had his gun on and he had spoken out, thinking just this might happen. He turned with unflinching

determination, and walked straight out into the dust. The Kid moved after him, stiff and truculent as a bulldog facing an enemy, filled with killing hate, yet contemptuous of Randall for all that.

Emmett muttered, "Good God, this is murder! But what can you do about it?" half to himself.

Tim-Jim heard him, and it galvanized him into action. He went running out, busting between the two men, and sobbing with great wracking breath. He flung his arms around Randall's waist, "This ain't fair, Kid!" he called out shrilly. "He can't even use a gun proper!"

The Kid stopped dead and his full attention riveted on the boy and the way he had thrown himself into Randall's defense. Against the back of his mind, a stream of thoughts were smashing. . . . Matty's words, that he would hurt the boy . . . the fact that it had been his fault Tim-Jim was nearly killed that afternoon . . . what Randall had said about the harm he'd done him . . . Randall saving him at the risk of his neck.

He raised his head, but did not look at Randall. He stood there as if listening to some distant sound. He sensed the waves of feelings drifting off the crowd—the friendliness for Randall, the grim suspicion of himself, the sudden draining of his popularity. Worst of all, he felt the bitterness mounting in the boy as he began to figure things—

He shook his head clear and looked around the circle of grim, shadowed faces, and only on the faces of the toughs did he find a spark of approval, or the least remaining shred of homage. This was no longer an arena fight between two professional gun kings; it was something that touched the homely, daily life of the range and town. It was something that could happen to any of them, something personal, and part of each of them was right out there with Randall. It was not Randall alone who would be killed for this—it was something solid and human and good that was in all of them and was ready to die rather than see mischief done.

But the thing that touched the Red Kid deepest was that bursting disillusion in the boy. The boy had fathomed him and knew now that he'd been the one to call him. Maybe the boy didn't understand that hearing her master's voice when she was spooked, Speedy would not have gone the other way, and that was the reason he had taken the chance of the longer crossing. But the boy did know he had been on range somehow, and had been set to rustle J. T. Emmett. And now he saw the Kid as the monster of fast gun

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play who would coldly shoot down the best friend he'd ever had and the man who had saved him, risking his own neck, and the only man in that town who had the nerve to speak straight out to the Kid.

The fact smashed him, and turned like a hot knife in his guts, and he sucked a long, whistling breath between his teeth. He couldn't have the boy hating him, and it struck him hard that Matty had been right, and his life had been wrong all along.

He said sidewise to Emmett, "Take the boy," and over the sound of the boy's wild bawl and struggle, he said metallically to Randall, "Now draw yore gun and shoot, mister, and show the color of yore liver!"

Randall licked dry lips and the veins stood out like black cords along his temples and his throat. His jaw locked suddenly and his hand raced to his gun, and his finger was tightening on the trigger. The Kid had not moved a muscle yet, but now he did. His gun flashed and barked in the same instant, and before he could fire, Randall's gun went clattering from his hand. He stood there gripping hard to his forearm, and out of his pain and daze, came conscious that he had not been shot—the Kid had simply shot the gun out of his hand.

THE KID was blowing smoke from his barrel and, snapping the chamber open, popped in a fresh shell. He booted his gun and looked across at Randall, and something decent won for a moment over the arrogant hatred in his leaden eyes.

He said grudgingly, "Any hombre can get out and shoot when he don't know how, and knows it, and is scared stiff, and knows that, has got guts—if he ain't got good sense, Randall. It will carry you a long way that you stood up and breasted the Red Kid!"

He swung at right angles on the heel of one boot, and looked at the suddenly silent and amazed boy as he passed. He said, "How do I stand with you, Red?"

"Gee, Kid!" the boy sobbed afresh, knowing fully what had happened. "Yo're a real gent at that!"

The Red Kid gave a hard grin touched with bitterness. "Remember that, Red," he murmured. "I want to recollect you thinking of me like that!"

He put out his hand, and felt tears fall upon it as Jim-Tim shook it, and then he turned and swung up into his saddle. He let out a savage, ear-splitting yell, and Speedy went from a dead stand into full gallop in five steps, and the town stood silent and watched the Red Kid sink into shadow.

Randall came over and laid a hand on the boy's neck, and told him gravely, "That was

a pretty good friend of yore's, Red, and not all bad."

It was the first time that Randall had ever called him that, and he realized that he used the nickname out of respect to the Kid. That made things a little better with him and he stopped sobbing.

Emmett looked down at the telegram he still held, and crumpled it and stuck it in his pocket. "Well," he grunted, "I didn't lose no cattle, but I reckon it's a lesson on crowding the range, Randall. I'm sending for Prentiss, Bone and Reilley, and I reckon we better get down to brass tacks about that railroad spur real fast."

"Seemis like," Randall said, "Red here ought to get a little piece of that stock when we get to it."

The boy moved awkwardly and hung his head. He was fishing for something amidst the confusion of his pockets. He drew it out and held it out to Emmett—a silver star off a fancy bridle. He said, "I reckon I better get myself straight here and now and fast—ain't this yore's, Mr. Emmett?"

Emmett's bleak eyes crinkled at the corners. "Why, yes," he murmured. "And there is a bridle that goes with it. I was figuring to sell it for about seventy-five cents."

Tim-Jim darted a furtive glance around the crowd, and found Big Tom's gaze upon him with an expression that was not all unfriendly. He mumbled, "Mebbe I could make that in a week or so, Mr. Emmett, if Big Tom would just give me a chance to get my job back."

Big Tom grunted, "Why when a man shows he needs a job that way—" and chuckled at him.

That was Tuesday and exactly a week later at the same time, Bob Randall rode out to Mrs. Cantrell's to read the message. The Red Kid had met, and died at the hands of, Two Gun Grace near Denver, but he had lingered long enough to gasp a message to the sheriff. He wanted Tim-Jim to have his horse Speedy if he wanted it, and he was leaving his pistol to Bob Randall.

Her face tightened and shimmered with emotion and then grief shook her for a long period. He took the boy's hand and then went outside to wait, and after a long spell, she came out and invited them back in for coffee. She had washed and tidied up, and emotion had cleared through her, and when she went out of the room for a space, the boy said to Randall with amazement, "Bob, I never seen her pretty like that before! She don't look like she's worked to death no more!"

Randall darkened and tousled the boy's head. "Mebbe," he told him, "we can see that she stays this way, Red."

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

Sonora turned an' slugged
him. . . .



THE GUNS TALK LOUD

*"Sometimes a man stumbles into
a place where, if he's a man, he's
got to show it—but you don't
show a Ranger more'n once!"*

HE RODE into town on a brown mule
and swung down from the saddle in
front of the Chuck Wagon. He wore
a high Mexican hat and a pair of tight Mex
pants that flared over his boots. Shorty Duval
started to open his mouth to hurrah this
stranger when the hombre turned around.

Shorty Duval's mouth snapped shut like a
steel trap and you could almost see the sweat
break out on his forehead.

One look was all anybody needed. Shorty
was tough, but nobody was buying any trouble
from the drifter in the high crowned hat.

He had a lean brown face and a beak of a nose that had been broken, some time or other. There was a scar along his cheekbone that showed white against the leather brown of his face. But it was his eyes that gave you the chills. They were green and brown, but there was something in the way they looked at you that would make a strong man back up and think it over.

He was wearing two guns and crossed belts. They were not Peacemakers, but the older Colt, the baby cannon known as the Walker Colt. Too heavy for most men, they would shoot pretty accurate for well over a hundred yards, which wasn't bad for a rifle.

He wore one of them short Mex jackets, too, and when we looked from his queer getup to that brown mule that was all legs we couldn't figure him one little bit.

Not many strangers rode into White Hills. I'd been there all of two months, and I was the last one to come. This hombre showed he knewed the kind of a town he was in when he didn't look too long at anybody. In fact, he didn't even seem to notice us. He just pushed through the doors and bellied up to the bar.

Bill Riding was in there, and some four or five others. Being a right curious hombre, I walked in myself. If this gent did any talkin', I aimed to be where I could listen. I saw Riding look around when I come in. His eyes got mean. From the first day I hit town we'd no use for each other.

Partly it was because of Jackie Belton's cur dog. Belton was a kid of fourteen who lived with his sister, Ruth, on a nice cattle spread six or seven miles out of White Hills. That dog ran across in front of Riding one day an' come durned near trippin' him. He was a hot tempered hombre, an' when he drewed iron, I did, too.

Before he could shoot, I said, an' I was standin' behind him, "You kill that dog, Riding, an' I'll kill you!"

His face got red, an' then white. His back was half toward me, an' he knowed he didn't have a chance. "Some day," he said, his voice ugly, "you'll butt in at the wrong time!"

Jackie saw me, an' so did his sister, an' after the way they thanked me, I figgered it would have been cheap even if I'd had t' kill Riding.

White Hills was an outlaw town. Most of the men in town were wanted somewheres, an' while it wasn't doin' any deputy much good t' come in here, the town was restless now. That was because the bank over t' Pierce had been stuck up an' ever'body in White Hills figgered the rangers would come here lookin' for him. That was why they'd looked so suspicious when I rode into town.

It didn't take no fortune teller t' guess that Harvey Kinsella had put Bill Riding t' watchin' me. Kinsella was the boss o' that town, an' he knowed everythin' that went on around.

Riding wasn't the only one had an eye on me, I knowed that. Kinsella had posted two or three other hombres for the same reason. Still, I stuck around. And part of the reason I stayed was Ruthie Belton.

The hombre with the high crowned sombrero leaned against the bar an' let those slow green eyes of his take in the place. They settled on Riding, swung past Shorty Duval, an' finally settled on me.

They stayed there the longest, an' I wasn't surprised none. We were the two biggest men in the place, me an' him. Maybe I was a mite the bigger, but that hat made him look just as tall. His eyes didn't show what he was thinkin', but knowin' how a man on the dodge feels, I knowed what it was.

He had me sized up like I had him. Me, I growed up under the Tonto Rim, an' when I wanted t' ride the cattle trails, I had t' ride east t' git to 'em. I'd punched cows an' dealt monte in Sonora, an' I ain't braggin' none when I say that when I rode through New Mexico an' hung around Lincoln an' Fort Summer an' Santa Fe, not Billy the Kid nor Jesse Evans wanted any part of what I had t' give. Not that I wanted them, either.

There wasn't no high Mex hat on me. Mine was flat crowned an' flat brimmed, but my guns was tied down, an' had been for more than a little while. My boots was some down at heel, an' I needed a shave, but no man in that place had the power in his shoulders I had, an' no man there but me could bust a leather belt with his chest expansion.

HE DIDN'T need no second sight t' tell him I was ridin' a lone trail, either. They never cut my hide t' fit no Kinsella frame. Anyway, he looked at me, an' then he says, "I'll buy you a drink!" An' the way he laid that "you" in there was like layin' a whip across the face of ever' other man in the saloon.

Bill Riding jerked like he'd been bee stung, but Kinsella wasn't there, an' Bill sat tight.

Me, I walks over t' the bar an' bellies up to it. *Amigo*, it done me good t' look in that long mirror an' see the two of us standin' there. Y' can ride for miles an' never find two such big men t'gether. Maybe I was a mite thicker'n him through the chest, but he was big, *amigo*, an' he was mean.

"They call me Sonora," he said, lookin' at the rye in his glass.

"Me, I'm Dan Ketrel," I said, but I was thinkin' of what the descriptions of the bandit who robbed the bank at Pierce said. A big

man, the descriptions said, a very big man, wearin' two guns.

Sonora was a big man, an' he wore two guns. For that matter, I did, too. There was even another big man in town who wore two guns. The boss, it was, Harvey Kinsella.

We looked at each other right then an' neither of us was fooled a mite. He knows what I was here for, an' I knowed what he was here for, an' neither of us was in friendly country.

Bill Riding didn't like me bein' here. It was chokin' up in him like a thunderstorm chokin' up a canyon with cloud. It was gittin' in his throat, the meanness of him, an' I could see trouble was headin' our way.

For that matter, I'd knowed it was comin', soon or late. I knowed it was comin' because I knowed I was goin' t' butt into somethin' that wasn't rightly my business. It had been buildin' for days, ever since I got the lay of the land, hereabouts.

I was goin' t' tear down the fence that kept Ruth Belton's cows from grazin' in Reefer Canyon, where the good grass was.

You'd think, maybe, that tearin' down one fence wouldn't do no good. You'd think maybe they'd put it right up again. You'd be wrong.

If'n I tore down that fence once, it was goin' t' stay down, because after I tore it down I'd have t' kill Harvey Kinsella an' Bill Riding.

They was the ones out t' break Ruthie Belton. When her old man was alive they left him strictly alone. He was old, but he was a ring-tailed wolf on the prowl, an' they knowed it. Then he got throwed from a bad hoss, an' they started t' move in on the Bar B.

It wasn't none of my business. Me, I was up here for a purpose, an' rightly I shouldn't think of anythin' else, but sometimes a man stumbles into a place where, if he's a man, he's got t' show it. An' me, I was a fixin' t' tear down that fence.

It would mean shootin', an' Kinsella was poison mean, an' Riding damn' near as bad. That was sayin' nothin' o' the rest of that outfit. But I had me a plan now, an' that plan was buildin' around a certain tall hombre in a high crowned hat, a man that rode a brown legged mule and packed two Walker Colts.

Bill Riding got up an' walked over t' the bar. He was spoilin' for trouble. As big a man as Kinsella in weight, he was a mite shorter than either of us, but nearly as broad as me. A big handed man, an' a dirty fighter in a rough an' tumble.

"Stranger," he says, starin' at Sonora, "y' seem kind of limitin' in your offer of a drink. Maybe y' think you're too durned good t' drink with us!"

Sonora had his elbows on the bar right

then, an' he didn't straighten, he just turned his head an' let those cold eyes take in Riding, head t' foot, then he looked back at his drink.

Riding's face flamed up an' I saw his lips tighten. His hand shot out an' he grabbed Sonora by the shoulder. Bill just had t' be top dog, he just had t' have ever'body believin' he was a bad hombre, but he done the wrong thing when he laid a hand on Sonora.

The man in the high crowned hat back-handed his fist into Bill's unprotected mid-section. It caught Bill unsuspectin', an' he staggered, gaspin' for breath. Then Sonora turned an' slugged him. Bill went back into a table, upset it, an' then he crawled out of the poker chips with a grunt an' started for Sonora.

Just then Harvey Kinsella stepped into the room, an' me, I slid back two quick steps an' palmed a six-gun. "Hold it!" I said, hard like, "anybody butts into this scrap gets a bellyful of lead!"

Kinsella looked at me then, the first time he ever seemed t' see me. "If you didn't have that gun out," he said, "I'd kill you!"

Me, I laughed. If'n it hadn't been for Sonora, who was goin' t' town on Riding, I'd have called him.

Bein' around like I have, I've seen some men take a whippin', but I never saw any man get a more artistic shellackin' than Sonora give Bill Riding. He started in on him an' he used both hands. He cut him like you'd chop beef. He sliced his face like he had a knife edge across his knuckles.

Me, Dan Ketrel, I slug 'em, an' Pap always said I had the biggest fists he ever seen on a man, but Sonora, he went t' work like a doc. He raised bumps all over Riding, an' then lanced ever' one o' them with his knuckles. Riding wanted t' drop, but Sonora wouldn't let him fall. He just kept him on his feet until he got so bloody even I couldn't take it. Then Sonora hooked one, high an' hard, an' Bill Riding went down into the sawdust.

Sonora looked over at me, standin' with a gun in my fist. "Thanks," he said, grinnin' a little. We understood each other, him an' me.

Harvey Kinsella looked at Riding lying on the floor, then he looked from Sonora t' me. "I'll give you until sundown," he said. Then he turned to go.

"I like it here," I said.

"I've told you," he replied.

SONORA an' me walked outside. Me, I figgered it was time t' talk. "There's been talk," I said, "of a ranger comin' in here after that hombre what done that Pierce bank job. Don't let it worry you none. Not for right now.

"Down the road a piece there's a girl, name of Ruth Belton. Her old man was a he wolf.

He's dead. This here Kinsella, he's tryin' t' run her off her range. Scared t' tackle it when the old man was alive. He's done put up a fence t' keep her cows from the good grass. I aim t' cut that fence."

He stood there, his big thumbs in his belt, listenin'. Me, I finished rollin' my smoke. "When I cut that fence, there's goin' t' be some shootin', but I aim t' cut it, an' aim t' kill Harvey Kinsella. He's got word out that ary a hand on that fence and his guns talk loud."

"I aim t' cut it. I aim t' kill him so's he won't never put it up again. But he's got a sight of boys ridin' for him. One or two, I might git, but I don't want nothin' botherin' me when I go after Kinsella."

"Where's the fence?" he asked quietly.

"Down the road a piece," I struck a match on my pants. "I reckon if'n we was t' ride that way, Ruthie would fix us a bait o' grub. She's quite some shakes with a skillet."

Me, I walked out an' swung onto the hurricane deck of that big blue horse o' mine. Sonora lit his own shuck, an' then boarded his mule. He went down the street an' took the trail for Ruthie Belton's place.

Neither of us said no words all the way until we got up to Ruthie's place an' could see the flowers around her door, an' Ruthie waterin' 'em down.

"I reckon," Sonora said then, "that ranger could hold off doin' what he has t' do 'til a job like this was over. Don't reckon he'd wait much longer though, would he?"

"Don't reckon so," I said, grimly. "A man's got his duty. Still," I added, "maybe this ranger never seen the hombre he's lookin' for. Maybe he ain't sure when he does see him, so maybe he rides back without him?"

"Wouldn't do no good," Sonora objected. "Too many others lookin', an' he'd be follered wherever he'd go."

Ruth looked up when she heard our horses, and then turned to face us, smiling. She looked up at me an' when I looked down into those blue eyes, I figgered what a fool a man was t' go lookin' into guns when there was eyes, soft like that.

"You're the man," she declared, "Who protected Shep!"

Me, I got red around the gills. I ain't used t' palaverin' with no womenfolk. "I reckon," I said.

"Won't you get down and come in? We were just about to eat."

We got down an' Sonora sweeps off that high-crowned hat an' smiles. "I've heard some powerful nice things about the food you cook, ma'am," he said, "an' thank you for a chance to try it."

We went inside an' purty soon Jack come in. He smiled, but I could see he was plumb

worried. It didn't take no mind reader t' figger why. Those cows we'd seen was lookin' mighty poor. It wouldn't take much time for them t' start dyin' off, eatin' only the skimpy dry, brown grass.

When she had the food on the table, Ruthie looked at me an' I could feel my thick neck gettin' red again. "You boys just riding, or are you going some particular place?"

Sonora looked over a forkful of fried spuds. "Dan here—he figgered there was a fence up here needed cuttin', an' he 'lows as how he'll cut it. I'm just sort of ridin' along—in case."

Her face whitened. "Oh no! You mustn't! Harvey Kinsella will kill anybody who touches that fence—he warned us!"

"Uh-huh." I picked up my coffee cup. "We ain't got much time here, ma'am. I got a little job t' do, an' I reckon Sonora has, too. We sort of figgered we'd take care o' this an' Kinsella, too. Then when we rode off up the trail you'd be all right."

When we finished, I tipped back in my chair. It was right homey feelin', the sort of feelin' I ain't had since I was a kid, me bein' a roamin' man, an' all. I got up after a bit, an' saw Sonora look at me. That mule-ridin' man never had a hand far from a gun when we were t'gether. For that matter, neither did I.

It wasn't that we didn't trust each other. We both had a job t' do, him an' me, but we were the cautious type.

I walked over an' picked up the water bucket, then went t' the spring an' filled it. When I come back I split a couple of armsful of wood an' packed it inside. Sonora, he sat there on the porch, sleepily like, just a watchin' me.

The door had a loose hinge an' I got me a hammer an' fixed it, sort of like I used to when I was a kid, an' like my pa used t' do. It gives a man a sort of homey feelin', t' be fixin' around. Once I looked up an' saw Ruthie lookin' at me, a sort of funny look in her eyes.

Then I picked up my hat. "Reckon," I said, "we better be ridin' up t' that fence. It's most two mile' from here."

Ruthie, she come t' the door, her eyes wide an' her face pale. "Stop by," she said, "on your way back. I'll be takin' a cake out of the oven."

"Sure thing," Sonora grinned, "I always did like fresh cake."

That was a real woman. Not tellin' y' t' be careful. Not tellin' us we shouldn't. That was her, standin' there shadin' her eyes again' the sun as we rode off up the trail, me loungin' sideways in the saddle, a six-gun under my hand.

"You'd make a family man," Sonora said, half a mile further along. "Y' sure would. Ought t' have a little spread o' your own."

That made me look up, it cut so close t' the

trail o' my own thoughts. "That's what I always figgered on," I told him. "Me, I'm through ridin' rough country."

We rode on quiet-like. Both of us knowed what was comin'. If'n we came out of this with a whole skin there was still the main show. I should say, the big showdown. We both knowed it, an' neither of us liked it.

In those few hours we'd come t' find we was the same kind of hombre, the same kind of man, and we fought the same way. We were two big men, an' when we rode that last mile up there t' the fence I was thinkin' that here, at last, was a man t' ride through hell with. An' then I had t' do t' him what I had t' do because it was the job I had.

THE fence was there, tight an' strong. "Give me some cover," I suggested t' Sonora. "I'm goin' t' ride up an' cut her—but good!"

The air was clear an' my voice carried, and then I saw Bill Riding step down from the junipers, a rifle holdin' easy in his hands. His voice rang loud in the draw. "Y' ain't cuttin' nothin', neither of you!"

Me, I sat there with my hands down. My rifle was in my saddle boot an' he was out of six-gun range. I could see the slow smile on his face as that rifle came up.

That moro o' mine never lost a rider no quicker in his life. I went off, feet first, an' hit the ground gun in hand. I'd no more than hit it before somethin' bellowed like a young cannon, an' out of the tail o' my eye I saw Sonora had unlimbered those big Walker Colts.

My six-shooter was out but I wasn't lookin' at Riding. He was beyond my reach, but there was a movement in the junipers close down, on our side of the fence, an' I turned and saw Harvey Kinsella there behind us. He had a smile on his face an' I could almost see his lips tighten as he squeezed off his first shot.

When I started burnin' powder I don't

know. Somethin' hit Kinsella an' he went back on his heels his face lookin' sick, an' then I started walkin' in on him. It helped me keep my mind on business t' walk into a man while I was shootin'.

Somebody blazed at me from the brush an' when I tried a snapshot that way, I heard a whinin' cry an' a rifle rattled on the rocks. But I was walkin' right at Kinsella, an' his guns were goin'. I could see flame stabbin' at me from their muzzles, but when I figgered I had four shots left I kept walkin' in an' holdin' my fire.

Behind me them Walkers was blastin' like a couple of cannon from the war atween the states. I wasn't worried about Sonora takin' out on me. He was an hombre t' ride the river with—besides, we each had us a job t' do.

Then Kinsella was down on his face, the back o' his fancy coat stainin' red. Two other hombres were down, too, an' I could hear the rattle of racin' hoofs as some others took off through the bresh.

Then I turned, thumbin' shells into my guns, an' Sonora was there, leanin' on a fence post, one o' those big guns danglin' from his fist.

Me, I walked over t' the fence haulin' the wire cutters from my belt, the pair I picked up at the girl's ranch. My head was drummin' somethin' awful, like maybe there was still more shootin'. But it wasn't that—it was deathly still. Y' couldn't hear a sound but the loud click o' my cutters.

When I finished I turned toward Sonora. He was slumped over the fence then, an' there was blood comin' from somewhere high up on his chest. I took the gun out of his fingers and stuck it in his holster. Then I hoisted him on my shoulder an' started for his mule.

That mule wasn't noways skittish. I got Sonora aboard an' then crawled up on the moro. When I was in the saddle again, I looked around.

Riding was dead, anybody could see that.

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He'd been hit more than once an' half his head was blowed off. There was another hombre close beside him, an' he was dead, too.

As for Kinsella, I didn't have t' look at him. I knowed when I was shootin' that I was killin' him, but I walked over to him.

Three times on my way back t' Ruthie's I had t' stop an' straighten Sonora in the saddle, even with his wrists tied t' the horn.

Before I got through the gate, Ruthie was runnin' down toward us, an' Jack, too. Then I must've passed out.

When my eyes cracked to light again it was lamplight, an' the room wasn't very bright. Ruthie was sittin' by my bed, sewin'.

"Sonora?" I asked.

"He'll be all right. He'd been shot twice. You men! You're both so *big*! I don't see how any bullet could ever kill you!"

Me, I was thinkin' it might not take a bullet, but a rope.

Kinsella got me once, low down on the side. Just a flesh wound, but from what Jack told me it must've bled like all get out.

When it was later, Ruthie got up an' put her sewin' away, then she went into another room an' to sleep. I give her an hour, as close as I could figger. Then I rolled back the blanket an' got my feet under me. I was some weak, but it takes a lot of lead t' ballast down an hombre big as me.

Softly I opened the door. Ruthie was lyin' on a pallet, asleep. Me, I blushes, seein' her that way, her hair all over the pillow like a lot of golden web caught in the moonlight.

Easy as could be, I slipped by. Sonora's door was open an' he was lyin' in Jack's bed, a chair under his feet t' make it long enough.

Well, there he was, the hombre that meant my ranch t' me. I'd strapped on my guns, but as I stood there lookin' down, I figgered it was a wonder he hadn't shot it out already. That reward was dead or alive.

Suddenly, I almost jumped out of my skin. Only one o' them big Walker Colts was in its holster! Why, that durned coyote! Lyin' there with a gun under the blanket, an' the chances was he was awake that minute.

Hell! I'd go back t' bed! It never did a man no good t' run from the law, not even in the wild country! Soon or late, she always caught up with him.

IN THE mornin' I'd just finished splashin' water on my face when I looked up an' he was leanin' again' the door post. "Howdy," he said, grinnin', "sleep well?"

My face burned. "Well as you did, y' durned plossum playin' maverick!"

He grinned. "Man in my place can't be too careful." He looked at me. "Ready t' ride, or is it a showdown?"

Sonora had his guns on an' there was a

quizzical light in those funny eyes o' his'n.

He was a big man, big as me, an' the only man I ever saw I'd ride with. "Hell," I said, "ain't y' goin' t' eat brea'fst? I'll ride with you because you're too good a man t' kill!"

Ruthie was puttin' food on the table, and she looked at us queerly. "What's between you two?" she asked, quick like.

"Why, Ruthie," I said, "this here hombre's a Texas ranger. He figgers I'm the hombre what robbed the bank over t' Pierce!"

She stared at me. "Then—you're a prisoner?"

"Ma'am," Sonora said, gulpin' a big swaller o' hot coffee, "don't you fret none. I reckon he aint no crook. Just had a minute or two o' bein' a durned fool! I reckon that bank's plumb anxious t' git their money back, an' I know this hombre's got it on him because last night—" he grinned—"when he was asleep, I had me a look at his money belt!"

Before I could bust out an' say anythin', he adds, "I figger that bank's goin' t' be so durned anxious t' git their money back they won't fret too much when I suggest this hombre be sent back here, sort of on good behaviour. I'd say he'd make a good hand around a layout like this."

Then I bust in. "Y' got this all wrong, Sonora," I told him. "Y' been trailin' the wrong man! Rather, y' trailed the right man, an' then when y' walked into the Chuck Wagon, y' took too much fer granted."

"I didn't rob no bank. I'll admit I got t' thinkin' about ownin' a ranch, an' I rode into town with the money in mind. Then I heard the shootin' an' lit out. The man who robbed the bank," I said, "was Harvey Kinsella. I took the money belt off him. His name's marked on it!"

He stared at me. "Well, I'll be durned!" he said.

Ruthie was lookin' at me, her eyes all bright an' happy. "Man," I was sayin', "I figgered you fer the bandit, first off. I was figgerin' on gittin' you fer the reward, needin' that money like I was, fer a ranch."

"An' I was tryin' t' decide if I should take y' in or let y' go!" Sonora shook his head.

Ruthie smiled at me, an' then at him. "I'm going to try an' fix it, Sonora," she said, "so he'll stay here. I think he'd be a good man around a ranch—some place where he could take a personal interest in things!"

There was a tint o' color in her skin.

"Just what I think, ma'am." Sonora shoved back his chair. I got up an' handed him the money belt. "An' Ruthie," he continued, "if I was t' ride by, y' reckon it'd be all right t' stop in?"

She smiled as she filled my cup. "Of course, Sonora, an' we'll be mighty glad t' see you!"

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 88)

TIME to cool your saddle a spell, *compadre*—rein up and take a look at the twenty Western quiz questions listed below. Try your hand at answering them, and if you can call the turn correctly on as many as nineteen of them, it's obvious you're no bill show cowboy. Answer seventeen or eighteen, and you're still no dude. But if you answer less than fifteen—well, don't get any callouses patting yourself on the back. Good luck, *compadre*!

1. The term "*alforja*" is used in reference to: A type of hay upon which horses are generally fed? A kind of saddlebag? A place where horseshoes are made? A low, rambling ranch house of the type found in southern Arizona and New Mexico?

2. In the language of the Westerner, the expression "*base-burner*" means: A drink of whisky? A fire used to keep cattle warm on the open range? An especially vicious and hard-to-ride bucking horse? A cowboy bed roll?

3. In the old days in Texas, the boys used to refer to the annual list of badmen and fugitives, published by the Texas Rangers, as: The "*bill show*?" "*Bible two*?" The "*Police Gazette*?" The "*swindle sheet*?"

4. "*Brown Gargle*" is the slang term for what well known item on the range?

5. In all probability, from what Spanish word did the cowboy term, "*wrangler*" evolve?

6. What is "*checking*?"

7. According to the Western meaning of the term, a "*fence stretcher*" is: A mythical instrument invented by the cowboy, and spoken of only when there was a tenderfoot around? A tool used to pull fence wire tight? A nester who keeps extending his territory. A wealthy stockman who somehow manages to expand his holdings noticeably from year to year?

8. True or false? "*Gun wadding bread*" is the cowpuncher term for light bread.

9. True or false? A "*lazy*" brand is a brand which has some letter or figure which is "*lying down*."

10. If a Westerner friend of yours said he was going to "*mug*," he would be planning to: Get down on his hands and knees and drink from a spring? Have his picture taken? Bulldog a calf?

11. True or false? A "*mule-hipped horse*" is a horse with too sloping hips.

12. In the language of the cowpuncher, a "*leather slapper*" is: A gunman? A tenderfoot? A camp cook? Any person who owns a large spread of cattle.

13. What are "*hair pants*?"

14. When a cowpuncher refers to "*final horses*," he means: The last bunch of horses to be ridden in a *rodeo*? The last group of horses to be sold during an auction. The horses ridden at the end of a wagon train? Horses which are ridden in the Eastern part of the United States?

15. True or false? "*Choke strap*" is a cowboy term for necktie.

16. If a Western friend of yours told you he was looking for a "*chaparral fox*," you would know he was: Planning to go fox hunting? Planning to go coyote hunting? Planning to go road runner hunting? Planning to go hunting for an extremely tricky human being?

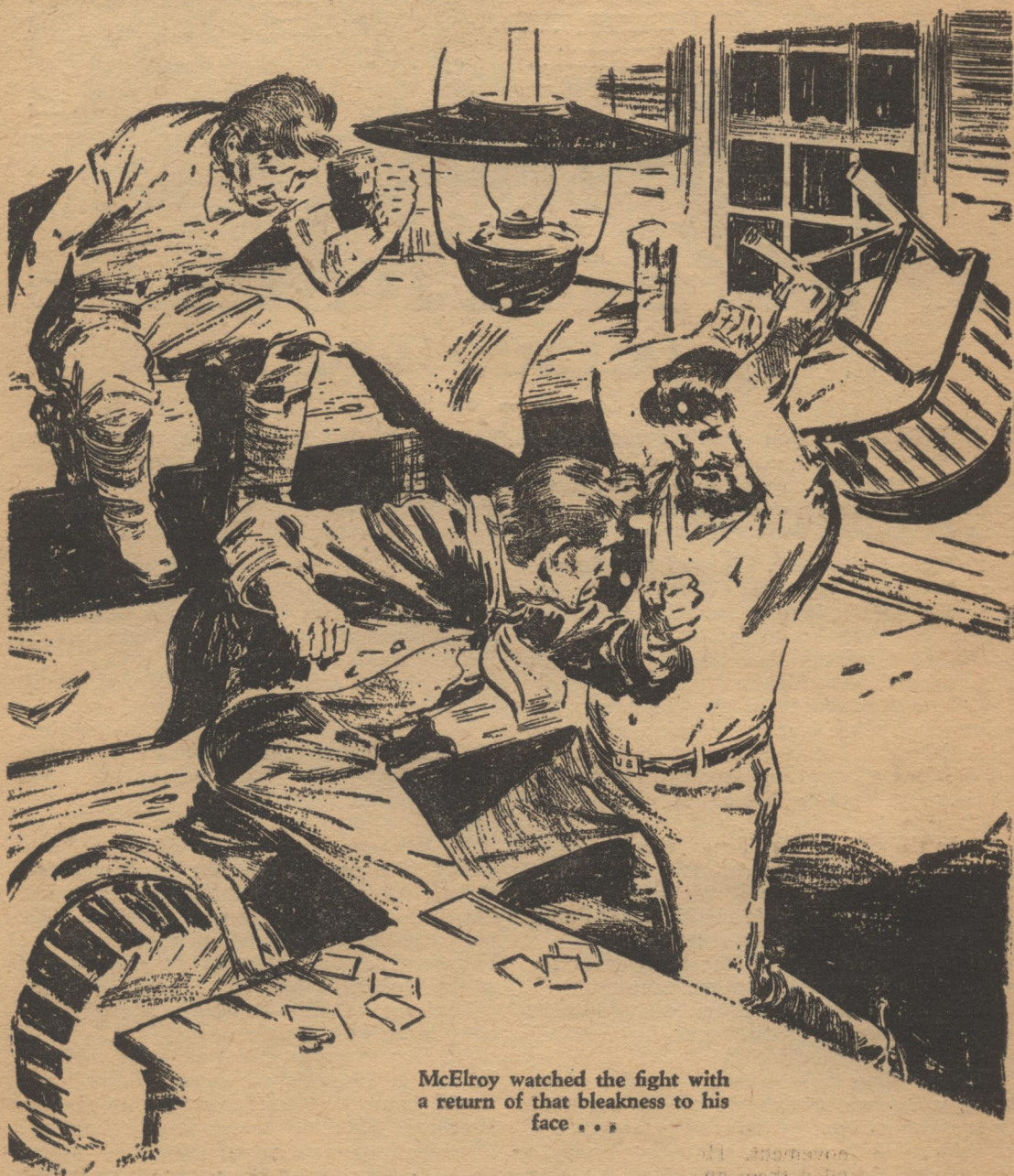
17. True or false? A "*brush hand*" is a cowpuncher with extremely rough hands.

18. What is a "*bill-show cowboy*?"

19. True or false? A "*bayo coyote*" is generally extremely fond of meat.

20. When might a cowpuncher be said to be "*all horns and rattles*?"

*The Singing Troop feared neither death nor
the devil—until the day they had to choose
between them!*



McElroy watched the fight with
a return of that bleakness to his
face . . .

IN LATE morning, the quartermaster mule train left the bald, scorched crests of the Dragoons sinking into the molten cauldron of the sky. Within the hour, it was heaving through a sea of silver-gray alkali, that closed in from all sides with a wall of blazing white-hot glare. The light stole all

slightest shadow and perspective; there was no sky, no horizon, no indication of grades or hills or hollows, and shortly it became apparent that they had lost their narrow strip of trail.

The command to halt, ran back along the column, raw and strident with a junior offi-

By **THOMAS CALVERT**



SCALP- TRAIL PATROL

cer's high temper at an obvious mistake. The wait was worse than the raw discomfort of lurching movement. Heat bit at the men and glare blinded them and they turned into grotesque gray phantoms under the sifting filter of fine powdered dust.

From the lead mule of the six team of wagon nine, Quartermaster Corporal Stedder cursed with dust raw grittiness. "Boxed!" he said. "And we will roll these damned coffins out with our shoulders again while

that jughead Yates is having a laugh on the new lieutenant!"

The man on mule six wore the two-toned blue-and-yellow of the cavalry and the pride of it was about him like a light. Not even nineteen days unvaried mule-pace had cracked him; he still rode stiff as a ramrod, tunic hooked tight to the jaws, aloof and detached from this quartermaster truck as a god. He turned his lean, high-boned face toward the corporal and his red-rimmed eyes

held a contemptuous fire in the gray dust mask of his face.

"Is this a quartermaster sergeant's idea of fun?" he asked.

Stedder bridled at the arrogant tone and growled, "What would you call it in the almighty cavalry?"

"Break, and sixty days double sentry with full pack!" McElroy snapped.

But he made no taunt, no issue of it. The thought came and passed as he spoke, striking but a bare spark of consciousness off the deep and burning anger that had filled him since he first looked out across Yuma from the Army transport's deck and caught the full impact of what it meant to be transferred from a crack headquarters post on the gentle, green Potomac to this raw and desolate firepit of the Southwest.

He returned his molten gaze to the beating silver glare. "Damned savage country," he muttered. "What would you expect?"

Stedder twisted in the saddle and studied the cavalry trooper with curiosity deeper than his anger. "You've not figured yet what brought about your transfer?" he inquired.

The trooper shrugged broad, sloping shoulders and made a bare gesture toward his lance stripe. "If it had been discipline, or even an officer's bile, they would not have left me that," he growled. "It is the injustice of it that is curdling me."

"You will get used to the country soon enough," Stedder grunted. "There is nothing else to do out here."

"You can hate it," McElroy growled. "I will stick it, and I will hold my lance stripe, but I will never stop hating the country or the man who sent me here while I live!"

"You'll never trace the transfer order," Stedder told him. "You may be cavalry, but it is still Army, and the Army makes damned sure of that!"

"I'll find out," McElroy answered grimly.

The corporal's lips pulled out in a tough grin. "You can't buck the whole cavalry, laddie!"

McElroy's head tossed and breath ripped through his high-bridged nose. "It was no cavalry officer did this to me!" he said. "It is not in the cavalry to pull a trick like this—it would have been some damned fool area headquarters staff brass!"

Ironical humor crossed the corporal's weathered face. The trooper was young for that lance stripe and he had worked like hell to get it. He had held the traditions of his corps with feelings akin to reverence, and now the injustice of his transfer had hurt him bad. But he was burying his disillusionment in pride of corps, and he was in for a rude surprise in that.

Fort Bowie had its points for pride, but

they were not things readily understood except from experience on the frontier. There was a story, and it held a grim seed of truth, that the Bowie garrison was beyond higher discipline for the single reason that the inspector general had never figured out any discipline as harsh as daily duty there.

BY HIGH sun, the train fought clear of the alkali and, mounting out of the moil of choking dust and blinding glare, was instantly gobbled by the throttling heat of Apache Pass. All day long, sweat had been a constant dampness in the creases of their bodies and the alkali had penetrated, raising sores from their armpits to their toes.

Now the heat raked across them like an oven blast. Good men were going foggy and berserk, and Sergeant Yates expected it of the damned cavalry greenhorn, but jogging up-column, he found McElroy still stiff in his long back and high of his blunt chin, riding with the grim *esprit* of Custer's sergeant-major.

For a moment, the sergeant had passing wonder where a pink-cheeked bluejay from an Eastern parade post got a veteran's tough-knit fibre. That kind of toughness marked a man either for glory or for slaughter, depending upon how he carried the arrogance that went with it. A stiff neck could cause a lot of trouble at a small, isolated frontier post, with nothing to occupy men except their grievances—at a post like Bowie, it could even end in murder.

Checking rein, the sergeant fell abreast of McElroy as the corridor straightened and shelved toward the blistering swells of Simon's Plain ahead. "Well," he grunted, "take your last smell of a friendly mule and human beings and fresh water, trooper! From here on, the only smells you'll know will be an empty canteen and Chiricahua and rattlesnake."

The sergeant nodded off ahead. "Yonder is your new God-forsaken post, with the barracks buried window deep in sand. When you sign in, the garrison will number exactly forty-eight, if fever, malpais, Injuns and plain saber-orneriness have kept it up to strength."

McElroy squeezed the water from brown-black eyes not yet accustomed to the thick lemon-colored glare, and for the first time since Yuma, the inflexible setness left his face. Bitterness and anger would be a long time leaving him, but from within those dark feelings he looked out with a young buck's eager hopes; there was in him a desperate need to pin his pride upon his new guidon as a shield against the sense of injustice corroding in him.

"There is a rumor," Yates went on as they lurched upgrade, "that the Fort Bowie garrison oils its saddles with Chiric livers and

soles its boots with their hides. It is a fact that the Singing Troop will travel as far as redskins without rations, living on raw lizard, rattlesnake and cactus juice . . . or taking water from a wild horse's bladder when need be."

Something violent ripped through McElroy and beat against the wall of his cool self-containment. "The Singing Troop?" he repeated, as a question.

"You didn't know?" Yates grunted with surprise. "The hardest riding, toughest fighting, sweetest warbling troop in the whole cavalry, they say! Albeit, they have not been boasting overmuch since they lost Llewellyn, their tenor, the man you are replacing."

The trooper's violence erupted and then settled into an expression like frozen lava on his face. Doubt had rioted through him and now conviction came with the hard, metallic impact of a tumbler settling in a lock.

Yates peered at him curiously and grunted, "Now what is there in that to get your Irish up?"

"Enough!" McElroy grated, figuring the long chain of intrigue that lay behind his transfer. "I was rated a middling good tenor on the Potomac. For want of a voice, these damned cannibals would break a man's career!"

"Ah!" Yates grinned with mixed appreciation and rough humor. "I have got to hand it to Mock—he was not Sheridan's orderly for nothing!"

They topped the grade and Yates jogged up ahead to swing the column into formation before the fort. The supply train came to a halt and they sat there with the dust settling about them, and in that first good look at the post, McElroy found no solitary thing to ease the roughness of his temper.

Bowie was a fort only by virtue of its name; it had no fortifications, no symmetry, no sign of martial order. It was simply a bunch of buildings, sheds and corrals, flung out carelessly upon a barren shelf of sandstone, and built of logs, plank, brush and iron sheeting, as necessity and supplies arrived. The buildings were dust-soaked, scarred and warped by fiercely blazing suns; loosened, twisted, and scraped raw by violent sands and winds. A weather-stained flag hung listlessly to a log pole nobody had bothered to skin, and a line of officers' wash hung in open sight between the gatehouse and a post outside headquarters. His feelings were more than a personal distaste—the post was a shock to all of his ingrained sense of military order and morale.

His attention switched to the half-clad men of the garrison gathering at the gate, as tough and weathered and truculent a band of

fighting men as he had ever seen. Their beards were unkempt, their hair long upon their necks, what could be seen of their clothes were sloppily work-stained. But a temper that drifted out of them caught and held him—an unholy absence of all human softness, with a ruthless and scarcely buried violence in its place.

There was no torture or violence or act of mayhem they had not seen and learned to stomach, he sensed, and it was like a smell about them that there were not many brutalities they would not practice with little goading. There was no martial pomp, no wish for glory, in the lot of them. They had the feel of men who would as soon kill as eat, and every thought and action of their lives was bent to that harsh end without a single softening relief.

McElroy looked at First Sergeant Gow with bitterness smoldering behind the black temper of his eyes. The sergeant stood just outside the gate, tough of body, muscular of gut, a man half as thick both ways as he was tall, and not a strip of fat on his solid beef and bone. He had lost an ear and three scars cut crimson channels in his iron gray handlebar mustaches. His Irish eyes held the emotionless blue of a November sky against a square face, burned to the color and texture of hot charcoal.

He had picked out McElroy's yellow bandanna and leg stripes, and now he grunted from the corner of his mouth, "Well, there is yer new man, Mock. From the spread of his back and the good Irish temper in his eyes, I am thinking he may curry that flea nest of yer's if ye get overbearing, which you will."

Mock was a black-fleshed, heavy fisted giant, with a huge, matted chest showing through a tunic opened to his belt. That he wore tunic and belt showed he was on duty, which gave McElroy a fresh shock. He wore the stripes of a platoon sergeant.

"Ha!" he blasted back at Gow. "It will be a day when any wild Irishman curries my beard! It is seventeen years you've been trying, Gow, and I have not even felt the sting of your blarney yet!"

"Pssh!" Gow hooted with humoring trueness. "I have only been encouraging you out of yer thick Dutch stupor in the gentle manner of handling a sick man, or an idjit. But I can see one of these days I will still have to push my whole boot down that blathering mouth of yer's to teach you civility."

Mock struggled to find something malicious enough to say, and was saved the worry by the arrival of Captain Beal and a junior officer. The sergeants both straightened to salute, a fantastic show of respect in view of

their general sloppiness. The captain was tall and gray and flat, and thoroughly Western cavalry, abrupt, harsh and unfathomable. His sharp, sun-bleached eyes picked McElroy out with instant attention.

He said, after a brief inspection, "Mad as hops, but I don't know if it is the transfer or the laundry that is galling him. Assign him to my patrol in the morning, Gow, and we'll find out if we made a mistake."

The junior stood with his boots spaced and his horseman's sinewy hands locked behind his back, head jutted forward a little with instinctive, core-deep truculence. His flesh was burned to a permanent black hue and authority had become an unconscious quality ringing him, for all that he was a junior. He was quick of decision, quick of action, a tough, fighting officer of tough, fighting men.

He put a bright black gaze upon McElroy and said with immediate conviction, "He has been taught his tricks and they are full of guard mount and parade. It is too late to break him right, sir, and he is not the kind to bend. It is a mistake to bring in these Eastern men; I will lay a half month's pay we bury him or transfer him within two months."

"You are too damned lucky or too damned smart," the captain grunted and gave the junior a sharp, thoughtful look. He swung his head on to his first sergeant. "Gow, what would you bet?"

"Well, I am swayed by sentiment, sir," Gow said, "I am waiting to hear his voice and take the sting of his fist." He blew thoughtfully against his upper lip. "But he has set himself against the West, and now he feels we're an insult to the cavalry. The smell of pomp and polish and parade is soaked into him, sir, and I agree with the lieutenant it may not sand off."

A rough humor pulled at the corners of the lieutenant's lips. "I would leave the sanding to Mock's gentle hands right off!"

The captain caught the instant forbearance that masked Gow's square, blunt face. He made note of his silence, as he noted the many small items that flowed beneath the surface and set the fighting current of his garrison. He felt no censor in the sergeant—and Gow was not above censoring an officer—but a remote detachment had settled over him. The leather-faced veteran had a point of reserve at which he did not condemn Lieutenant Ramsgate, but did refrain from giving him full confidence. Put into the violent, sudden action of an ambush or a skirmish, that small hesitation of full confidence in an officer could mean the difference between victory and massacre.

It was a small thing, but it changed the captain's humor. He scowled out at the

scorched horizon, forming clear with evening's slanting light and grunted gruffly, "The Apaches have taught me one great lesson, Mr. Ramsgate—nothing is lost by waiting if you stay awake."

He moved out brusquely to meet the quartermaster, a man on whom the advancing frontier had laid its experience—both the harshness and the understanding that comes of it. Shortly he turned back to his own quarters, giving Gow a nod to get moving with the supplies. Gow's roar broke like a clap of thunder through the fort and the post filled with bustle and cursing and commotion.

The captain's orderly was laying out a pouch of mail. Beal slit open a form letter from Battalion headquarters, knowing that it requested recommendations for junior officer advancement, just as similar forms had for a year past. He moved to the window and stood there tapping the stiff paper slowly upon his brown-spotted hand. He had three juniors and no first lieutenant and he needed one badly.

From length of service and point of record, Ramsgate was entitled to advancement. He was a top fighting officer in battle and, potentially, a great deal more than that. There was no pettiness, no damnfool vainglory, no intrigue in the man; he was what too few officers were beneath the surface, honestly and wholly devoted to the service, with the makings of a really brilliant career. But he had that fatal quality of snap judgment and impatience. If he won advancement now, the mold would set and sooner or later that quality would be the barrier that stopped his rise.

"Bailey," he growled at his boot-worrier, "when you have two choices and both are bad, what do you do about 'em?"

"Wait, sir," Bailey answered philosophically. "It saved me bigamy and kept me a bachelor, once!"

"Yes, wait, of course," the captain bit out savagely. He wheeled to his file and dropped the letter in, but it gave him no sense of certainty, no surety of fairness, to dismiss it. Who was an aging, sick and frontier-buried captain, passed for promotion four times now, to decide what would be best for Ramsgate? This stayed upon his mind, pulling his face strained and gaunt and harsh.

He finished reading dispatches and had a cup of black and bitter Irish tea, and turned to his doorway to look out. Sundown's light was slanting in broad shafts from the sky but the heat clung as to a bed of ashes. His men moved, stripped to the waist, sweating bodies gleaming like animated bronze through coats of dust, black of face and sullen of temper at the common work of hauling supplies—a necessary duty, yet beneath a fighting man's

sense of dignity and pride. Gow and Mock moved among them, lending the conviction of a hard boot or calloused hand to their raw orders, secretly glorying in the test of their authority. Ramsgate was back and forth at double between wagon line and commissary, cursing the quartermaster and his own men equally as thieves, and right in both cases.

THE greenhorn drifted into the captain's gaze, stiff and grimy from his long ride, but holding himself with a smartness and deportment in sharp contrast to the laxity of the post, for all that he had been on trail nineteen days. The captain's eyes narrowed and filled with a sharp speculation and withheld judgment. The man's anger at his unmerited transfer was natural. What the captain had not been prepared for was a man who set his guidon before him with the reverence he would an altar and who regarded any laxity of deportment as heresy. It was bad enough to have a martinet in an officer; it was fatal for a small frontier post in the ranks.

Close by, Mock was invigorating a tiring trooper with a boot that put him sprawling and cursed him to his feet and on his way again. He turned, taking a fresh chew from a black plug, and met the hot contempt of the greenhorn's gaze.

Mock's teeth came unlocked before he had his chew and he held the plug before him. With soft, inviting truculence, he growled, "I don't suppose they would treat a trooper to a boot in the Eastern cavalry?"

"They don't have to," McElroy answered thinly, and left the insulting implication hanging in the air.

Gow's bellow lifted from barracks for McElroy, and the man pivoted and moved with military precision toward the call. Mock stood there with a molten glow creeping through his black, bearded face, and turning a jagged scar on his neck crimson.

Captain Beal scowled and blew against his

austere lips and turned to his desk for more work than he ever caught up with. The light filled with crimson and yellow and dusty maroons, and shortly, without warning, the trumpet crackled *Retreat* upon the air. Only the guard, the officers and sergeants stood attention wherever they happened to be, the supply lines never slowing. It was not usual procedure, but it was common enough not to cause comment, and attuned to every slightest sound and feeling of the post, the captain caught some indefinable instinct of McElroy's reaction to this laxity and it was severe.

Bailey put the coal oil lamp burning over the desk, and shortly Ramsgate came in with a hard step, a circle of dust and sweat and horse smell moving with him. There was a look of savage satisfaction on his face. Throwing off his tunic, he grunted, "Well, the greenhorn has managed to cut his future yard of trouble without waiting!"

Captain Beal sat back and looked at his junior's naked, iron-muscle shoulders. "With Mock?"

"With the whole post," Ramsgate said. "Being relieved of duty until sweated in, he used the time to take a scrub!"

The captain glanced out at the endless chain of red-faced, puffing, sweating men and gave a flinty grin. "Maybe he needed it after that trail," he commented.

"He scrubbed at the Aravaipa; it was on him like a calendar!" Ramsgate said. "But what he will need now is a damned tough pair of fists. Those boys would like a cool bath themselves right now, sir—and they don't like his lance stripe to begin with."

"Pomade and polish wear off fast in a hot country," Beal reproved his junior mildly. His eyes turned a shade harder as he tapped a pile of papers. "Battalion headquarters is on us for not trapping Yellow Hand."

Ramsgate came up from a pan of water and rubbed hard with a towel to cover the redness of his neck. "We damned near had him cornered," he growled.

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE

***F-N TEST?**



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SAYS: "IT CONTAINS
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3 And TUNE IN:
2 NETWORK
SHOWS! "The
Adventures of
Sam Spade" Sun.
evenings, CBS
Network; "King
Cole Trio Time"
Sat. afternoons,
NBC Network.



"If you had sent back for water and waited at the pass," the captain pointed out dryly, "he'd have walked right into you, coming out. He put you on a merry-go-round and got out first."

The younger man glared over his towel. "My orders were to engage in action if possible, sir. I pursued him with that end in mind."

"And out of choice, Mr. Ramsgate," the captain grunted more sharply. "Some day you are going to ride into ambush where a little patience would get your quarry."

The junior officer held his answer, but there was no agreement in the hard line of his jaw. He had been ambushed three times and turned it to good advantage. All he asked, and all that he had found necessary in this hostile country, was the opportunity to engage and fight. He took a long pull of whiskey and, freshened, returned to his duties.

THE shadows were thickening into a purple tide when the orderly brought in McElroy, spick and span, brushed and shined as if he were ready for parade. Captain Beal studied him inscrutably, sensing that the man had fathomed the somewhat irregular reason for his transfer. Private dispatches had already assured him the trooper had been the best tenor on the Potomac.

The captain took his papers and tossed them in a drawer without glancing at them, his gaze quiet, almost negligent, as he looked at him. He said easily, "McElroy, there are a few things different about the Western cavalry."

"Yes sir," McElroy answered respectfully, but there was a rock hard resistance in his voice. He had set himself not to accept any differences of deportment, and he would rub his Eastern parade post standards in their faces.

"One difference," the captain said with sudden sharpness, "is that some men have been in this troop four hitches and still not rated the lance stripe you've come with."

"I will serve out my hitch with every effort to retain it, sir," McElroy said, and without slightest disrespect, showed precisely how he felt and what his mind was. The black bitterness in him was a violent and abiding thing, but he meant to contain it without yielding to the things of which he disapproved. Capt. Beal cursed silently. He would rather have a man's temper blow off and clear the anger out of him.

"You will find there are reasons for certain laxities of deportment," the captain went on. A faint, cool humor threaded his sun bleached gaze. "For instance, McElroy, you can bathe too often out here. A clean skin is an itchy one in dust country."

The line of McElroy's long jaw hardened. He said, "Yes sir," without admitting the rightness of the advice.

"A fighting post," his commander murmured, "is an easy one to get along in, McElroy—and just as easy to get frozen out of. Fighting men will not—" He stopped noting that resistance to anything he might say was pressing toward the surfaces of the transfer's eyes. He stood respectfully attentive, and aloof as a star. Neither understanding nor goading would penetrate the barrier he had set against everything in this savage, ruthless land.

The captain made a gesture. "Well, you will learn the differences for yourself," he grunted dryly. "What kind of remount have they issued you?"

The commander watched a sudden light of perplexity flicker the dark shadows of the man's eyes. "Work-gaunted, sir," the trooper said. "But in top condition." For an instant, he looked as if he would ask some deep and bothering question and then thought better of it. "Better," he added, "than I expected, sir."

"You might take that for a key to the differences of a frontier post," the captain suggested briefly, and nodded termination of the interview. He noted the smart click of the man's heels and the precision of his salute and pivot.

He watched his broad, slanting shoulders recede into the dusk.

"Bailey," he grunted, "what do you make of our new man?"

Bailey came in, trying to look as if he had not been bending his ear double. "Starchy as the devil, sir," Bailey said. "I have seen good sergeants with that streak in them." He looked reminiscent. "And good corpses."

"What are good corpses?" the captain asked.

"Those that die in post, sir," Bailey said.

He grinned, but it was a grim joke and the captain knew it. Men who could lift the scalp off a Chiricahua as neatly as an enemy Indian—and when their officers weren't looking, often had—were not held in check by scruples. It was a complex balance of camaraderie, trust, harshness and understanding that held a fighting garrison in check from the violent surges of mayhem that monotony, privation and never-broken tenseness sent sweeping through the men. Get a really serious grudge started in a post that size, and it became everybody's grudge, splitting in all directions, and all hell could pop loose. The last time that had happened in The Singing Troop, fourteen men would have gone to Leavenworth, except for an attack which let them die as heroes first.

At daybreak, Captain Beal led his own

patrol out of the fort, pointing on the lower roll of the Pinalenos. Not once during the morning's march did he catch sign of McElroy's hatred for the troop relaxing. The man rode encased by his bitterness and prevented by it from finding any good whatever in his new guidon. But there was a matching pride to him; he was not going to let anger break his drill book sense of *esprit* and deportment, and at noon stop, he took trouble to examine his remount's hoofs.

Gow grunted to the captain, "With a different beginning, that would stand him well with the men, sir."

"Give him his try," the captain said.

"He will get that, all right!" the sergeant grinned.

It was hostile country and they moved warily through the long, hot hours of the afternoon, the ever-present sense of danger keening them, and bringing the grim light of past experience to their eyes, and drawing them into the closeness of a well-trained fighting troop. But even new to the country and not yet used to its dangers, McElroy remained aloof. He meant to stand alone and buck them. He had made that decision and there was no relaxing about him, and the men were beginning not to like it.

They bivouacked late, with no time or mood for talk and, with sunrise, pointed southward along a trail of mulberry tinted gray. Within the hour the country grew sparse and dry and gouged. Eroded valleys of baked, dead earth were closed in by impassable barren hills. The country had the feel of enormous beauty and vast monotony and sudden violence intermixed. These, plus the rising heat and dust, formed a narcotic in a man's blood and, even as he cursed it, made him an addict. Beal had never failed to see it touch a man and soften him, no matter how tough his grain. But catching a side glance of McElroy he found nothing in his face but an implacable hatred—he'd have none of it.

AT NOON they hit a creek and the shade of cottonwoods. Beyond there, the river was a sluggish stinking trickle and, by mid-afternoon, a trough of flaming heat. It was fierce and pagan and magnificent, but none of its beauty nor its challenge touched the greenhorn.

Gow was watching him now with a revaluation of his timbre. That grim anger could work out well in a fighting man—or it could turn a frontier post into a murder camp. He looked now for the effect of softer things upon the man. Evening's light slanted shadows down the chocolate colored hills. Suddenly the haze drew off the land and the glare broke as at a trumpet call. The Pinalenos piled atop their maroon folds, and their

trail bent and the patrol drew into camp with a blood red sun bleeding down into blue mountains.

None of this penetrated McElroy's temper. It neither exploded it, nor softened it, nor varied his feelings in any way. He was filled with a black and unyielding hardness that consumed him.

"He has the hardness of a fighting priest, sir," Gow told his captain. "It is too bad it is turned against us."

"You have decided?" Beal asked.

Gow eyed him with a veteran sergeant's privilege. "You want to see him in action first, sir?"

"I want to see something crack his shell," Beal grunted. "No man can be that hard."

Next morning they saw signal smokes and every trooper's face lifted with that controlled excitement of a bird dog's, but McElroy, who should have been most excited, remained aloof. The smokes faded and they failed to cut Injun sign. But at the junction of their patrol with Fort Grant's, they watched that fantastic reality of an experienced cavalry troop coming out of screen against a hill and forming clearly out of the glinting haze.

The two troops approached to check reports with the stirring rhythm of well trained and constantly ridden horses and the rub of leather and the rattle of bridle chains and sabers. These things hung upon the air, mixing with the pastel cavalry colors and the smoke of dust and the smells of horse sweat, saddlesoap and gun oil. This was the cavalry at its best, two rivals meeting, and there was not a man who did not feel the stir of it, except McElroy. He looked at the Grant men with the same bitter and contained contempt he had shown for Fort Bowie and the whole West.

Beal felt the irksome suspicion that perhaps Ramsgate had bested him in one of his rush decisions again as they turned back for Bowie. After twenty years experience on the frontier, he still felt the surge of thrill matched only by a fighting man's instinctive excitement at a fight.

"It is going to be rough life in barracks, if he is as tough to lick with fists!" Beal scowled. "I am not sure even Mock can break that black hate of his!"

"We need him sorely, sir," Gow said with a thread of sorrow. "Post life has not been the same without a good tenor."

"You might lick him," the captain muttered. "But I don't think it would do the trick. What he needs is time to forget the pomp and polish of parade and learn that the blood and guts of the fighting cavalry is a warmer, realer thing to live for."

The sergeant judged the ugly temper of

his men for the new trooper and looked dubious. "You don't think there is time, Captain?" he asked from long understanding of how Beal's mind worked.

"If we had Chiric sign and met up with them, a fight might have done it. But—" He cut the air with a gesture of bad temper. "Damn Ramsgate—he is winning too many bets!"

But it was a deeper feeling with the captain than just that, and the sergeant knew it and held his answer; it was a matter affecting Beal's self assurance in every decision touching the post. They had pulled every trick in the cavalry's book to get a good tenor transferred out here, and this was putting them in the wrong on their own trick. A man who committed insubordination or showed slackness would have been better eventually—discipline or riding would cool him out. But McElroy had simply frozen within his anger in the way that old lava is frozen.

"I should know better," Captain Beal told Gow at the last patrol camp, "but we'll risk a sing tonight, if the boys are in the mood for it."

Gow grinned and, without being ordered, knew voices were to be kept low. They would probably pull down every murdering Chiricahua in the hills with their racket, but it was worth it. A song in post was never the same as on the trail.

MESS was finished and water detail over, and dusk was velvet soft around them. The captain lolled back with a cigar, his senses keen and yet drifting like the sage cutting the warm, friendly smell of the horses. The horses and the men, the feelings of danger and courage and loyalty, the low, rough laughter, the play of the fire-light upon burned, battling faces, the dim movement of the sentries—these were the infinite small things that made a soldier's life worth having; the simple, rugged life that summed up to a man his contentment within the cavalry.

Gow got the singing started, and it gained force, swelling with that particular vibrant quality of low-held voices. The lilt of the simple sounds caught and carried them, and self consciousness left them. The spirit of comradeship that song brings to rough and lonely men spread out and enclosed them. Suddenly it drew McElroy into the circle of their friendship.

Gow's eyes sparked with amusement; the recruit had been singing before he knew it. He had a true, clear tenor, and as his voice gained, the others fell into a natural chorus, and then let him take the lead with the knife-like softness of *Annie Laurie*.

Captain Beal closed his eyes and leaned back, enjoying the song. McElroy's voice floated low and clean upon the desert night, ripping feelings in the men few would have admitted, and that was good for them. At an outpost where men lived in alternate periods of violence and monotony, they needed the release of song to keep from going sour or stark crazy.

The song ended and the captain sensed that McElroy's stiff disapproval would be forgotten; they would accept him and, in the doing of it, he would accept them and the trick they had played him. Gow got up and took a few steps toward the picket line and blew his nose like a trumpet, and after a brief time, came back.

He said heavily, "That was a good song, laddie, and we will sing it agin for those blathermouths at Fort Grant one of these days! It is Mock's favorite and he has been sore missing, Lwellyn for none of us can carry it."

It was a simple thanks, straight from the core of a grizzled fighting man, and told McElroy he was accepted in spite of his stiff parade post views. It told him that he could shine his boots and press his uniform every day if he damned well wanted to, and nobody would take it as an insult—which was one of the chief factors of post morale, as Captain Beal well knew. He had been right not to jump to a quick judgment of the man and give him his chance, and by virtue of one rightness, other decisions, such as Ramsgate's promotion, would be the stronger for it.

McElroy looked embarrassed and as if he wanted to admit his starch, but didn't know how to say it. The song had not changed his mind about the lack of morale and deportment at Fort Bowie, but it had changed the way he thought about it, and about the West. If the West could bring out in men what it took to sing as these did, it was not all sand and heat; it had good in it, and he was minded to think that with exceptions, a man might even come to like it.

This was on Friday and the patrol rode in next sundown. Instantly catching the camaraderie the troops included McElroy in, Ramsgate gave a sour grimace and prepared to pay Captain Beal his bet. Across the yard, Mock scowled as he cut sign on the same fact and, guessing the reason, had the immediate wonder if McElroy had sung *Annie Laurie*. Gow made him wait his time to find out, but finally suggested a song that night.

"It is the luck of the damned Irish," Mock told the greenhorn with a growl, "to hear it first time on a desert night! No, I'll bide my time and hear it right, but it is something you're owing me, McElroy. I'll not

have my men favoring that flannel mouth, Gow!"

The boys added fuel to the exchange of sergeant insults, but it turned out Mock was really sore at Gow's luck, and very shortly, the two sergeants were tumbling in a rough fight. The blows got hard, and their mutual prestige was at stake, and by the time it was broken up, there had been an exchange of really vicious tricks.

McElroy watched the fight with a return of that bleakness to his face. He had known his own barrack fights, but they had not held the explosive violence of this brawl, and any man on the Potomac who had fought a comrade that way would have been frozen out, if not actually discharged. But this garrison liked it and approved of it and was calling for a few untried Injun tricks! Even with voices like angels; they were still a damned pack of savages at heart. The incident shook his recent change of mind, and it was Ramsgate who noticed the disapproving gravity that had returned to his face, and decided cheerily that the bet was not yet lost.

In the morning, it was a fresh surprise to McElroy to find the two sergeants jovially playing poker, as if nothing had happened. None of the troops, discussing the fight, even mentioned the roughness of the tricks. McElroy decided finally, that they fought Injuns every week or two this way and, still disapproving of that kind of fighting in the cavalry, let it go at that.

In good humor at a sudden streak of luck, Mock grunted, "Now then, there are no details for the morning, and what is wrong with a little song, excepting one?"

Corporal Johnson strummed a guitar at random and nodded at McElroy to lead off the song. The recruit considered the day of the week and his own inclinations, and led off with a hymn.

For a space, utter silence held the room. Then white of face, Gow turned slowly in his chair. He said, "No man in this post sings hymns or reads a service, trooper!" and there was actual murder in his tone.

McElroy had known rough soldier humor at his streak of piety, but he had never known a troop evil and brazen enough to forbid a hymn. His back stiffened and his jaw went hard as an anvil; he took his religion mildly yet seriously, and he was willing to fight for this.

"You'll make no fight of it, or mention it again," Gow cut in warningly. "It is law at this post, and the whole outfit would be on you for it!"

McElroy looked around and met the tight setness of their eyes and the grimness of their mouths. It was not a casual thing, then. It was something deep and bitter with vio-

lence in it. It proved what he had first thought—that they were as bad as the savages they fought.

Gow said nothing more and the silence held tightly as McElroy walked out.

HIS black anger turned to white fury and lay through him in molten pools and, with tension building, the men froze him out. He was in Mock's platoon, but the men would not ride with him after he had tried humming his private Sunday hymns again. He was put on stable duty and all of the harsh riding of which angered fighting men are capable was given him. He would sing to the horses anyway, and they let him get away with that, but his anger was building to where he would flaunt them with a Sunday service, and that was going to mean sabers.

At the end of a month Lieutenant Ramsgate said cheerily to his captain, "Well, sir, do I win a bet, or are we going to have a little mutiny and murder?"

Captain Beal sucked at his upper lip and his eyes were frosty. "I will pay," he clipped out, "but I want to know the reason. It is a black one, for not even the sergeants will tell the truth of it!"

His junior officer chuckled, "He was marked for trouble first day in. Risking your anger, sir, I am thinking he is just too damned good for a frontier post."

Captain Beal's gaze drifted over him like ice. "I am aware of what you wagered, Mr. Ramsgate. What I am interested in is—is there something so rotten in this post it is going to sour us, regardless of what we do with him?"

"I think the men need some action to blow off steam, sir."

"And you would like to take a scout into the Pinalenos to scout for Yellow Hand?" Beal asked. "It is my opinion you are still a little rash for that scout, Mr. Ramsgate."

"Yes sir," the junior said and darkened, but there was no agreement in his gaze. Anger and mockery gathered in his eyes and pressed to the fore. Beal knew what he was thinking—that it had also been the captain's opinion that McElroy would prove out a good man—and it was the captain who darkened and moved his gaze in the end.

It was clear that he was in no position to insist that an unknown trouble lay with the garrison when there had been no trouble before McElroy came. If he pushed an investigation, he would have to take that stand—yet for the life of him, he could not get it out of his mind that a man good enough to win a lance stripe at McElroy's age was a good man in any troop, if he had the basis of understanding.

He barked, "We'll see about Yellow Hand. In the meantime, there is a damned train of immigrants who have been stupid enough to start across Simon's Plain. They are reported as poor loot and would probably not make an attractive prize if reasonably well defended. I think Mock had better ride out with three troopers and escort them down and through the pass."

"No officer?" Ramsgate asked.

"No. It will be a slow trip and I can't spare you for the time. There are only two wagons in the train."

Ramsgate saluted and went out to give the orders, his humor high at having won the bet on McElroy. Sooner or later the old man was going to have to recognize his right to promotion and that meant admitting the soundness of his judgment.

Captain Beal finished the endless paper work that wore out most post commandants in the end, and then sat on in the dark, trying to settle the reason for the present tension in the garrison. Sundown was a brilliant flush of red across his door and then the shadows were thickening into twilight. He watched the mess line form against the wide oblong of yellow light coming from the cookshack, and, even beyond earshot, he could feel the tension snapping through the troop. Maybe it was just sourness and boredom and the men needed more action, even at greater risk, as Ramsgate said. Maybe, Beal thought, with a tight pull in his jaws, he had turned into an overcautious and cranky commandant whose judgment was no longer respected. But he would still like to know the full story behind the difficulties with McElroy—it was not usual for his own sergeant to evade him.

He pulled to his feet, a tall and wearied and worried figure trying to deny that greatest defeat of any man, loss of his own self-assurance. Mock and his men cut blocks of solid shadow against the lesser shadows of the night as they passed through the gates. There was a light in the stables, and he knew that by mutual, unspoken agreement, McElroy no longer even mixed with the garrison, eating at a different time.

The heat of day had moved off the land. There was a hunting tang in the low breeze ranging off the desert. But there was no excitement, no appreciation, in the captain. That hunting breeze was filled with nothing but a monotonous, dusty smell tonight, and he was tired of it.

He was dead tired of the West, and of being in top command.

He stepped from the low half-log stoop into the thick dust of the untended square, conscious that there had been a rightness of McElroy's original disapproval of the fort; a frontier post without women or a town let

itself get slack and too utilitarian. He moved in quietly from the back end of the stables, pausing and standing with his hands locked behind him in the shadows.

Horses were at feed, and their warm friendliness pressed about him, but tonight even that was irritating. McElroy was at the far end cleaning a box stall, and singing very low and very miserably, but in that clear sweet tenor voice.

Captain Beal's head jerked up and his eyes sharpened, for he was hearing something he had not heard for many years—a hymn. Abruptly he understood the full and dangerous state of his post troubles, and yet his lips pulled slightly in an austere, fighting smile. He took a half step forward and then paused and, coming to a decision that involved more risk than he had ever taken, he felt suddenly fine. McElroy had not seen him, and he turned quietly and briskly back to quarters.

His orderly was waiting for instructions and he said, "Steak, rare and thick, and a bottle of that tokay you've been trying to steal!"

HE HAD not planned on the opportunity, but the opportunity came at high sun the next day. A single bloody and dusty trooper on a foam-smeared horse came racing through the gates. It was one of Mock's men, carved half to pieces, and barely able to gasp the story before he dropped. They had met up with their immigrant train nearer than expected and started in escort for the pass at dawn. They had been ambushed fording a dry creek by Yellow Hand and, if Mock was lucky, the fight was still going on.

Orders crackled and the trumpet racketed its brash call, and officers and sergeants reported to quarters. Ramsgate was on post, and Beal clipped briefly, "Take Gow and twenty men and bring that redskin in! I am detailing McElroy as one of your men."

The fighting grin froze on Ramsgate's rugged face. "He'll get killed," he grunted. "And not by a Chiricahua!"

"Then he has already sung his hymn and will go to his glory," Beal snapped.

Ramsgate's face came briefly alight with understanding. "So that was it?" he threw across his shoulder and pounded out as an orderly brought his horse.

The smoke of a fire rose above the landscape at Crimson Creek, and Yellow Hand's painted pack raced off ahead of them into the hills. Three immigrant men and a boy and two cavalymen lay dead in grotesque glory where they had fallen. Five Chiricahuas were dead and two had been literally broken apart in Mock's huge hands, but he had paid for that. They had fired one wagon and laced him to

the wheel and the mutilation had already begun. He was still breathing and semi-conscious as McElroy came around the wagon, but he was beyond human aid.

McElroy was the first one on that side of the knoll, and was held by a terrible fascination. Never would he forget the wounds on that giant's naked body. In that one horrible look, he experienced the full and violent impact of the cavalry's hatred for the Chiricahuas.

Gow came by, putting the flat of his saber across his shoulders to bring him conscious. Yellow Hand's tracks were clear running up a dangerous defile, and Ramsgate's voice boomed out, "Trumpeter, recall!" and the harsh notes rattled upon the air.

Troops returned from foraging through the nearby brush, bringing in two wounded Indians who had lost their horses. Ramsgate was afoot with the grimmest expression of fighting hate McElroy had ever seen. Troopers were being assigned the gruesome duties, and Ramsgate said with a strident quality to his voice, "Corporal Ryan can do the check up if you'd rather, Gow."

Gow stood with fierceness burning clear through him, and shook his head doggedly. He disappeared behind the wagon and no trooper moved and—except McElroy—no trooper looked. He came from his rounds booting his saber.

In a heavy voice thick with emotion he gave his report, "All dead."

"Troopers too?"

Gow nodded dully. "And Sergeant Mock."

Ramsgate jerked his head at Ryan, who took men and gathered up the corpses. They had been fighting mates and friends, the men of this troop, but Indian fighting was a grim business, and now there was only a restlessness in the lieutenant to be off on Yellow Hand's trail. He said, "One of you can ride back and bring the wagon from the fort, but if the damned Chirics get back around us, they'll finish up the bodies. We had better bury them in shallow graves."

McElroy was staring down at Mock's mutilated body with that horrible fascination he could not shake off. The body kept drawing his eyes and, as they laid Mock into his shallow grave, he realized with shock that Mock had a knife mark across his corded jugular he

had not had before. A knife—or else a saber cut—and his old friend Gow had been the one to declare him dead!

Murder! he thought. *He murdered his own friend!*

Ramsgate asked, "Will you say a word, Gow?" but the veteran sergeant was licked with grief and just shook his head.

Ramsgate looked at the circle of grim faces. "Any other friend?"

Suddenly the fierce guts it had taken Gow to do what he had done struck McElroy with realization of the deeds that Indian fighting meant. He knew now why no man of the Singing Troop ever sang a hymn—it was because they would not be profane.

He had to do what he was doing now and he stepped forward and said, "I will."

Gow's head snapped up like an unleashed spring. Ramsgate's hand ripped unconsciously to his pistol. For that one instant, the silence that falls before a blizzard held them. In that instant, McElroy lifted his sweet, clear tenor softly in the strains of *Annie Laurie*.

Gow listened, with raging murder turning to other things upon his face. There was utter silence again, and then Gow looked across the grave with his fierce toughness coming back upon him.

He growled thickly, "He got his song and he would have liked it, McElroy," and understanding passed between them.

Ramsgate was studying McElroy with a peculiar look. Behind it was a new respect for the patience the old man cautioned. He blew his nose on a red bandanna and then looked at Gow and did something he had never done in his reckless career.

He asked, "Gow, would you follow Yellow Hand, or leave a bait and wait?"

"They are Chiricahuas, sir," Gow told him, "and will likely try to circle us and come back for their own dead and what hell is left."

For an instant, Ramsgate was torn between Gow's advice and his own inclinations. Then he took the less risky side of caution, to set a bait, and realized abruptly that never before had he felt from his men such whole hearted respect. He looked across at McElroy with a grim humor in his eyes. He growled, "All right, Annie Laurie, the man who volunteers for bait is the one who gets the medals."

"I'm with you, sir," McElroy told him.

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By Joseph Chadwick

Forsythe's horse began to pitch, spooked by the gunfire, and for an instant he thought wildly, *This is where I get it. . . .*



BRAZOS TO HELL

CHAPTER ONE

The Texas Way

IT WAS a feeling a man had, Tom Forsythe thought, more than unchangeable fact. It seeped into the tenor of Texas lives like an erosive under-current, and cut deep. It ate at its own foundations, bringing change.

Texans had learned long ago that cattle-raising was not a business but the riskiest kind of gambling. But when a band of armed men said, "There are two kinds of cattle—American and Texan—and your longhorns can't enter Colorado," it was like dealing from the bottom of the deck. That was fight talk. Texan feelings were sure to be hurt, and Texan guns were apt to talk back—loud.

Tom Forsythe heard the angry muttering of the Texas men at his back, and he saw how the men before him tightened their grips on rifles and six-shooters. The two mounted bands faced each other at no more than fifty feet—pointblank range, if shooting started. Forsythe and the leader of the other outfit, which called itself the Colorado Cattlemen's Association, sat their mounts between the two opposing lines. The late August sun was hot on Forsythe's face. He had a lean, dark look. He lifted a hand and wiped away sweat.

"We came all the way from the Brazos," he said carefully, trying to keep anger from his voice. "We fought off rustlers west of the Colorado, and a Comanche war party east





|
 His sixes were to Forsythe what
 Texas ticks were to his cattle—
 too fast for the eye to see—and
 pure hell on anything on the
 front end of 'em!
 |



of the Pecos. Twice our herd stampeded to hell-and-gone, and had to be rounded up. Once we trailed sixty miles without water. Now that we're almost to the Colorado market, you hombres tell us we can't go on."

"It's the law, friend," the Coloradoan said. He, too, was uneasy—a lanky settler in homespun, armed only with a rifle. "Colorado law says no more Texas cattle can enter the state. It's not that we've got anything against Texans. It's just that Texas cattle carry ticks that spread to our American cattle, giving our stock the Spanish fever. Some of my own cattle have died of that, and I'm one who aims to help enforce the blockade."

"You and your crowd wear no law badges."

"Maybe not. Maybe we're just vigilantes. But we mean to turn back every longhorn herd that comes up the trail."

"All these men with you own what you call American cattle?" Forsythe asked. A few of the dozen blockaders looked like farmer-settlers, but most of them appeared to be hard-cases, out hunting their brand of fun. "Some of them look like men on the prod."

"We're all settlers," the lank-faced man said. "And so we're ready to have a showdown—here and now—if that's what you want."

Forsythe shook his head. "No showdown fight," he said. "No use shedding blood—if you've got the law behind you." He was sincere in that. He had fourteen men at his back, all of them fighting men. But even though Texan guns could blast a hole through this Colorado blockade, some of the trail hands would also die. The death of good men was too high a price to get cattle to market. Forsythe said, "Where's the nearest law in these parts?"

"About three miles north, on the Picket-wire," the lank-faced blockader said. "Town of Banner."

"Thanks, mister," Forsythe said. "I give you my word that my herd won't be moved until after I talk with a lawman."

"Fair enough. I'll take your word on that."

FORSYTHE swung his mount and faced the trail crew. He said, "Let's get back to the herd."

He could see scowls on some of the Texan faces. He heard a couple of riders mutter angrily under their breath. Mild little Henry Carter, who owned a part of the trail herd, looked relieved that there was to be no immediate gunplay. But burly Sam Burnett, who with Forsythe and Carter owned the cattle, was red-faced with rage.

"Dammit, Tom; you backing down for those law-spouting sons?"

Weeks ago, back on the Brazos, it had been decided that Tom Forsythe should be trail boss. But Sam Burnett was not one to bow to another man's authority. He had a stiff pride in his own ability that made him question every decision. To Forsythe's mind, Sam Burnett was a man who liked to fancy himself top dog, yet fell short when it came to leadership.

"We won't go off half-cocked, Sam."

"We outnumber them. We outgun them, and we can outfright them."

"We'll ride back to the herd," Forsythe said mildly.

The crew followed him back, Sam Burnett grumbling to the others. The cattle were grazing on a flat a few miles north of Trinchera

Pass, which was east by two days' trailing of Dick Wootten's notorious toll road over the Raton Range. There was water and grass, and it was a foothold on Colorado range. Forsythe had made it clear at the start of his talk with the blockaders that he would hold his camp, no matter what the cost. He felt that with the herd on Colorado graze, he had the blockade door partly open. But he knew Sam Burnett and some of the trail hands would not be satisfied with so little. The whole crew was hell-bent on reaching a settlement where there were saloons and maybe a honkytonk. The trail across Texas and up through New Mexico had been long and hard.

The Mexican cookie, Pablo, had a fire going by the chuck wagon. Nan Carter, Henry's daughter, was seated on a store box in the shade of the gear wagon. She was sewing a patch on somebody's shirt. She was a blonde girl with smiling gray eyes and provocative lips. Her lifted gaze sought Forsythe.

"What's the trouble with those men, Tom?"

"They don't like Texas cattle."

"You mean they won't let us go on?" Nan said, worry crowding the smile from her eyes. "We can't go on to Las Animas?"

Forsythe said, "Just for the moment," and dismounted. He watched the girl as he rolled a smoke. Nan Carter was good to look upon, even in the mannish riding clothes she wore here on the trail. And Forsythe had long ago discovered that there was an unspoken future in Nan's eyes—for him. "We'll find a way through," he added. "I figure those blockaders are pulling a bluff."

Sam Burnett came forward from turning his horse in to the remuda, and said, "You sure let them get away with it, then. You acted like all you could see was a yellow streak."

Forsythe turned slowly, after lighting his quirly. "You think that, Sam? Well, you've got a right to your opinion." He could take no real offense to Sam Burnett at the moment. The big rider liked to talk loud and stand tall before Nan Carter; he had his eye on the girl, and made no secret of it. "I'm going to have some grub, then ride to that town on the Picketwire. When I know what the law really is, then I'll know what to do about the blockaders. Don't crowd things, Sam."

Burnett's attention drifted to the girl. "Whose shirt you sewing on, Nan?"

"Dan Forsythe's."

"That's no good. You shouldn't do chores for every man in this outfit." Burnett's face was flushed again; there was jealousy in him. "Next time one of them asks you—"

Tom Forsythe turned away, walked to his brother who was pouring a tin cup of coffee at the cookfire. Dan Forsythe was a sandy-haired youngster of twenty. He was inches shorter

than Tom, and he hadn't yet filled out. He was a touchy sort, and his boyish face wore a habitual sullen frown. He gave Tom a sour look.

"Dan, don't be too friendly with Nan," Tom Forsythe said, low-voiced. "It riles up Sam Burnett."

"Hell, she's your girl—ain't she?"

"I've never asked her."

"What're you waiting for?"

"What's ailing you, Dan?" Tom asked. "You've been as mean as a rattler, ever since we left home."

Dan gulped down coffee, then swore as it burned his mouth. Then he growled, "Nothing ails me. Nothing except I don't like trailing cattle all over creation. I could have had a job in Dunn & Bateman's store in Waco, but you made me come along on this loco drive. I'm plenty tired of you bossing me around. One of these days—aw, forget it!"

"I've been trying to make a cattleman of you, Dan."

"Who wants to be a cattleman?" the kid shot back. "Just because you figure only Texas cattlemen look good in God's sight doesn't say I feel the same way. If I had any guts, I'd quit you cold. And if Sam Burnett had more guts and less mouth, he'd take Nan away from you. The trouble is, you ride everybody with rough spurs and we crawl because we're scared of you. But some day—" he faced Tom squarely, with sudden brashness—"some day you'll fall plenty hard!"

Tom Forsythe lifted his hand, then dropped it without touching his kid brother. He loved Dan and only wanted to do right by him. But he couldn't find the right words to tell the boy so. He muttered, "All right, Dan—all right," and turned away.

He mounted and rode out, heading north. The blockaders, he saw, had withdrawn to a clump of cottonwoods half a mile to the west. But they were still keeping watch on the trail herd.

BANNER wasn't much of a settlement, and Tom Forsythe, as he rode in, wondered what reason the town had for being. It was made up of a few adobes, several log cabins and two frame buildings—one a general store and the other a saloon. A few saddle mounts stood at hitch-posts along the short dusty street, but until he reached the saloon, which bore a crude sign proclaiming it the Blanco Arroyo, Forsythe saw none of the town's citizens. But a woman stood in the doorway of the Arroyo. She was watching him.

Forsythe gigged his horse over, reined in. He removed his hat, though that was a courtesy most men wouldn't have bestowed upon a woman who frequented such a place. He no-

ticed her dark green dress—it was fashionable, full skirted, form-fitting at the bodice, coming high to the throat, and Forsythe measured, in a man's way, the warmth and softness of her. Then he lifted his gaze to her face. It was a beautiful face, but Forsythe no longer thought of her as warm. Her greenish eyes were ice.

"I understand there's a lawman in this town," Forsythe said.

"A lawman of sorts," the woman said, and her voice had no color. "Step down, stranger. Come in and have a drink. You look as though you've come far."

"From East Texas," Forsythe said, wondering why such a woman was only half alive. "And I've got farther to go. I'll pass up the drink."

The green-gray eyes didn't change, but a faint smile curled the full lips. "First time any man's ever turned down an invitation to drink with me," the woman said. "I never thought I'd see that—you'll find our lawman over in Dubrow's store."

"Thanks."

"The pleasure is all mine."

Forsythe chuckled and dismounted. As he turned from tying his dun horse to the saloon's hitch-rail, a man appeared in the doorway of the store across the street. A lawman's badge was pinned to his shirt, and a dead cheroot hung from his lips. He didn't move as Forsythe walked up to him. The badge was a deputy sheriff's star.

"My name's Forsythe. I'm out from Texas with a herd of longhorns. Some blockaders stopped my outfit south of here, claiming there's a law against Texas cattle coming into Colorado. I figured you could set me right."

"I'm Ben Shard," the lawman said. He was a swarthy man of about forty, beady-eyed, thin-lipped. A jagged scar ran across his left cheek. He talked in a dead-beat voice. "I'm sorry to tell you those blockaders are right. It's a crazy law, and lots of Colorado folks are against it. According to the Denver newspapers, such a quarantine is against the rights of Congress. But the Territorial Legislature passed it, so there's nothing can be done."

"Suppose I'd drive through the blockade?"

"Well, I could look the other way," Shard said. "But you'd have all the settlers between here and Pueblo on your neck. Best thing for you to do is to ride up to Las Animas or Pueblo and see a lawyer."

"What good would that do?"

"Lawyers can most often find a way to protect a man's property."

Forsythe thought that over, and it seemed worth a try. After fighting off rustlers and Comanches, he didn't want to lose any of his crew in a bloody fight with the blockaders. He said, "Thanks for the advice, Shard."

"You're welcome, Texan."

Forsythe recrossed the street, and the woman was no longer in the saloon's doorway. He had no thirst for whiskey at the moment, but he went into the Arroyo.

He admitted to himself that he wanted another look at her.

She was seated at a deal table at one side of the room, idly shuffling a deck of cards. Forsythe knew then that she was the dive's faro dealer. He had seen women dealers in gambling places back in Texas and Kansas. They made good drawing cards. Except for a fat man drowsing behind the bar, they were alone in the place.

Forsythe stopped by her table. "I've changed my mind," he said. "I'll have that drink with you. My name is—"

"I know your name."

"How so?"

"Word of a trail herd travels in these parts. Sit down. My name's Bess Naylor." Her voice lifted. "Charlie, two bourbons."

The saloonman came with the two filled glasses, then withdrew. Bess Naylor lifted her drink. "Here's luck to you," she said. Forsythe took his up and said, "And here's to you, Bess."

He downed his drink, but Bess Naylor merely took a sip of hers. She began to toy with the cards again, and her hands were slim and white. Her eyes measured the width of Forsythe's shoulders.

"Did Ben Shard give you some good advice?"

"I guess he did," Forsythe replied. "He figured if I rode to Las Animas and saw a lawyer, I might find a way to bust the blockade without doing any shooting."

"And if you have to shoot in the end?"

"I'll shoot."

Bess smiled but her eyes still took on no warmth. "When the guns open up," she said, "be careful you're not shot in the back. That happens around here. Don't trust anybody who tries to get around behind you. You know, Forsythe—I believe you'll get through."

"What makes you believe that?"

"Maybe it's in the cards," the woman said, riffing her deck. "Or maybe my woman's intuition tells me so."

"Another drink, Bess?"

"No thanks."

Forsythe shoved back his chair and rose. He dropped a silver dollar onto the table. Bess pushed it back to him. "The drinks were on me."

"Why? That's not the way it's usually worked."

"Don't question a woman's motives, Forsythe."

"Tell me what else your cards or your intuition says about me."

Bess said, "I hear there's a girl with your

outfit. What does she mean to you, if anything?"

"Maybe I'll marry her—some day."

"And in between now and your wedding day," Bess said, "you'd like to know if the cards say anything about you and me." She shook her dark head. "I'm a widow, Forsythe. I lost a good man. I've got my memories and I don't need anything more. I deal faro here. All I can offer you is an invitation to sit in on a game some night. Which I hope you'll refuse."

"It's refused, Bess."

"You'll find some honkatonk girls in Las Animas, Forsythe," Bess said. "Adios."

"So long, Bess," Forsythe said, and strode from the Blanco Arroyo.

Riding back to the trail camp, he wondered why his conscience bothered him. When he reached camp, he kept away from Nan Carter.

CHAPTER TWO

Boothill Law

THE others—Henry Carter and Sam Burnett—were agreeable to his idea of riding to Las Animas to see a lawyer. Carter would have agreed to anything that would avoid trouble, Forsythe knew. And Sam Burnett was in agreement because it meant that for a few days he would have Nan Carter to himself. Forsythe filled his saddle bags with grub, then called to Dan.

His brother said touchily, "What you want now?"

"How much money have we left, Dan?"

Dan was good at figures and kept tally for Tom. He said, "We've got two hundred and forty-seven dollars. Why?"

"Give me the forty-seven. I may need it at Las Animas."

Dan carried the money, in gold and silver specie, in a money belt under his shirt. He counted out the amount and gave it to Tom. Pocketing the money, Tom mounted and, with a wave of his hand, rode out. He headed for the Picketwire, but this time he circled wide around Banner. He told himself he didn't want to see Bess Naylor again.

Forsythe rode into Las Animas at noon of the next day. His inquiries revealed that the town did boast a lawyer, but that gentleman was presently at Pueblo. Forsythe hired a fresh mount, shifted his saddle, and headed west along the Arkansas. He was in no great hurry, but he kept on the move. Thirty-six hours later, he reached the thriving town of Pueblo. He put his horse up at the livery stable, then went to the Drovers' Hotel. He inquired about a room for what was left of the night, then asked about John Wyman, who was the Las Animas lawyer. The hotelman

told him that Lawyer Wyman was there, in room seven.

Forsythe went upstairs, knocked on Wyman's door, and a voice said sleepily, "What's the trouble?"

"Cattle trouble," Forsythe said. "I want some legal advice."

"Can't it wait until morning?"

"Sure. But I've got money to pay for what I want to know."

"Friend, come in," said Lawyer Wyman.

He was a young man with red hair and china-blue eyes that squinted badly in the light. He had gotten from bed wearing a nightshirt, but now pulled on his breeches. A short, man, he had to look up to his visitor.

"Cattle trouble, eh?" Wyman said. "That means you're a Texan who's run up against the blockade."

"That's right," Forsythe said. "I want you to tell me how to bust that blockade without gunplay. Can you do it?"

"Sure. It's so simple I shouldn't charge you for such advice. But I've not been rolling in wealth since I hung out my shingle."

"Name your price, but keep it reasonable."

"Ten dollars, friend," Wyman said. "It's like this—that law against Texas cattle is no good. Once it's tested in court, it'll be repealed. It's not enforced in the territory to a great extent—by law enforcement officers, that is. But the Colorado Cattlemen's Association is another thing. That outfit is a vigilante crowd, which is always a bad thing. It was started by honest men, but a lot of dishonest hombres have joined up."

"Why?" Forsythe interrupted.

"Well, the association puts up the blockade," Wyman explained. "It holds up the Texas trail herds. The Texans can't stay camped with their cattle, and they don't want to drive them all the way back to East Texas. So the blacklegs in the Association start rustling from the stalled herds, or they offer to buy the cattle at a stealing price."

"What do those hombres do with Texas cattle?"

"Just what you're going to do—on my advice," Wyman said. "You swing your herd far out around the settlements, friend. So far around them that the Colorado people can't claim your longhorns are giving their American cattle fever ticks. I don't believe any territorial lawmen will bother you much. You can come north by some back trail, then cut in to Las Animas or Pueblo—and sell out. You may have trouble with the Cattlemen's Association, but it's up to you to guard your herd. You've got property rights, same as anybody."

"I rode a long way to learn something I should have figured out myself," Forsythe said, grinning. "Well, here's your money."

"If you need a lawyer again—"

"I'll look you up," Forsythe said. "Right now I need some sleep."

He nodded, went out.

Forsythe headed out after a breakfast at the hotel. He rode steadily, thoughtfully, realizing that John Wyman's words had confirmed some of his suspicions about the blockade crowd south of the Picketwire. Only a part of those blockaders had looked like farmers; the majority had seemed like hardcases. At the time, Forsythe had figured that those tough hands had been in the game just for the hell of it. Now, with what he had learned from the lawyer, he was certain that they were in it for gain. Without a doubt, a blackleg crew had designs on the trail herd. Forsythe recalled what Bess Naylor had said, "*Don't trust anybody who tries to get around behind you.*" The woman knew how things were around that part of the country.

She knew too well!

Forsythe suddenly realized that Bess could have saved him this long ride. She could have told him how to avoid the blockade. *No—she wouldn't have told me, even if I'd asked*, he told himself. Bess Naylor was a part of the town of Banner, and it, without a doubt, was the headquarters for the rustling and blackleg crowd.

At full dark that night, Forsythe made camp by the Arkansas, about fifteen miles short of Las Animas. He could have kept riding, but his hired horse was trail weary. He built a fire, ate from his saddlebag, smoked, then spread out his blanket roll. Usually, he was asleep as soon as he stretched out. Tonight he lay thinking for a time—not about the girl he believed he would one day marry, but about a woman nearer his own age of thirty. . . . A woman with green-flecked eyes. A woman without emotion or feeling.

At sunup, he ate some jerky and cold biscuits. He saddled up and rode toward Las Animas at an easy lope. In mid-morning, he turned his hired mount in at the livery stable in that town and shifted his saddle gear to his big gelded dun. He paid the livery charge, and headed south.

IT WAS nine o'clock when Forsythe reached the trail camp midway between the Picketwire and the mountains. A voice challenged him from the darkness, and he recognized the voice as belonging to Luke Doyle, one of the hands. He sang out his name and headed in.

"Keeping watch all around camp, Luke?"

"Got to, Tom," Doyle growled. "Things've been popping since you left. Rustlers."

Forsythe muttered an oath. "They ran off some of our cattle?"

"Blamed near two hundred head, just last night."

The camp had roused, and somebody threw some brush onto the fire. Henry Carter came from his blankets, his thin face worried. Forsythe off-saddled, turned his tired mount over to Doyle, and asked Carter what had happened. Most of the crew gathered about the fire.

"Rustlers hit us about midnight," Carter said flatly. "Dan and Pete Long were riding night herd—Pete got wounded in the shooting."

Again Forsythe swore. "What about Dan?"

"Not a scratch on him," Carter said. "He wasn't armed. You know Dan seldom carries a gun, so the rustlers didn't turn their guns on him. They stampeded the herd. Took us the rest of the night and all this morning to round the critters up. And we're almost two hundred head short. Sam Burnett trailed the run-off cattle."

"Go on," Forsythe said, as the older man paused.

"Sam went off half-cocked," Carter went on. "Went alone. At sunup, he got close and there was some shooting. Sam shot the horse from under one of the rustlers, then hunted him through the brush. Sam was still mounted, and the ornery son was afoot. The chase went all the way to Banner, before Sam caught up with the rustler. There was some shooting, and Sam killed the cow thief. Then along comes a deputy sheriff and arrests Sam. He's locked up in Banner, right now."

Forsythe looked around. "Where's Dan?"

Nobody answered.

Forsythe saw Nan Carter over by the gear wagon, sitting up and holding her blankets about herself. "Nan, where's the kid?"

"Where he's been every day while you were away—and every night but last night when he was riding night herd," the girl said.

"I'll tell you, Tom, if the other won't. You should know about it. He's in town drinking and gambling. What—" her voice hardened a little—"what are you going to do about Sam Burnett?"

"I'll ride to town now."

"We'll all ride in," Henry Carter said.

"No. I'll handle this alone," Forsythe said grimly.

He crossed to where Pete Long lay. The wounded man gave him a grin, and said that he was doing all right. He had only a flesh wound in his right thigh. "I'll be on my feet in a day or two, Tom."

"Take it easy," Forsythe told him.

He saddled up a fresh mount and rode out, the crew watching in silence. A mile's easy lope brought him to where he could see the bright yellow patches that were Banner's lighted windows. He kept his eyes on the patches, watching them grow larger. When finally he rode into the town, he recognized

it for one of those places that slept by day and only came alive by night. Where the men came from to crowd it after dark, only they and the Devil knew—Forsythe judged that there were at least fifty horses racked along the short street. He dismounted across from the Blanco Arroyo, left his horse ground-hitched.

Half a dozen men came from the saloon, mounted, rode from town. Forsythe crossed the street, stepped through the doorway. The long bar was lined, and the fat saloonman was busy. Four men sat around Bess Naylor's faro table. Another card game, a private one, was underway at a table in the rear of the room. Bess looked up and her lips formed a smile. The next instant, she frowned.

Young Dan was at the bar, at the far end, and Forsythe knew the kid was drunk. Ben Shard was perched on a tilted-back chair in the room's front corner, a limp cheroot between his thin lips. His swarthy face was unreadable. He gave Forsythe a glance, then continued to watch the faro dealing. Forsythe crossed and stood before the lawman.

"Shard, you arrested Sam Burnett."

"That's right, Forsythe. For murder."

"Murder, hell," Forsythe shot back. "He was trailing a rustler crew that ran off some of our cattle. He caught up with one and the rustler tried to shoot it out. You can't call that murder."

"That's Burnett's story."

"Anybody dispute it?"

"Well, no. But the other hombre's dead."

"The dead man's gun was fired?"

"Well—yes. Come to think of it, it was."

"That's enough for me, friend," Forsythe said. "Get off that chair and take me to where you've got Burnett locked up. I want him turned loose. You savvy, Shard?"

Shard's eyes narrowed, watching the big Texan, studying him. Forsythe was aware that the lawman and he were the center of attention for everyone in the saloon, but he ignored all but Ben Shard. The swarthy man took the unlighted cheroot from his lips.

"I aimed to hold him until I could ride to Trinidad and talk to the sheriff there," he said slowly. "Tell you what, Forsythe. I'll release Burnett in your custody—providing you'll give me your word that he'll show up when and if the sheriff wants him."

"You've got my word," Forsythe said flatly. "Let's get going."

Shard let his chair down from its tilt. He got off it, took a step toward the doorway.

A voice behind Forsythe—Bess Naylor's voice—said in a husky whisper, "Watch it, Texas!"

Forsythe was watching it. When Shard came whirling around, grabbing at his gun, Forsythe hit him. He slammed his fist square-

ly against Ben Shard's scarred left cheek. Shard slammed against the wall, and hung there, gasping. Forsythe followed him up, shoving his shoulder against the lawman's heaving chest. He wrenched Shard's six-shooter from his hand.

"A sneak play like that doesn't go with a law badge, my friend."

"You saying I got no right to this law badge, Forsythe?"

"I'm saying I want no trouble with you," Forsythe said, stepping back and gesturing with the captured gun. "Walk ahead of me."

There was a low muttering and faces scowled around the room. Forsythe said, for all to hear, "Keep out of this game. It's between Shard and me. If there's shooting, I'll drill him—quick!"

Deputy Sheriff Ben Shard said sourly, "Keep out of it, boys. I'll settle this in my own good time." He walked out of the saloon, Forsythe behind him.

SAM BURNETT was locked up in a 'dobe at the south end of the town, along with another prisoner who was sleeping off a drunk. His horse was in a corral around back, and Forsythe kept Shard covered until Burnett was freed and had saddled up.

Sam Burnett was in an ugly humor. When he had mounted, he said savagely, "I wouldn't be in this fix if it wasn't for that no-good kid brother of yours. I'm warning you, Tom, keep that kid out of my sight."

"What's this, Sam?"

"Ask him!"

"I'm asking you."

"All right!" Burnett growled. "Dan Forsythe came to this sinkhole of a town soon as you left for Las Animas. He got likkered up, and took to gambling away that money he was holding for you. And maybe he signed some IOU's. I don't know about that. But I'd stake my life on it that somebody in this town got a quick hold on that shiftless kid."

"A hold? What you mean, Sam?"

"He offered to ride night herd last night," Burnett went, his rage only slowly coming under control. "Always before, he tried to skin out of that kind of work. You know that. But last night he rode herd—and then those blamed rustlers showed up."

"You claiming Dan was trying to pay off some gambling debts by helping somebody rustle our cattle?"

"Why don't you put it to him?" Burnett retorted, and swung his horse around. He was gone before Forsythe could say more.

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Ben Shard was watching Forsythe, his beady eyes glinting in the gloom. He shook his head when Forsythe asked if he knew anything about Dan losing a lot of money.

"None of my business," he growled.

Forsythe gave him his six-shooter, and said, "I'll produce Burnett if you get a warrant for him. If you're holding a grudge, you can finish it off now—while you've got that gun in your hand."

Shard holstered his gun, saying nothing. He strode away from the adobe hut that served as a lock-up. Forsythe watched him mount a horse in front of the Blanco Arroyo and head north at a lope. As he stood there, Dan came lurching from the saloon and went to the hitch-rail for his mount. Forsythe started forward, calling the kid's name. But Dan hit the saddle and came loping along the dark street, sweeping by and heading toward the trail camp.

Forsythe frowned, blaming himself. If Sam Burnett was right about Dan pulling such a sneak stunt, then he himself was to blame. He had insisted that the youngster come along on the drive, when Dan wanted to take a job in a store. He had tried to make a cattleman out of a young fellow who was more fitted to be a merchant. Hating the trail, Dan could have run wild when he hit this rowdy town—on a vengeful impulse. The real fault was his own—so he told himself.

Troubled, he walked slowly back to where he had left his horse across from the Blanco Arroyo. As he took up the reins, he heard Bess Naylor speak his name. He turned and saw her step away from the saloon's doorway and walk north along the dark street. She halted at the last cabin in the row, looked back over her shoulder, then opened the cabin door and disappeared inside. Forsythe saw a patch of lamplight suddenly appear from the cabin doorway.

Very slowly, almost automatically, he tied his mount's reins to the hitch-rail. He was drawn toward that cabin like a bit of iron to a lodestone. He felt his heart pound, hard and fast. The door was closed when he reached it, and he knocked.

Bess' voice said, "Come in, Tom."

The cabin had more than one room, and the one into which Forsythe stepped was a nicely furnished parlor. He wondered vaguely how far the furnishings had been freighted—and how long ago. He closed the door, stood with his back to it and removed his hat. Bess stood by the center table upon which stood the oil lamp and a book and a sewing basket. She wore black tonight, black velvet. It made her skin seem like pink tinted ivory. Her eyes had changed. They were aglow, luminous.

Forsythe said, "My brother lost a lot of money at the Arroyo."

"Not at faro," Bess said. "In a private game."

"Who sat in that game besides Dan?"

"Ben Shard, for one. A man named Ace Meehan, for another. There were two others, but they don't count. They take orders from Shard and Meehan, who are partners under cover."

"Shard?" Forsythe said.

"I'll get to him," the woman said. "First, you've got to know about Ace Meehan. He rode with Quantrill's guerrilla band during the war, and he's still a lobo. He robs miners back in the hills, and I've heard that he has done some claim-jumping. But he likes cattle best."

She paused, watching Forsythe. She was smiling with her eyes as well as with her lips, and her voice was no longer toneless.

She went on, "Your brother was a victim of a tinhorn game. He lost his money, then signed some IOU's. Yesterday, Ace Meehan told him how he could get back those IOU's. All Dan had to do was give a signal when your herd could be raided. If you follow the Picketwire west, Tom, you'll see a big red rock that's shaped like a church steeple. Just beyond there's a canyon. Your cattle are there. Ace Meehan will have gunhands guarding them. But I don't think you'll be worried about that."

"Aren't you a little afraid to tell so much, Bess?"

"Fear is the least of my feelings, Tom."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Hate can make a person laugh at fear," Bess said. "You want to know about Ben Shard. All right. Ben Shard was a lawman at one time, but he turned crooked. He never turned in his badge. He likes to pose as a lawman. Because of a crazy pride, I suppose. And because it leads to easy money. He locked up your man, Burnett, in the hope you'd offer him a bribe. If you hadn't been smart and tough, it would have cost a thousand dollars to get Burnett turned loose. Shard and Ace Meehan work together, and they're not done working on you. You can be sure of that. They'll try to get away with your whole herd. And if they can't do that, they'll try to rob you of the gold you get when you sell your cattle."

"And Ben Shard is the man you hate?" Forsythe said.

Bess Naylor's eyes clouded, and her voice once again was hollow. "Jack Naylor and I came here six months ago," she said slowly. "Jack had been in a little trouble up at Denver, and this seemed like a good place to hole up for a time. My husband dealt faro at the Arroyo. He was a square dealer—you've got to believe that, Tom."

"Since he was your man, I believe it."

"Thanks. But being honest, a gambler some-

times has a run of bad luck. There was a poker game, and Jack was a heavy loser. He was caught between Ben Shard and Ace Meehan, and those two know as much about card playing as they do about fighting. They cleaned Jack out."

Bess was pale. She swayed as though she were about to faint. But she recovered after a moment.

"Jack had a ruby ring that he'd bought when he was very young," she went on. "He was superstitious about it—claimed it brought him luck. Ben Shard suggested that he put it into the game. Jack refused, saying it was the one thing he wouldn't risk on cards. Ben Shard came right back at him, and said, 'The only thing, Jack? Well, there's something I want more than your ruby ring. You lost six thousand dollars in this game. I'll give you a chance to win it back. You willing to put up your wife?'"

"Shard wanted Jack Naylor to stake you on a poker hand?" Forsythe said. "He must be loco!"

"Jack hit Shard across the face, cursed him. Shard walked away. He rode out of town—one night a week later, Jack was back-shot as he walked home from the Arroyo. It was Ben Shard of course, but—well, I'm only a woman. I couldn't take a gun and hunt him down. And there's no law here in Banner."

Her voice ran on. Shard had come back to Banner a month later. He had expected her to take up with him. Bess would have nothing to do with him. She took over the deal table at the Arroyo, to earn a living. She had hoped to find a way to even matters with Ben Shard. She had hoped to find a man to use against the killer. But—"Until you came along, Tom," she said finally, "I saw no man who dared stand up to Shard."

"I'm beginning to savvy why you brought me here," Forsythe said. "You want me to kill Shard for you."

"When I saw you brace him tonight—"

"I'm no killer, Bess. I use a gun only to protect myself."

The woman took a step toward him, her slim white hands lifted like a beggar's. At that moment he saw the answer to his thoughts in her eyes—and something else. He shook his head.

"Your hate is no good, Bess."

"I'm still good in your eyes, aren't I?"

"I'm no killer, I tell you!" Forsythe said harshly. "I'd kill Shard in a minute, if he jumped me. But not in cold blood—not for you or anybody." His palms felt clammy; there was a chill sweat on his forehead. "You picked the wrong man, Bess."

When Forsythe walked from the place, he felt that someone was watching him from some deep shadow. But he reached his horse

and rode from the town without seeing anyone.

CHAPTER THREE

Six-Gun's Due

AT SUNUP, as the trail camp roused, Forsythe took Sam Burnett aside and told him that he knew where the rustled cattle had been hidden. "I'm going to take a couple men and ride out there," he said. "You want to ride along?"

Burnett was always ready to buck trouble, and said, "I'll ride along." Then he added, "But I sure hate to run up against rustler guns because that fool kid, Dan, got roped in on a tinhorn game."

"It's my fault, Sam," Forsythe said. "I shouldn't have made the kid come along on this drive. You don't need to ride with me."

"Shucks—I'm with you in everything. You know that, Tom."

Forsythe smiled wryly. "In everything but one," he said. "Look, Sam—I'm not standing in your way with Nan."

He turned away before Burnett could reply to that. He saw Nan Carter over by the gear wagon; she was brushing her tawny hair. She looked young and fresh, and unspoiled. And Forsythe knew that any feeling she had for him was not very deep. She had been attracted to him because he loomed big in her youthful eyes, and Sam Burnett was a better man for her. Forsythe remembered how Nan had said last night, "*What are you going to do about Sam Burnett?*" She had begun to notice the burly young rancher. . . . Forsythe went hunting his brother.

Dan was still in his blankets, his hat covering his face. Forsythe shook him awake, and said, "Dan, when we get to Las Animas and sell the herd, I'm sending you back to Texas by stage. You can go take that job at Waco."

The youngster looked sick from last night's whiskey, but his eyes brightened. "Thanks, Tom—thanks!"

"Forget it," Forsythe said and turned away.

He crossed to the remuda and saddled a mount. Sam Burnett had picked out Luke Doyle, a good fighting man, to ride with them. The three of them mounted and headed out after Burnett went to say something to Nan Carter. Forsythe led the way west along the Picketwire.

An hour's ride brought them within sight of the high spire of red rock that Bess Naylor had described. The country around the rock was wild, and Forsythe saw no trail over which cattle could have been driven. But he had faith in what Bess had told him. If the rustlers hadn't moved the longhorns, they would be found in a hidden canyon. Forsythe

was sure of that. They reached the huge rock formation short of noon, and reined in to blow their horses.

Burnett said, "Rider coming up behind us. Looks like Dan."

It was the kid. He had belted on a six-shooter and was carrying a rifle across his saddle horn. When he pulled up, Forsythe said, "What's the idea, Dan?"

"I'm going in there with you," Dan said. "I'm to blame for it, and I figure I should have a hand in whatever happens."

"This is no game for you, kid."

"Sure it is, Tom," Burnett said flatly. "Stop treating him like a school kid. Give him a chance to make a man of himself."

Forsythe looked at Burnett and saw no malice in the man. Suddenly he realized that it was time he stopped shielding his kid brother from the seamy side of life. "All right," he said. "Come along, Dan."

Starting out again, they rode warily. They pushed through timber and a tangle of brush, then came to some rocky hills. A commotion broke out somewhere ahead, and they knew that it was the noise of a herd of cattle being moved.

Sam Burnett said, "This way," and swung south through the brush. Forsythe rode right behind him, and minutes later they broke from the screen of brush and trees and saw riders hazing a big bunch of longhorns from a narrow pass in the rock hills. There were half a dozen riders, and they caught sight of Forsythe and Burnett at once.

Rustlers guns opened up, and the cattle began to move at a wild run. Forsythe drew his rifle and swung it up, firing at the rustlers. Burnett opened up with his six-shooter, but a bullet hit his horse and the animal went down with a crash. Forsythe saw that Burnett was pinned beneath the fallen animal. He cursed, for there was no time to help the downed man. The rustlers were leaving the herd and riding at him, their guns blasting.

Forsythe's horse began to pitch, spooked by the gunfire. It ruined his aim, and for an instant he thought wildly, *this is where I get it!* Fear crawled through his belly, and he cursed his mount. He managed to fire another shot, but missed again. The rustlers were crowding in at him, so close now he could see their faces. A burly man had a bead on him—Forsythe could see the six-shooter staring him in the eyes. But it never blasted. A gun opened up behind Forsythe, and the red-faced rustler toppled from the saddle.

Forsythe got his horse under control at last, and his Henry roared again. That shot caught a man in the chest. The rifle behind Forsythe was firing steadily, and it cut down a third rider. . . .

Abruptly it was over. The remaining three

rustlers swung their mounts and high-tailed it back toward the pass in the hills. Forsythe giggled his horse about and saw that it was Dan who had broken the rustler attack.

More sensible than either Forsythe or Sam Burnett, the youngster had dismounted and steadied his rifle across a rock for better shooting.

Forsythe said, "Nice shooting, Dan."

Young Dan's boyish face lighted with pleasure. He said excitedly, "You know who that big red-faced hombre is, Tom? That's Ace Meehan, the tinhorn who took me across in that card game."

"He'll do no more card playing," Forsythe said, and went to Sam Burnett.

Luke Doyle came up, muttering angrily because he had missed out on the shooting. He had been knocked off his horse by a tree limb while riding through the brush.

They got Sam Burnett out from under his dead horse, and the big rancher suffered nothing more than a hurt leg. He was full of pain but he had no broken bones. Dan caught up one of the dead rustler's broncs for Burnett to ride. The stampeded longhorns were still running, but they were headed east along a dry arroyo, in the direction that led back to the trail camp. That made it easier.

Forsythe said, "Let's take after those critters. We're ready now to bust the blockade and head for Las Animas."

It was nearly sundown when Forsythe and the others got the recaptured cattle back to camp. They hazed the longhorns in with the grazing herd, then rode to the rope corral and dismounted. Coming from his horse, Sam Burnett sank to the ground. His hurt leg had buckled and his face was twisted with an agony of pain.

Nan Carter cried out at sight of him; then a look of startled surprise for her concern for a man other than Tom Forsythe crossed her face.

Forsythe gave her a smile and said, "Go to him, Nan." He was thinking of another woman—one he would not see again.

Around the fire that night, he told the crew that they would pull out at midnight. "We'll swing the herd east across the plains, away from the settlements," he said. "We'll head north to the Arkansas, then west to Las Animas. That way, we should give the blockaders the slip."

"They're watching us day and night," Henry Carter said.

"No matter," Forsythe replied. "We're moving out."

BY MIDNIGHT the herd was moving east across the grass flats. At sunup, the cattle were still on the move. The wagons and remuda broke trail, and the whole

outfit was headed away from the Picketwire. A band of riders appeared at mid-morning, and watched the herd from a distance. Forsythe did not know whether they were blockers or rustlers. After a time they disappeared to the southwest.

The next morning a solitary rider was seen so far back he was but a speck across the plains. Sam Burnett said, "Trouble in a man who prowls like that. You want me to drop back and see what he's up to?"

"It's Ben Shard," Forsythe said. "I'd gamble on it."

"You figure he's after me?"

"No. I'm the one Shard wants."

He rode on with the herd, only occasionally looking back to see if the rider he thought was Shard kept to the trail. The rider was always there, never venturing close. *Tonight*, Forsythe told himself.

After sundown, with the herd still on the move, Forsythe talked to Burnett and then dropped from the saddle. Burnett took his horse, and Forsythe dropped flat in the high buffalo grass. He had his Henry rifle, and as the dusk thickened he trained it on the approaching rider. It was Ben Shard, all right—Forsythe felt that in every fibre of his being.

Sam Burnett was keeping the herd on the trail, as Forsythe had asked, and it was already half a mile to the north. Shard was narrowing its lead, but still holding his horse down to a slow walk. Forsythe tried to read the man's mind; there seemed only one explanation for Shard's trailing the herd. He wanted to get a shot at him—at Tom Forsythe—because of the woman. Shard must have known that Forsythe had visited Bess, and there was a devil in him now.

Presently Shard reined in. He removed his neck scarf and held it high, watching it closely as it dangled in the wind. The light was fading, and even though Shard was within rifle-shot, Forsythe could not read the man's actions. Then Shard replaced his scarf and turned his horse to the east.

Forsythe rose from the grass and started in the same direction. Afoot, he could move silently. As darkness came, there was little chance of Shard looking back and seeing him. Finally, well east of the herd, Shard reined in and left the saddle. Forsythe halted and watched—and then understood what Shard was up to. A match suddenly flared.

Forsythe reared up, yelling an oath, jerking up his rifle. He fired wildly, and so missed. Shard leapt for his horse. He hit the saddle and swung it hard around as Forsythe's rifle roared a second time. That shot too missed and Shard was lost in the darkness. But where he had been, flames were leaping high.

Panic driving him, Forsythe tried to stamp out the flames with his boots. It was like try-

ing to stop a flash flood with a tin cup; the flames roared and leapt higher, spreading out in a wide swathe. Forsythe turned and ran.

Sam Burnett loomed through the darkness, leading Forsythe's horse. He shouted, "Grass fire, Tom—"

Forsythe swung to the saddle and said, "Shard set it! The crazy son must want to wipe out the herd. We'll stampede the cattle, Sam. If we can swing it northeast, maybe we can get them away. Come on!"

The fire was racing forward in a long glowing wave, and the cattle were wild with the fear of it. Forsythe and Burnett shouted to the other riders, and they fired their guns and got the herd running. They tried to control the cattle, and after the first wild minute managed to turn the blind charge northeast across the plain. Then, as Forsythe saw that he was going to save the cattle, a band of riders came racing in from the west. Their guns blazed in a pounding volley as they swung in and tried to get at the bees.

Forsythe fired shot after shot into the rustlers. He reloaded his rifle, and emptied it again. The barrel was hot in his hand. He thrust it into his saddle boot, then grabbed out his six-shooter. All around him guns were blazing. Men swore and yelled, some crying out as they were hit. Wounded horses went down screaming.

Pointblank, the two Texans emptied their six-shooters. The raiders shied away. They turned back and were silhouetted against the prairie fire. Forsythe called Sam Burnett back.

"Let them go. They've had enough of it."

"The cattle are still running."

"We'll round them up in the morning," Forsythe said. Some of the crew came riding up. "Anybody hurt?" he asked them.

"Luke Doyle's dead. Both the Hanlon boys are wounded—but not bad," somebody replied. "We must have plugged half a dozen of those dirty sons."

Forsythe said, "Find Luke's body. We've got to give him a decent burial." There was grief in his voice for the dead man.

There was hatred in his heart for Ben Shard. He saw Sam Burnett watching him, and he said in a whisper, "I'll get him, Sam. If it's the last thing I do, I'll get him!"

TRAIL'S end was the stock pens of a cattle dealer at Las Animas. Texas cattle brought the high price of twenty-seven dollars and fifty cents a head in Colorado that year of '69, perhaps because of the blockade. Tom Forsythe felt that the money had been earned, whenever his mind's eye looked back along the trail to the Brazos. Three men had suffered wounds and, though they had recovered, Luke Doyle lay in an un-

marked grave on the prairie. It had taken blood and sweat to get the herd to market.

He had his share of the cattle money—in gold and silver specie—in his saddle bag. He had his dun gelding and a pinto mare for a pack animal, though the rest of the remuda had been sold. And he had his grim plans. Forsythe planned to outfit for the trail and hunt down Ben Shard. He couldn't let that raid upon the herd—and Luke Doyle's death—go unavenged. It meant a return trip to that rustlers' den by the Picketwire, the town of Banner.

Forsythe trailed south without haste. Except for his hatred for Ben Shard, he had nothing on his mind. Dan was on his own. Nan Carter would marry Sam Burnett—his own plans for the future were settled. When he got back to East Texas, he would sell out his Brazos ranch and form a new trail herd. He wouldn't drive to market this next time, however. He planned to start a new ranch on the virgin Staked Plains.

But the nearer he got to Banner, the dimmer grew other matters. He thought more of Ben Shard and of how the showdown would end up. He was gambling his life. Shard was tricky; he was tough and smart. But Forsythe thought, too, of the woman.

He reached the grubby little settlement at mid-morning of the third day. Short of the town, he reined in and frowningly stared the length of the dusty street. Banner had been drowsy before; now it seemed dead. Not a single horse stood anywhere along the street. No chimney let out a puff of smoke. The Blanco Arroyo's door was smashed in and its windows were shattered. The store opposite the saloon was closed, its window boarded up. Forsythe's eyes sought Bess Naylor's cabin. The door was open to the bright sunlight. Forsythe saw no movement there, but he felt that it alone of any place in Banner had life.

He swung his horses close to the cabin. He dismounted and walked to the door. Bess was in the parlor. She was busily packing some of her things into a trunk. She looked up, startled, when Forsythe filled the doorway.

"What's happened here, Bess?"

"Something that should have happened months ago," she told him. "A few days after you took your herd away, a big bunch of riders came over from Trinidad. Every man was sworn in by the United States marshal. They came to break the rustling element around these parts. Some of the Banner crowd forced up in the Arroyo, but the fight lasted only a few minutes. Twenty men were arrested, a couple killed. The others hightailed it and never came back. The storekeeper pulled out. The few people the posse didn't bother left during the next couple of days."

"And now you're leaving?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"Denver, maybe. Or California. It doesn't matter," Bess said. "I'll send a wagon for my furniture, once I'm settled somewhere. Now if you'll go, Tom—I'm very busy."

Forsythe frowned, puzzled by her manner. The green-flecked eyes avoided his gaze. She was pale, nervous. She turned to the curtained doorway to her bedroom, then paused.

"Why did you come here?" she demanded.

Forsythe started rolling a quirly smoke. "Ben Shard," he said, and saw no surprise in her. "Did the law posse get him?"

"No."

"He's here in town?"

"If he were, you wouldn't be alive," the woman said. "He'd have shot you down as you rode into town." Her voice rose, grew edged. "Why don't you leave? Why don't you go back to Texas?"

Forsythe lit his quirly. "I'm hunting Ben Shard," he said. "It's blamed funny. Once you tried to get me to kill him. Now you act as though you don't want that. What's got into you?"

"There's no sense in killing," Bess said. "What good would it do you to kill Ben Shard? You told me that my hate was no good. Why don't you tell yourself that yours is no good?" She faced him now, looking squarely at him. "I want Ben Shard to stay alive," she went on. "When he comes back, he'll take me away. He's my ticket to some other place. He's got plenty of money and—"

"And he killed Jack Naylor," Forsythe said. "Did you forget that?"

"A woman in my position can forget a lot of things," Bess said. "Most of all, I'd like to forget you. Will you please go?"

"I'll go," Forsythe said, and turned out of the place.

HE MOUNTED his dun, caught up the pinto's halter rope. He turned his horses and rode north out of the dead town. He kept going along the dusty road until a clump of cottonwoods hid his movements.

Then he dismounted and started back on foot, his six-shooter in his hand.

Rocks and brush and trees screened him, and he moved warily. Finally he dropped down behind a boulder thirty feet from the cabin. He was on the blind side of the cabin, but he could see if anyone stepped from either the front or rear door. He heard voices—Bess' and a man's. He waited and grew cramped from crouching. Then at last Ben Shard stepped from the front door. The swarthy hardcase peered north, then laughed. He said over his shoulder, "You got rid of him, all right."

Forsythe rose, swinging his gun up. "Here, Shard," he called out.

Ben Shard whirled, grabbing out his gun. He fired as his six-shooter came clear of its holster, but Forsythe's bullet caught him in the chest and reeled him back against the cabin wall. He tried to fire another shot, but he couldn't bring his weapon to bear. He shoved away from the cabin and ran stumblingly. Forsythe shot him again, and Ben Shard sprawled flat in the dust.

Forsythe holstered his gun and turned. Bess was in the doorway, horror in her eyes. She looked from Ben Shard's lifeless body to Tom Forsythe, and the horror was replaced by relief. Forsythe went to her, gently turned her back inside.

"He was there in the other room, behind the curtain," he said. "He saw me coming—and he could have ambushed me. You told

him you'd go away with him, if he'd let me live. He would have taken two men out of your life. You made a bargain with him. Bess, didn't you know I would see through it?"

"No—I just couldn't bear the thought of you dead."

"It looks as though you and I can't get along without each other," Forsythe went on. "I'm going back to Texas, to sell my ranch and drive a herd into the Staked Plains. I'll start small but I'll end up with something big. I want you to come with me, Bess, and share my life. You won't ever regret it."

"Gratitude, Tom?" Bess said.

"Not gratitude," he said. "You know better than that."

Forsythe saw the last trace of chill leave the green-flecked eyes. He saw Bess Naylor's lonely face glow with sudden happiness. He had his answer.



SUDDEN-DEATH CHARLIE

AMONG the names made famous in California during the gold era was that of Charlie Parkhurst, stage coach driver supreme. Stories of his daring and courage and coolness mounted with Charlie's record of daily runs. Once the swollen Tuolumne River reached flood stage as Charlie was driving a coach loaded with passengers over a bridge spanning the torrent. The beams began to buckle, and the bridge sagged. Charlie's reaction was firm and accurate. The whip was laid on, the horses with a fury—the spirited team surged ahead as never before. As the rear wheels of the coach touched the far shore, the bridge melted into the swollen stream.

Charlie also left his quota of dead road agents in his twenty year wake, until his coaches made their runs virtually unmolested. When his twenty years were up, he retired and settled down in Central California. In 1879, Charlie's body was found by friends who planned a visit.

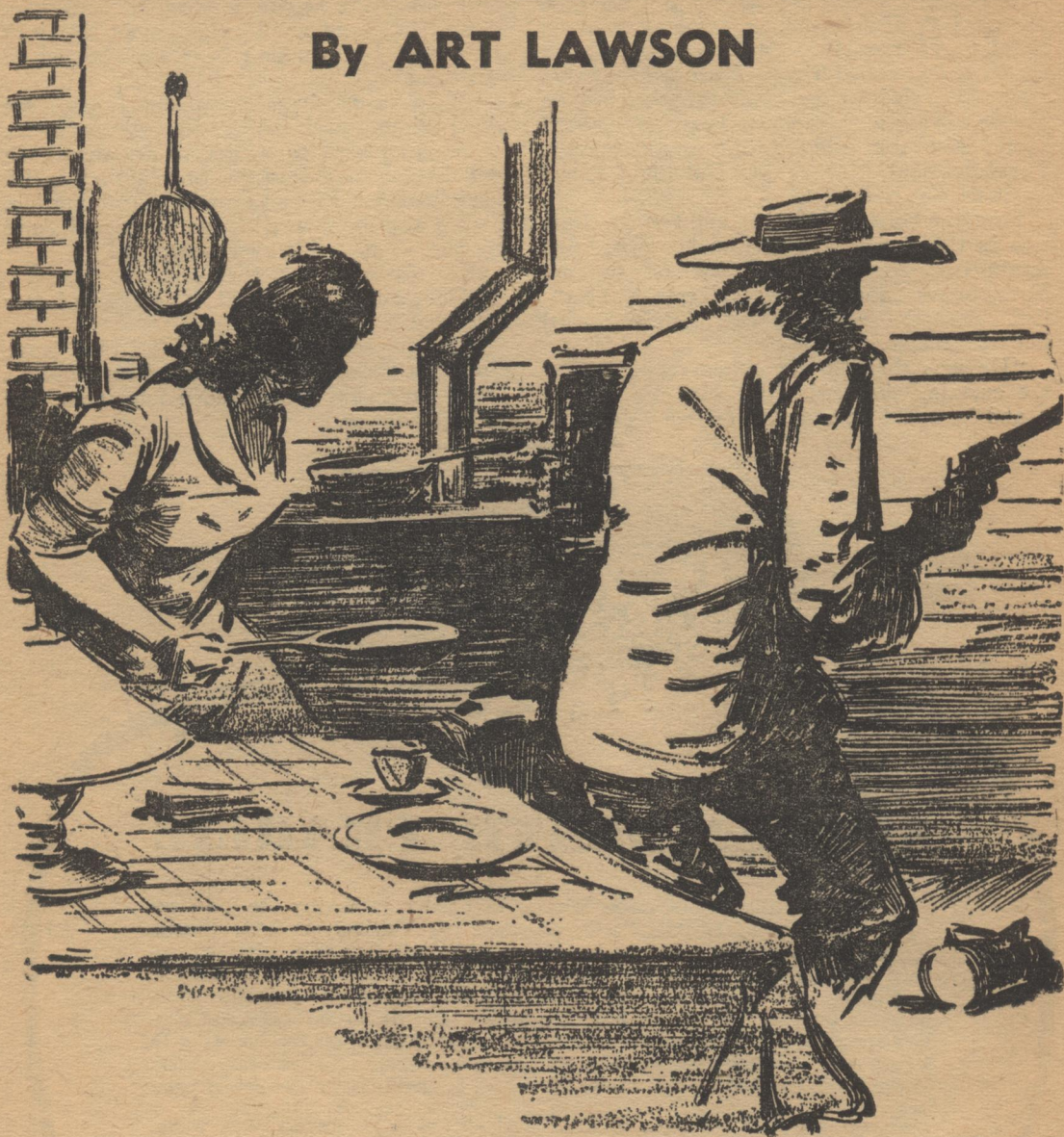
Newspapers all over America chronicled the death of Charlie as the loss of one of the toughest best "whips" among California drivers. But another reason made the story big news, for you see, Charlie was a woman—who kept her secret until death!

By

R. W. Young

ROPE-READY

By ART LAWSON



CHAPTER ONE

Bounty on Polecats

WHEN Vance Carter got up that morning he could not open the door of his cabin, and the drifts of snow were higher than his two tiny windows. Vance swore harshly at fate. Then suddenly he stopped and listened. He listened—but the only thing he could hear was the humming of blood in his ears. The blizzard had stopped.

As unaccountably as it had started, it was over—and Vance Carter's VC spread was wiped out. Even as he stood in the black, soundless shanty he knew that he would not have to dig out and look around to learn that his ranch was an outfit of the past, that his cattle were smothered under the snow, or frozen by the arctic wind.

He went head first out the kitchen window, into a snow-bank . . .



Fool's Creek had lived up to its name and the gun-hungry Texan saw no sense in hanging around—especially by the neck!

He lit a lamp, started the fire in the old rickety stove, put on coffee to boil, and shaved carefully while waiting for his breakfast to cook. He warmed beans, fried bacon, and made some baking powder biscuits which he ate with hot drippings. He drank three cups of coffee while he sat by the lamplight in the warm little cabin. Snow melted at the windows. After a while a thin sliver of light appeared along their top edges.

He loaded a gunnysack with the things he wanted to take along; extra clothes, a couple of books, a violin, an old photograph of his father and mother, taken the day they were married. Ready to leave, he wrote a note which he placed on the home-made table.

Any passenger wants this ranch can have it and the whole of Montana for all I give a damn. Vance Carter, the biggest fool on Fool's Creek.

The door was still unmovable. Vance smashed a window with an axe and climbed outside. He sank into snow to his shoulders. The sky above was the color of lead. The storm had not quit. It was just taking a holiday.

The intelligent thing to have done would have been to climb back into the cabin, patch the window and wait. He had plenty of food and firewood. He could drive away the heavy silence with his fiddle. He could keep warm

while thinking of his dead cattle all around him. He could think of his horses freezing in the lean-to. He could hole up in his cabin and go crazy—as many intelligent people had done.

So he fought through the snow. He forced his way around to the back of the cabin. Here in their shelter his four horses huddled, staring at him with wide, frightened eyes. He forked down some hay and filled troughs with oats. He stamped his feet to warm them while his horses ate.

Yonder were the willows and the scraggly alders that lined Fool's Creek. The odd-looking humps in the snow were dead cows, longhorns from the Texas plains, beeves that were not of a breed to get along in the frozen country up here along the muddy Missouri. Fool's Creek, Vance thought, had been very well named indeed.

He saddled his best horse, a short-coupled hairy beast with a mean disposition and in-bred cow savvy and heart. He lashed a sack of oats onto the pack saddle of his second best horse. He was going to use the other two to break trail, but when they were ready to go it was Vance, himself, who led the procession.

The world was an endless rolling range of white, his only guide the gaunt trees and brush along the creek. After a mile of tunneling through the shifty snow, Vance threw his sheepskin coat onto the back of the pony following him. He struggled on without thought, without a consciousness of what he was doing.

At noon he fed his horses again—lightly. He cooked tea and bacon and warmed up a pan of beans. He huddled a while in a blanket. The horses were stomping, steaming. Vance got up and stumbled on his way. The snow was coming down again.

By three o'clock in the afternoon the world was pitch black. It was instinct that told Vance where he was. A break in the tree-fence to his right pointed out the ford across the creek, the main road to the gold country. A tiny light indicated the Thornton Roadhouse. Vance moved ahead a few more yards. In the lee of the two-story log building he halted a moment to get his breath. The horses blew and snorted.

It was a miracle, Vance thought, that he had ever gotten here. Then he laughed bitterly. It would be more of a miracle if he ever left. Mike Thornton had threatened to kill him on sight.

"C'mon," Vance said to his horses.

HE LED his weary string around back, put his shoulder to the great barn door and slid it open just enough to let the animals file inside. A big Concord

coach stood in the middle of the barn, bulking huge in the gloom. It was covered with ice.

Horses stomped in the stalls. Slowly Vance warmed up. He struck a light and looked at the Concord. This coach was the one Mule Nissley usually drove. Mule was a damn good poker player—and if Mule's coach was here and Mike Thornton's was not, it could mean that Mike was missing, too.

Vance would appreciate a night of peace and poker and firewater before hitting the trail for Texas.

He found empty stalls and rubbed his horses dry with sacks that were lying around. He forked hay and grain, and stood a while rubbing his hands together, making his fingers supple. He warmed his six-shooter inside his shirt until the film of oil was loose again. Then he listened to the soundless fall of the snow—and to the light laughter of a girl in the big roadhouse. He began to perspire under his hat band.

He had kissed Belle Thornton the last time he was down. He had had a drink too many. He had been lonesome and a little reckless, and Belle was a girl calculated to build a fire inside a man—and he had kissed her thoroughly before Belle's brother, Mike, had run him out.

Vance buttoned his sheepskin over his chest and closed the barn door behind him. He stomped across the yard, onto the long porch. He tried to look like any casual pilgrim when he stepped inside.

The warmth made him dizzy. He kept his eyes away from the bar. There was Mule Nissley, all right, sitting over in the corner of the room with some other gents. There were whiskey bottles on the table, and playing cards and money.

"'Lo, Mule," Vance greeted. "You loped old son of a whiskey drinkin' kiote."

"Tex, you old warthog!" Mule shouted. Mule was the only one along the road who called Vance that. "Get a bottle and join us, boy. We'll let you have the chair with its back to the wall and a view of the door."

"In that case," Vance said, "reckon I'll take a hand."

He continued avoiding the bar. A rather dudish-looking gentleman sat with a very elegantly-dressed girl at a second table. Though they seemed vaguely familiar to him, Vance was sure that he had never seen them before. He took off his hat, knocked snow from it, and bowed to the couple.

"Evenin'," he said.

The girl smiled brilliantly. The man growled his answer in a hostile fashion. Vance felt ornery and smiled at the girl. He licked his lips.

"Don John, himself," a second girl said.

"You ought to hear him when he starts recitin' poetry."

Vance blushed scaldingly. He guessed he had been pretty silly the last time he was here. But he had to face it now; there was no way out of it. And he knew that he had come in this direction, rather than going in the other, just to see the girl behind the bar.

"H'yah, Belle," he said.

The girl was scowling at him, angry, and a little frightened. She was a very pretty girl, dark and wild.

"What'll it be, irresistible?" she asked.

Vance ignored the dig.

"Cup of tea," he said. He leaned against the bar. His throat was a knot. "I'll chase it with a bottle of Monongahela."

She reached under the bar for a bottle. "Cash," she said shortly. "And then you better trot right along on your way." She nodded to the small mirror behind the bar. An announcement was written there in soap. Vance had not observed it along with the other notices.

BOUNTY ON POLECATS \$500

For Vance Carter's Hide

"Your brother's got a fine sense of humor," Vance said to the girl.

Belle said intently, "He doesn't think it's funny." The anger and hardness left her. She seemed suddenly like a little girl. "You got to go, Vance, before he gets back. Please, Vance."

"Sure," Vance grinned.

He picked up the bottle and carried it over to the poker table. Passing, he winked at the elegantly dressed girl sitting with the dudish gentleman. She widened her blue eyes. The poker players made a place for him at the table where he could sit with his back to the wall. While they played out the hand he noticed that the dudish gentleman and his lady were in a tense and angry conversation. Vance began to feel good. It sure had been hell up there alone in the hills, waiting for the blizzard to wipe him out. Down here things were stirring.

MULE NISSLEY'S stage had been stalled here for two days. Mike Thornton's coach, which should have passed through on the way down-trail had not shown up at all. The poker players, all but Mule, were having a tense time of it. Mule never had given a damn how long he hung around one place as long as there was a poker table between himself and the door out. The others were surly, as if Mule had been riding them. They were proddy and mean, and had been drinking too much. Like a

longhorn herd on a stormy night, the slightest thing might stampede this outfit—and such a sum as \$500 could drive any of them to try to collect. Vance Carter's grin was thin and cold.

Big Ashley was the one with the tightly curled red beard. Little Ashley was crippled. His brother, they said, had shot him accidentally in the spine when they were kids. Little's legs had not grown after that. He could not walk, but he could fork a horse with a special saddle, and he was lightning with a gun. He was helpless without Big who carried him around like a sack and was always on hand to wait on him.

The two dealt in mining stocks—they claimed—deals of so great and secret a nature nobody ever got in on one of them. But the third man at the table did nothing at all for a living as far as anyone could tell. Lazy Joe Sims was half Comanche and half Boston Yankee. He had the ragtail of an education. He could quote Shakespeare or the Bible—or he could drive splinters of pitch pine under your fingernails and set fire to them. Of late, Lazy Joe Sims had been seen often in the company of the Ashley brothers.

But none of them, Vance thought, would want to split his head-money with anyone else.

As for Mule Nissley, Mule was a friend of Vance's. In that respect Mule might act differently from the other three. Mule would make absolutely sure that there was \$500 to collect before trying to nail up Vance's hide.

Vance's thin grin grew hard. "Any big deals lately, Big?" he asked the bearded Ashley brother.

Big grunted. Little said irritably, "We playin' poker or settin' in on a ladies' gab fest?"

"The tongues of dying men enforce attention like deep harmony," Lazy Joe Sims said. "A gent named Shakespeare said it—*Richard the Second*." He added to Vance, "You ought to read it, boy."

"Did," Vance said. "The mistake that king made was trying to beat the Irish. Remember that, Joe." Vance was the only Irishman there. "Well, boys, let's deal a hand. How're tricks, Mule? Been held up lately?"

This was apparently a touchy subject with the poker players. Mule handled his cards deftly, dealing them around.

"Hell, no," he said. The story was that in his day Mule had been a gambler on a river boat. He had killed a man under unfortunate circumstances. The crime was not that Mule had murdered, but that the victim had been well liked. Consequently Mule had been driven off the Mississippi. He picked up his hand and looked at it. Mule was a man who could talk while he played and not lose track of the cards. "I ain't been robbed since you was

snowed in, Tex," he said casually. "It's been mighty peaceful on the road. Who's opening?"

Vance Carter's sense of humor was taking a licking. He stood up behind the table.

"Okay, Mule," he said slowly. "You want to get up and make a formal complaint?"

Mule was not thrown.

"No," he said quietly. "All I want to do is play poker."

Mule was not backing down either. He was just waiting.

CHAPTER TWO

Rope-Ready

THAT lonesome cabin up Fool's Creek began to seem like a mighty nice place.

In the Thornton roadhouse Vance felt crowded. When he first came to this country it was summer, and often a hundred or more people gathered here to drink and dance on a Saturday night. It had not seemed as jammed then as it did now with only eight men in the big room. The whiskey was not doing him any good, either. He had eaten very little since morning and had exhausted himself coming down through the snow. He needed food and sleep. He was beginning to feel light-headed.

He threw his cards on the chips in the middle of the table. One of them turned over. It was the deuce of hearts.

"If you fellers don't mind," he said, "I'll throw up this game. I had enough of it. I'm hungry."

"You're winning," Little Ashley said. "You're winning and you're quitting."

Vance had won heavily. He had not thought much about it. His luck had run so steadily against him for so long it had not occurred to him that he might win something. Little Ashley slowly was turning over the cards Vance had discarded. The highest was a seven. If he had been playing Hi-lo he would have had something. As it was his hand was worthless. Little Ashley was meaner, proddier than ever.

Little Ashley began accusing Vance of backing out when he was ahead. Even Mule Nissley was waiting for an answer as to why he should quit so early.

Vance kicked back his chair. Little Ashley moved around onto one lean childish hip to more readily reach his gun. His less subtle brother dropped a hand to his holster. Vance put an edge to his thin grin.

"You fellers," he said slowly, "look hungry. I am hungry. Time I was eatin', boys. Hope you have a meal too. This blizzard just about wiped me out. Killed all my cattle. But I got plenty more cash where that dinero came from."

It was a lie and he knew it, and felt that they knew it, too. But he did not care. He

put his hands under the edge of the round poker table and dumped the piece of furniture on top of Little Ashley. Money, bills, coins, silver and gold, poured down on top of the cripple.

"S all yours," Vance Carter said. "I give it to you."

Mule Nissley was the only one sitting at the table who had not been upset by Vance's sudden move. The two squared off for a moment, then Vance moved past him. He ignored the infuriated men sprawling on the floor. The elegant stranger was laughing politely. His fancy girl friend looked frightened. Vance chuckled her under the chin and passed on. He leaned against the bar.

Belle Thornton was wide-eyed with fright. Though she was not a girl easily scared, she had lived on the frontier long enough to know when a man was really on the peck. Something had set off Vance Carter.

"Nother bottle, sister," he ordered.

"Sure, Vance," she said quietly.

In the mirror, Vance noticed that the elegant gentleman was approaching him. The stranger was kicking up the sawdust, stamping his heels. His fists were knotted, and his face was white. He laid a hand on Vance's shoulder.

"I'll have you know," the stranger said, "that you have just insulted Miss Flora May Hopkins." The name astonished Vance Carter. Flora May was a very famous actress. Towns had been named after her. Woodcuts of her were pasted up in miners' huts all over the gold regions. Vance glanced around at the woman. She was pretty and very affable, but she did not look like a famous actress. He suspected he was being rawhided. But the stranger who was with the actress was deadly serious. "I demand redress!" he shouted. His voice was deep and powerful.

Flora May Hopkins was calling to her hero. "Don, please—he doesn't mean anything."

"S all right, lady," Vance said.

He lowered his fist, preparatory to bringing it up on the point of Don's chin. As he did so, Belle Thornton made a quick shift. She put back the bottle she had been about to place on the bar, and picked up a bungstarter that was kept handy for such occasions. She swung it high and knocked Vance cold before his fist connected with Don's jaw.

VANCE CARTER sat up. His head was full of a fire that was made of pitchy sticks that sputtered and popped. He built as fine a grin as he could.

"That was nice," he said. "It was ellygant. I liked that."

"I got half a mind to fetch that bungstarter again," Belle threatened.

"How about some ham and eggs first?"

"I'll get you something to eat, Vance. Then you've got to ride."

"In this blizzard?" he asked.

The wind was moaning again. It made a sad, dismal sound in the kitchen chimney, and a thin film of snow drifted in under the bottom of the kitchen door. Belle was rattling pans while she thought up an answer.

"I can keep you away from those coyotes out there," she said, "for tonight, maybe. But when Mike shows up there's nothing I can do."

Mike and his coach had been missing for two days now. Mike was Belle's brother, and though he had threatened to shoot Vance on sight, Vance could still appreciate the fact that the girl was worried. He shook his head to steady the sparks in his brain. But the movement only stirred up the flames. He was sick and miserable.

"Don't worry about him," Vance said. "He won't get here tonight—and I'll be gone tomorrow. Gone to Texas, for good."

The girl's face was white. She had bacon cooking in a frying pan, and coffee was boiling. She broke two eggs into a saucer and was so clumsy at it she had to fish out the shells. She bit at her lower lip.

He got up from the cot and came over to her, but he did not touch her. He watched her for a moment, savoring the fact that he was close to her. She was a fine robust girl, a girl who could take care of herself in this wild country. It had not occurred to him before that she could be as lonely down here as he had been up on Fool's Creek—or that anything could frighten her. She stirred the eggs in a pan, and he went over to the iron sink and dipped a cup of water from a pail that stood on the drain board. He was terribly thirsty. His mouth was hot and dry, strangely wordless.

The girl's eyes slanted around at him suddenly.

"What are you going to do with your ranch?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Leave it." He wished she would not look at him as if she had caught him doing something improper. "Shack covered with snow this morning. Had to get out through the window. My cattle are all froze to death—every damn one of them. There's nothing to keep me here."

"Nothing?" she said.

"Why don't you go with me?" he said suddenly.

The girl turned back to her cooking abruptly. Her shoulders were stiff. Vance could not see her face. His knees were suddenly too weak to hold him up. He slumped down at the table, staring at the girl's back.

"You know what they've been saying about you?" she said softly.

"They think I've been tipping off these road agents," Vance said. "Or maybe I'm a road agent myself." He laughed shortly. "Well sir, they're right about one thing—one hundred per cent right. They've been saying nobody could make a living running a longhorn herd up in the Fool's Creek country. Well, ma'am they're right. But they're wrong on every other count. I wasn't using that spread as a blind. I figured on selling fat cattle to rich miners at a big profit. I've never been near those Concords." His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You think I've had a hand in these holdups?"

She continued to keep her face away from him. "No!" she said in a very quiet voice. Then she dished up his supper and placed it on the table. He reached for her hand, and she moved away quickly.

She was trying to tell him something. "Vance—I'll—"

She got no further. A great gust of wind rattled the building. The kitchen door flew open. Another traveler had come in out of the horrible night. It was Charlie McGrew, the shotgun guard who usually rode with Mike Thornton. Charlie stumbled across the barroom to the kitchen. He looked pinched and frozen.

"They got him," he said hoarsely. "They got Mike."

"Who?" Belle almost screamed it.

"Mike," Charlie said. "I don't know. Big feller—cowboy. Say—" His pale eyes centered on Vance Carter. "How long you been here?"

"Long enough—damn it!" Vance said.

Lazy Joe Sims' voice spoke up from the barroom, suave and easy.

"Couple of hours."

Charlie McGrew reached for a gun. Vance Carter dropped his hand to his holster and found that his Colt had been taken while he was unconscious. The girl was staring at him, horrified. He was in a jackpot, and there was no doubting it.

Charlie's cold fingers fumbled along the pistol's butt. Vance reached behind for the coffee pot. As he flung it he heard Belle scream. He did not stop to see what happened. He went out the kitchen window, head first into a snowbank. There was a rush of boots through the roadhouse.

He was hopelessly bogged in the drifts. . . .

THEY fished him out and brought him into the barroom. While Mule Nissley boarded over the broken window, the others stood around Vance Carter, guns at hand, ready to give him a quick trial. Little Ashley, sitting hunched up against the wall, had made up his mind what they should do with the big Texan.

"Go fetch a rope, Big. We'll hang the skunk in the stair well. Mike was my friend."

Big grunted, pouched his pistol and started for the door. Flora May Hopkins, the actress, squealed with horror and excitement. She had heard of things like this but had never witnessed such a quick decision to hang a man.

Her partner, Don de Wolfe declaimed, "Let us not be too hasty, gentlemen."

Mule stopped hammering long enough to shout from the kitchen, "You got to give the boy a chance to talk, gents. Maybe he kin prove he didn't do it."

That was one thing Vance Carter could not do. He had noticed though, that Charlie McGrew had not accused him of the killing until Lazy Joe Sims gave the cue. He noticed, too, that Charlie was in a terrible hurry.

"I'm for hangin' him and gettin' it over with," Charlie said grimly. "Didn't reckonize him at first in the kitchen. But he's the hombre, and I'll swear to it on a Bible. Came in out of the snow and plugged Mike without giving him a chance."

Mule finished his job and came over to stand in the doorway. He was still holding the hammer. Belle Thornton had not left the kitchen. Vance could hear her moving dishes. She came into the barroom with a tray bearing the supper Vance had deserted. The eggs were cold and dull looking. There was film on the bacon.

"If you're going to hang him," she said bitterly, "you can at least let him eat first." She thrust the tray into his hands. She kept her eyes averted. "And you're going to hang him," she added, "you're not doing it in my house, savvy? And you're not doing it in my barn, either."

With that she retreated to the kitchen again and slammed the door. Mule had to jump to keep from being whacked on the backsides. Flora May squealed again. Vance was oddly, frozenly amused as, carrying the tray, he moved over to the bar. The carefully laid out meal seemed unappetizing. He poked at the eggs with his fork. He took a mouthful and swallowed. His stomach growled.

"He get away with anything?" Lazy Joe Sims asked in his soft, easy voice.

He was talking to Charlie McGrew. Vance Carter felt an itching at the top of his spine. It had taken these people a long time to ask that question.

"Lord, yes," Charlie said. "No passengers—we were carrying a special shipment of bullion. I was riding inside. I heard this shot, but when I got my shotgun unlimbered it was too late to do anything. Mike was up on the seat, dead. The express box was gone."

You're lying, Vance thought. But there was no one there to challenge the gun guard. There was nothing anyone would do to bring

out the truth. Each for his own reason was willing to hang the affair on Vance, who stood with his back to them, while he slowly ate bacon and eggs, and munched on biscuits. He lifted the cold coffee to his mouth. He was so nervous he spilled some. Carelessly, it seemed, Belle Thornton had left a dish towel on the tray. He reached for it to wipe off his chin. There was something hard under the cloth, and Vance started as if he had been burned by it.

Little Ashley was talking.

"It's open and shut. We ought to hang him, and the hell with Belle. Do it right here, I say."

Vance looked in the brightly polished but small mirror behind the bar. There was the notice offering five hundred dollars for his hide. There he could see the faces of the people in the room—Little Ashley, vicious, deadly; his brother, stupid but willing; Charlie McGrew in a hurry that passed for vengeance—and could have been.

Vance could see Flora May Hopkins, too, open-mouthed, staring at the scene as if witnessing a more stirring drama than she would have been able to perform. Don de Wolfe had given up; he had reached for a glass and was taking a drink. Mule Nissley was still holding his hammer. Mule, Vance realized, had been in the kitchen when Belle put that six-shooter under the towel. The one remaining member of the party—Lazy Joe Sims—could not be seen in the mirror.

"Maybe we ought to find out what he did with the cash box," Lazy Joe Sims suggested.

"By George, yes!" the actor burst out. "Certainly. Absolutely."

Little Ashley rocked back in his chair. "We can find it easy enough. He didn't have time to get rid of it. Likely it's in the barn, or along the road. Go get that rope, Big."

Big Ashley was actually at the door with his hand on the latch. Vance had made up his mind to wait until Big was gone and then he would take the pistol that Belle had so unaccountably delivered to him, and beat a retreat.

He would shoot Little Ashley first—and that would be a pleasure. Then he would plug Lazy Joe Sims. And if he had to, he would not very much mind shooting Mule Nissley—after the way that hombre had been behaving.

Meanwhile he forked up some more food. He could hardly swallow it. It seemed to grate on his throat.

"This is the fifth robbery in two months," Lazy Joe Sims said. "There's a stack of blood money on the heads of the road agents. More than that lousy five hundred Mike put up because Vance kissed Belle—"

"We'll split it," Little Ashley said quickly.

Lazy Joe Sims said, "The notices read,

'For information leading to arrest and trial—'

He let that sink in. The company certainly would not pay up unless they were sure they had their man. Vance changed his mind about fighting it out now. Later he might have a better opportunity. Studying the mirror to make sure no one was looking at him he slipped the six-shooter from under the towel into his shirt.

Belle Thornton came in from the kitchen. She was dressed in her heavy sheepskin coat with the wolf parka. She strode across the floor and pushed Big Ashley aside.

"Haven't you hanged him yet?" she asked crisply, and stepped into the storm. She did not bother to close the door behind her. Snow swirled in. It was big and flaky, not the hard, biting little crystals against which Vance Carter had fought while coming down from the creek. The wind, apparently, had shifted.

Vance turned away from the bar. He went over to the chair where his own sheepskin coat was hanging.

"If you fellers don't mind," he said slowly, "I reckon I'll side Miss Belle on her journey." He grinned his thinnest. "She oughtn't to be out alone on a night like this," he explained. "And somebody should go along to help bring back the body."

The next moment he was watching Charlie.

CHAPTER THREE

Fury at Fool's Creek

CHARLIE MCGREW could not keep his finger off his trigger. He took a shot at Vance and missed, because Lazy Joe Sims happened to draw at the same time and, in doing so, jogged Charlie as if by accident. Lazy Joe fired too, his bullet digging a hole in almost the precise spot in the wall where Charlie's slug had wasted its strength. He knocked over a table and dropped behind it for shelter.

Armed only with a hammer, Mule Nissley dove behind the bar. Flora May Hopkins began to squeal. Don de Wolfe disappeared. Little Ashley with his chair leaning against the wall was handicapped in a quick draw. Before he could level his gun Vance Carter got his pistol out and put a chunk of lead into the oak seat of Little's chair. The crippled man and the chair collapsed in a pile.

Vance did not bother with Big Ashley. Big never could do anything without direction from his dwarfed brother. His reactions were just beginning to function.

Behind his table Lazy Joe Sims was making a terrible racket. A stray bullet from his pistol smashed a lamp. Another went through Big Ashley's hat.

All this happened while Charlie McGrew eared back his Colt for a second shot. Vance, meanwhile, got the shotgun guard across his sights. He had a perfect target, but pulled his punch. He let his slug range high so it broke Charlie's arm, rather than killing him. Charlie screamed.

Vance Carter ran for the door as the remaining light went out—not the front door, but the kitchen. The shadow of Big Ashley blocked the other exit—and Little Ashley, sitting in his pile of sticks from the broken chair, began to shoot. Big Ashley grunted and collapsed. Vance made it through the kitchen to the rear door.

He opened it, stepped into the snow and heeled the door shut behind him. Out here there was a luminous quality to the night. Near the barn a girl's voice was calling.

"Here—hurry!"

He plowed through the drifts. Belle was waiting in a light cutter.

As the cutter swept into the road, Vance asked, "What was the idea?" Vance asked. "I mean the gun under the towel?"

"Charlie was lying," she said. "You didn't—"

She shut her mouth with a snap.

There was a warmth in the wind. A Chinook was coming up, the warm breeze that would melt away the snow. In a day or two Vance Carter's longhorns would be out of the drifts, lying exposed, dead in the brown grass, ready for the wolves.

Meanwhile the thawing snow grew heavy; Vance had to get out from under the cozy bear rug in the cutter and go to work breaking trail. He fought the wet endless piles until he was sick with exhaustion. When he stumbled and fell on his face, Belle had to come up and pull him to his feet.

The spare animals Belle had brought finally gave him an idea.

He said, "Look—here's something we might try. Drive two horses ahead of us. I'll take the cutter."

The two leaders plunged into the snow. In the cutter Vance Carter watched the back-trail. Snow had stopped falling. The sky was clearing. Stars were beginning to appear. Wolves howled in the hills to the south and Vance wondered if they had discovered one of his foundered steers.

It was odd, Vance thought, how Lazy Joe Sims had shot so wildly that night. It was even stranger that Lazy Joe Sims had not trailed him. Then he shouted at Belle and climbed down from the cutter and ran up on tired legs. Somewhere in the darkness ahead a horse whinnied.

Belle cried out with surprise. "The coach—Mike!"

She pushed ahead while Vance followed.

The girl's horses had stopped near the long, steaming four-span team that was hitched to the Concord. They stamped and snorted. Belle crawled around them, fighting to the coach. Sobbing, she yanked open a door. Her brother was inside, sprawled on the floor.

Mike was still alive.

BELLE was praying. In between her prayers she talked to Mike as if he were a baby. She talked to Vance as if he were a spoiled boy. All the loneliness that had been piling up in her, all the anger she had suppressed while she thought that her brother was dead, spilled from her in a torrent.

"Take the cutter, Vance. Go on up the road. Mike, you'll be all right. Go on, Vance."

Instead, Vance hacked at the spruce trees near the road. He built a roaring fire beside the coach. Heat was reflected from the ceiling, down onto Mike Thornton, who breathed shallowly.

Vance melted snow in a bucket. The girl took off her brother's cold gloves and briskly rubbed his hands and wrists. He moaned once. She turned him around so that his head was lower than his body. Color touched his frost-bitten cheeks. His eyes flickered.

"It's Belle, Mike—" the girl said. The stage driver groaned; made a soft coughing sound. Belle said brightly, "Vance Carter's with me."

That acted on Mike with astonishing violence. He struggled to sit up. His hands opened and closed. "Gimme my gun," he said hoarsely. "Gimme my gun."

Belle paled. Vance stood in the doorway of the stage where the fine bright light of his campfire shone on his face.

"Gimme my gun," Mike gasped.

Vance Carter felt tired. It seemed there was no getting out of this. Every time he got ahead he slipped back deeper.

The girl took a pistol from inside her coat. Mike saw it and grabbed for it. She let him have it. She gave Vance Carter plenty of chance to run. But Vance stood solid.

"I came down from my cabin," Vance said, "straight to the house. You know where I've been since."

The girl looked weak with relief. "That's true, Mike," she said. "Charlie McGrew shot you. Come on, Mike, tell us—Did you see who shot you?"

Mike's lips were white. "No," he said. "But Charlie saw."

Then Belle stood aside. "He was lying, Mike."

Mike's crazy eyes were filled with doubt. The pistol wavered. The muzzle dropped. Belle did not bother to tell anyone the Colt was not loaded. She held the canteen to Mike's lips and he gulped the hot liquid. Vance Car-

ter slumped up against the side of the coach. A voice spoke out of the night.

"Hold your hands up, Vance!"

It was the soft, easy voice of Lazy Joe Sims.

Vance Carter could not hold up his hands, and even if he had been able to he would not have tried.

"I should of killed you, Joe," he said, "when I had the chance."

"You never had the chance," Lazy Joe said. He came into the bright circle of firelight. Nothing seemed to ruffle the man, nothing much even seemed to reach him. "I was the only friend you had back there, except for Belle. Even Mule Nissley would have turned you in for that five hundred, except he was afraid he would have to split it. You know that, Vance. And you knew it all the time, and you couldn't put your sights on me."

"I guess you're right," Vance said doubtfully. "Only you're wrong at the same time, Joe. Charlie McGrew's got the loot from this stage. I wasn't out this way at all."

"I know that," Lazy Joe said. "I knew it all along. I just wanted to make sure." He glanced into the coach where Mike was lying, pale and washed out but alive.

Mike was feverish. "If I had my way," Mike muttered, "I'd hang every man of you. You too, Joe, and your pardners."

"Big's dead," Lazy Joe said. "Little shot him—thought it was Vance in the dark. Little's drunk, crying like a baby. Charlie McGrew's drunk, too. Got his right arm in a sling—Vance broke it. As for me—" he backed away a bit. "That's a damn hot fire," he said. He unbuttoned his coat. As it fell open the firelight sparkled brightly on a bit of metal pinned to his galluses. The girl and her brother stared at that badge. Vance Carter leaned closer to see what was engraved upon it.

Lazy Joe Sims drawled, "A U.S. marshal can't afford to make mistakes. I had to be sure, Vance. Well, I got work to do."

Vance said quickly "Where?"

"Yonder," Lazy Joe said. "I got to find out where Charlie McGrew hid that loot. I got to get a confession. Maybe a twist or two of his broken arm would help."

Belle Thornton could not keep from gasping. Vance grinned. Lazy Joe had a reputation. Probably the tales of how he would drive splinters under your nails and burn them down to the tune of your howls were all fabricated, but they could serve a purpose.

"I'll go with you," Vance said. "We can put Mike in the cutter. We can have the place all aired out and quiet by the time Belle brings him in."

They moved Mike carefully. They stretched him out and covered him with blankets. The cutter would slide smoothly over the snow.

It would not rattle and jounce as the coach would. Lazy Joe Sims had brought an extra horse. Vance could hardly lift his leg over the animal's back.

THEY were holding a wake for Big Ashley. They held it right in the bar. Except for being horizontal, Big looked just about as animated as he had when actually alive. They even gave him a bottle and a glass.

"Shot me when I was a li'l kid," Little Ashley said in a maudlin whine. "Din' know no better. Accident. Now I plugged him. He carried me around—"

Charlie McGrew said. "If you'd of shot Carter in the first place—"

He quit talking. Little Ashley kept up his maundering reminiscences. Mule Nissley was waiting bar. Don de Wolfe had come back when the shooting stopped. He and Flora May Hopkins huddled at their table again. Snow had kept them from risking travel. She believed that this was all a nightmare.

"I see it with my own eyes," she said, "but it can't be true."

Then she screamed.

Flora May had done enough screaming for a season's run of cliffhangers in the past few hours. She screamed this time because, in the kitchen doorway, she saw a man who had been reported dead. She screamed a second time because in the front doorway appeared the man who had sworn he had done the killing. After Vance Carter had made his break for freedom, Lazy Joe had "shot" him in the barn. Mule Nissley had "witnessed" the shooting. But Vance was standing in the kitchen doorway, smiling at Flora May.

From the front door, Lazy Joe Sims said quietly, "We been talking to Mike, Charlie. Mike's feeling kind of puny, but he was up to telling us a thing or two."

Charlie had been drinking too much and his broken arm was giving him hell.

Charlie bleated like a stuck sheep. "He's a liar," he shouted. "I mean, you're a liar. Mike's dead as a haddock. He's—"

A great doubt crossed his face. Little Ashley turned from his brother's body. With the tears on his gaunt cheeks he looked like some sort of a devil from hell, weird and strange like a gnome.

"You double-crossing skunk," he said sharply.

Charlie McGrew had been holding out on Little Ashley. Now the crippled man suddenly knew the truth. Charlie McGrew had brought this calamity upon him, the death of his brother, his ever-handy servant, his legs. You could see all this cross Little Ashley's eyes as he sat there on the bar stool and deliberately drew his pistol. Little Ashley shot Charlie

McGrew in the head, and in the same instant swung like a monkey out of his seat. He bobbed crazily along on his long ape-like arms, across a table, up onto Don de Wolfe's back. He clung to de Wolfe with one arm and spurred him with an elbow. He prodded Flora May Hopkins with his pistol.

"I'm leavin'," he said, "and I'll kill this fancy gal, boys, if you don't all drop your guns. I mean it."

There was no doubt that he meant it. There was nothing to do but let him go and hope to pick him up at some other time. But Little Ashley, who knew nothing about women, had made his mistake. Flora swung on him with the speed of lightning.

"Fancy gal!" she screamed. "Nobody's going to call me a fancy gal!"

Before Little Ashley could recover, Vance Carter had hauled him off the actor's back. Flora May Hopkins was still fuming. Lazy Joe Sims, half Indian, half Boston Puritan, but most U.S. marshal, fell to the floor laughing.

WHEN the time came Little Ashley talked. No point in keeping things secret any longer with the bunch broken up—with all of them dead but himself. Charlie tipped them off. Big and Little usually did the job. Little had a pair of false legs he wore when in the saddle. They looked like the real McCoy.

They found the loot too, when the Chinook dried up the snow and disclosed the hiding place where Charlie McGrew had cached his gold with the intention of picking it up later. And they also found a sponge with which Mike washed off the sign scrawled on the little mirror in the Thornton road house.

"This hurts me more'n it does you," Mike told Vance as he swabbed at the sign. "But I'm in five hundred dollars."

The roadhouse was full of people and the drinks were on the house. The preacher had a sherry.

"Fine a couple as I ever see," he said as Vance and Belle ran out to their waiting buckboard that would take them back up Fool's Creek to the little shanty. Flora May Hopkins had come down to be bridesmaid, but at the moment had forgotten her duties while she stood on the porch pitching an old shoe at the newlyweds. The buckboard rattled away.

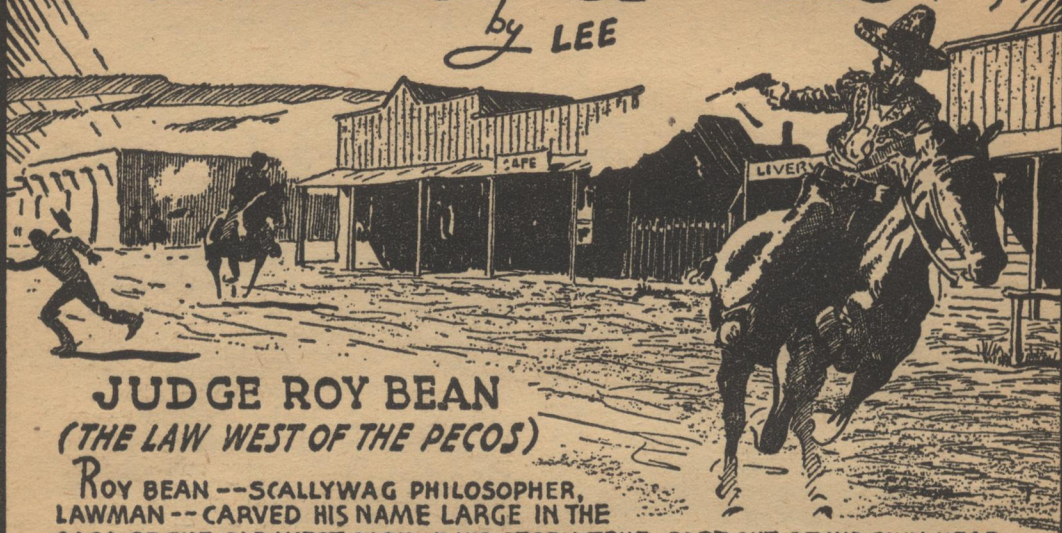
With a girl in the cabin on the creek, Vance thought—with a fresh start a man might yet make a ranch in Montana.

At the bar, Mule Nissley sadly watched his image in the mirror, at the exact spot where the five hundred dollar reward had been.

"I could of used that dinero," he said.

TALES of the

by LEE



JUDGE ROY BEAN (THE LAW WEST OF THE PECOS)

ROY BEAN -- SCALLYWAG PHILOSOPHER, LAWMAN -- CARVED HIS NAME LARGE IN THE SAGA OF THE OLD WEST, PART OF HIS STORY TRUE, PART OUT OF HIS OWN HEAD.

BORN AROUND 1825 IN A KENTUCKY BACKWOODS CABIN NEAR THE OHIO, EDUCATED IN THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS, THOUGH HE COULD BARELY READ & WRITE, AT 16 HE STARTED FOR NEW ORLEANS WITH A FLATBOAT OF SLAVES, RETURNING SECRETLY AND IN A GREAT HURRY, WITH TALL TALES OF DERRING-DO.

JAILED IN SAN DIEGO FOR A PISTOL DUEL ON HORSEBACK THROUGH THE MAIN STREET, BEAN ESCAPED AND AFTER SOME SEÑORITA TROUBLE DRIFTED INTO NEW MEXICO IN '59 WITH A RED ROPE-WEAL AROUND HIS NECK.

AT SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, A TRY AT BLOCKADE-RUNNING AND FREIGHTING ENDED IN A FLURRY OF TRICKY LAWSUITS. DOWN AND OUT, IN '82 HE SET UP SHOP WITH A WAGON LOAD OF WHISKY IN VINEGAROON, ROISTEROUS TENT CITY OF CONSTRUCTION WORKERS, PUSHING THE NEW RAILROAD WESTWARD.

WITH THE NEAREST COURT 200 MILES AWAY, TEXAS RANGERS HAD BEAN APPOINTED JUSTICE OF THE PEACE AND HE OPENED COURT BESIDE HIS BAR WITH ONE LAW BOOK, AN OFFICIAL SEAL AND A SIX-SHOOTER.



— OLD WEST

THE DEFENDANTS SNEERED AT HIS FIRST RULING -- A \$30 FINE FOR GAMBLING. TOO MUCH! THEY WOULDN'T PAY! "MAYBE I MADE A MISTAKE," ROY BEAN SAID. "THE FINE IS NOW \$50--AND IF I HEAR ANY MORE IT'LL BE \$100!" THE GAMBLERS PAID AND "JUDGE" BEAN WAS ESTABLISHED AS "THE LAW WEST OF THE PECOS."

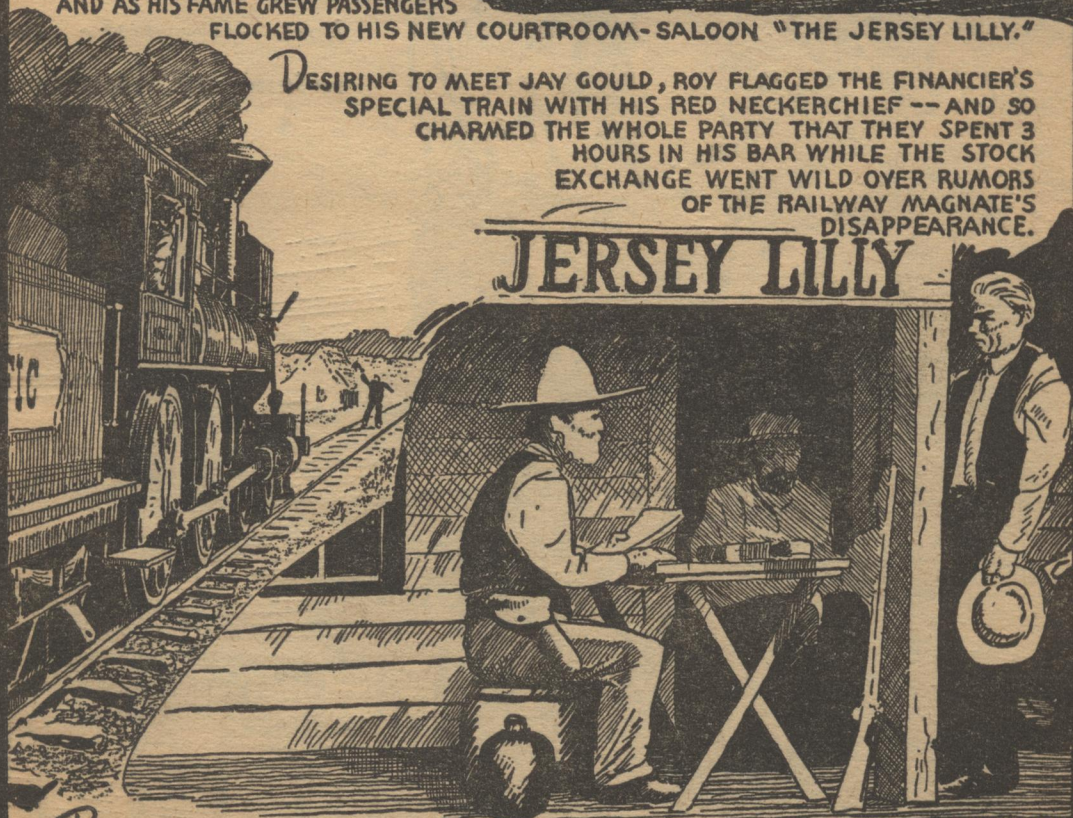
HE FINED A CORPSE \$40 FOR CARRYING A PISTOL, PROBABLY BECAUSE THAT WAS ALL THE MONEY FOUND ON IT AND BECAUSE, AS HE INSISTED WITH A WINK, HIS COURT HAD TO BE SELF-SUSTAINING. BUT HE KEPT THE TOWN IN HAND.

THE RAILROAD FINISHED, JUDGE BEAN MOVED TO LANGTRY, NEARBY WATER TANK AND EATING STOP, AND AS HIS FAME GREW PASSENGERS

FLOCKED TO HIS NEW COURTROOM-SALOON "THE JERSEY LILLY."

DESIRING TO MEET JAY GOULD, ROY FLAGGED THE FINANCIER'S SPECIAL TRAIN WITH HIS RED NECKERCHIEF -- AND SO CHARMED THE WHOLE PARTY THAT THEY SPENT 3 HOURS IN HIS BAR WHILE THE STOCK EXCHANGE WENT WILD OVER RUMORS OF THE RAILWAY MAGNATE'S DISAPPEARANCE.

JERSEY LILLY



BEAN DIED IN 1903 AND THE TALES ABOUT HIM IMPROVE WITH TIME.

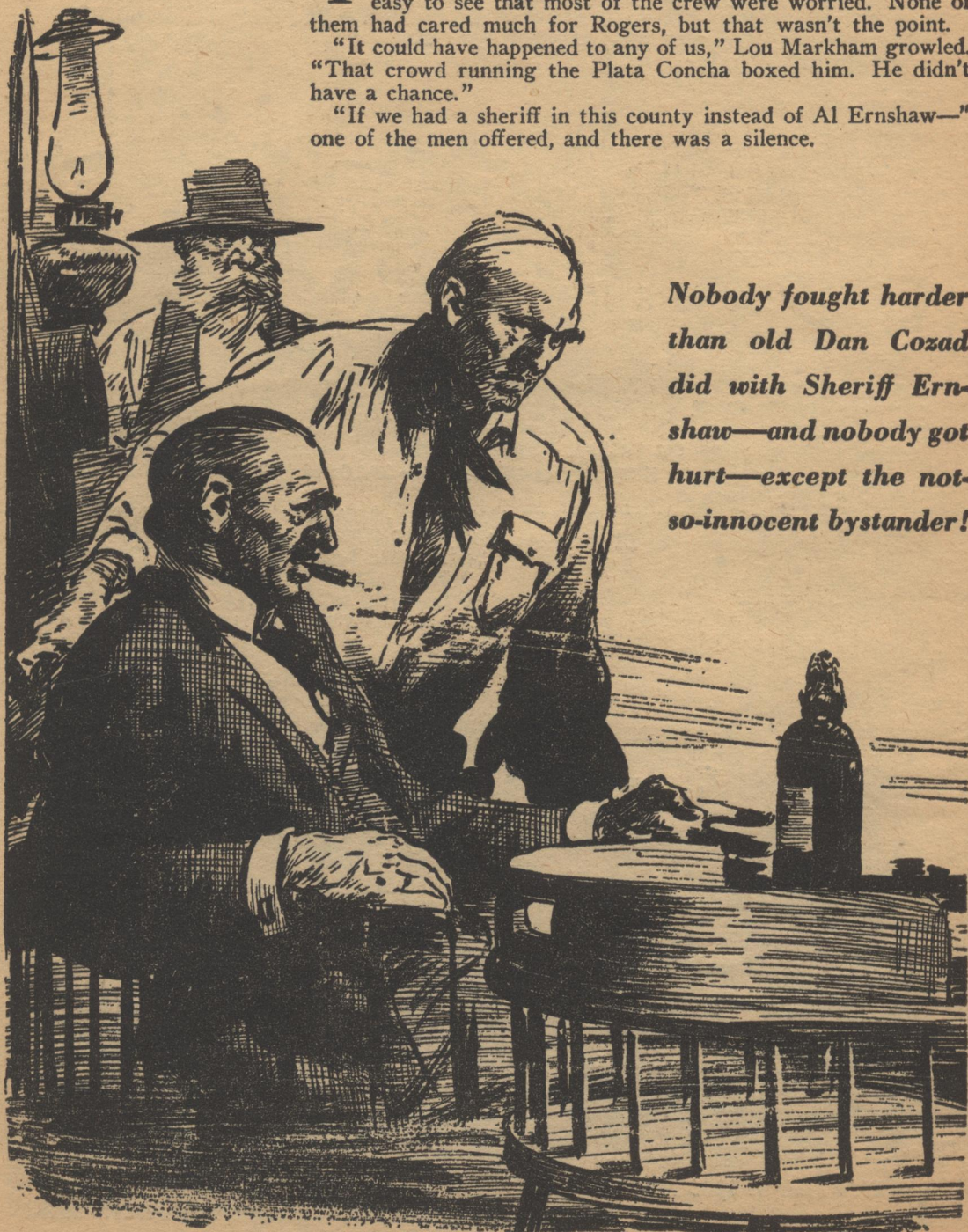
OWLHOOT

THAT night in the COB bunkhouse they got to talking about Tex Rogers and the way he had died and it was easy to see that most of the crew were worried. None of them had cared much for Rogers, but that wasn't the point.

"It could have happened to any of us," Lou Markham growled. "That crowd running the Plata Concha boxed him. He didn't have a chance."

"If we had a sheriff in this county instead of Al Ernshaw—" one of the men offered, and there was a silence.

Nobody fought harder than old Dan Cozad did with Sheriff Ernshaw—and nobody got hurt—except the not-so-innocent bystander!



DEPUTY

By
**PHILIP
KETCHUM**

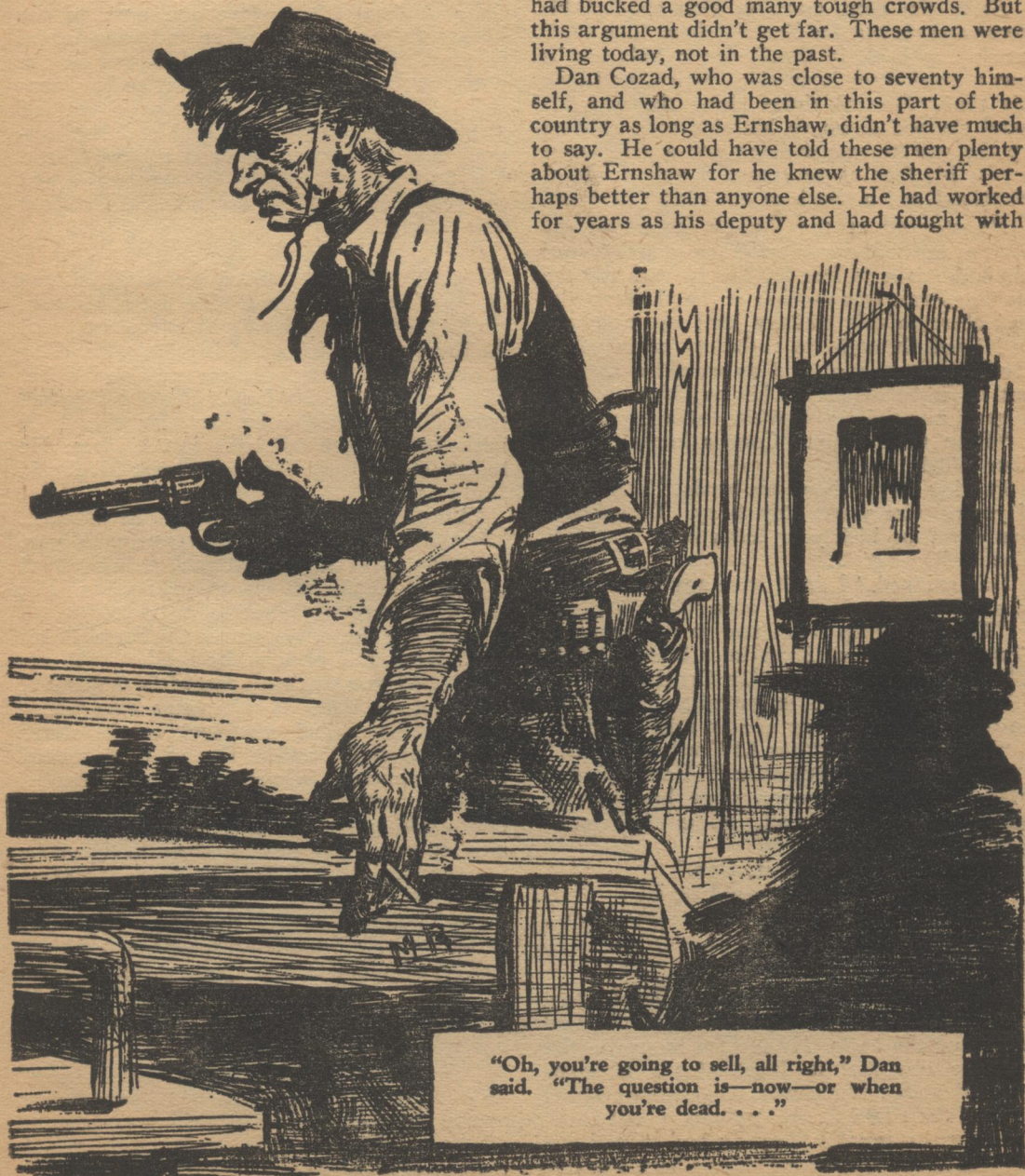
Markham scowled. He said, "All right, Dan. Speak your piece about Ernshaw."

Dan Cozad snorted. "He's a cross between a coyote and a skunk. Don't get me started, Lou."

Several men laughed, for Dan Cozad's opinion of Al Ernshaw was well known.

There was more talk of the men who ran the Plata Concha saloon in San Esteban and Dan Cozad listened to it and listened to the criticism of Al Ernshaw. One of the fellows offered a half-hearted defense of Ernshaw, claiming that after all he was a pretty old man and reminding the others that, in his day, Ernshaw had been a two-fisted sheriff who had bucked a good many tough crowds. But this argument didn't get far. These men were living today, not in the past.

Dan Cozad, who was close to seventy himself, and who had been in this part of the country as long as Ernshaw, didn't have much to say. He could have told these men plenty about Ernshaw for he knew the sheriff perhaps better than anyone else. He had worked for years as his deputy and had fought with



"Oh, you're going to sell, all right," Dan said. "The question is—now—or when you're dead. . . ."

him then as he had since. The feud between them was almost as old as their acquaintance.

After a time Dan got up and went outside. He was short and a little stooped but his shoulders were still broad and his eyes were as sharp as they had ever been. A scowl deepened the wrinkles in his leathery face. He crossed the yard and stood at the corral fence looking toward San Esteban. "The damned fool," he said under his breath, thinking of Al Ernshaw. "I reckon I've got to go into town an' slap sense into him. I should have done it long ago."

Early the next morning Dan saddled his horse and set out for San Esteban. The COB ranch was back in the Redondo hills and it was a good three hour ride. Dan Cozad took his time. Several times along the way his hand slapped down to his side and whipped up the gun he was wearing and a grin broke across his face as he sensed a quickening of his blood and a touch of the old excitement.

He stopped at the Webber corral at the head of San Esteban's main street and turned his horse over to Peg-leg Davis, who ran the stable. Davis was another of the oldsters who had come to this country long ago and who had lived through its turbulent early years. He was as stooped and as wrinkled as Dan but he covered part of his wrinkles up with a gray mustache and white, straggly beard. "Been to the Plata Concha lately, Peg?" Dan asked.

Peg-leg Davis shook his head. "Nope. An' if you're wise you'll stay away. They knock you down an' kick your teeth in at the Plata Concha."

Dan grinned. "I don't have any teeth. How late do they usually stay open?"

"Things dry up about two in the morning. Sometimes earlier. Sometimes later. What's all this interest in the Plata Concha?"

"You might drop in tonight, Peg," Dan answered. "Say about one or a little after."

"You goin' to work for Al Ernshaw again?"

"That stinkin' rattlesnake?" Dan exploded. "Nossir—I'm just gonna show him how to handle his job, that's all. About time someone did."

"Ernshaw won't like it, Dan."

"Who asks what Ernshaw likes?"

Peg-leg Davis grinned. He said, "One o'clock's perty late for me, but I might be there."

Dan Cozad walked on down the street, past the stage station, the barber shop, the feed store and the bank. He nodded to two of the men he saw and in front of the bank he stopped and stared across the narrow street toward the Plata Concha saloon. Until about two months ago Ed Harman had owned and run the Plata Concha and it had been a pretty decent place. Then Ed had sold it to a man

named Frank Paulson and there had been trouble ever since. Two gamblers, Bill Jellico and Manny McNab, had been in on the deal with Paulson and the games in the Plata Concha had been built up and there had been several shooting frays.

The Plata Concha had once been a warm and friendly place in which to spend a few hours. Now, unless you spent your money, you weren't welcome and if there was any trouble a man named Fats Travers was ready to throw you out, or ready to gun you if you wanted an argument.

Down beyond the store and next to the hotel was the sheriff's office and from where he stood Dan could see Al Ernshaw in the chair on the office porch. Al Ernshaw was still a big man. He filled the chair and slopped over it. He was bald and the sagging skin on his face gave it a square look. His coat was off, for the day was warm and his head had dropped forward. Al Ernshaw was dozing.

DAN COZAD moved on until he was close to Ernshaw. He drew his gun, then, and pointing it upwards, fired. Al Ernshaw jerked out of his chair, knocking it over in his hurry. He came up on his feet with his gun in his hand. His head jerked from side to side and he saw Dan Cozad. A flushed and angry look came into his face. He took a step toward Dan and shook his fist in Dan's face.

"You little sawed-off runt!" he shouted. "Someday I'll mop up this street with you. Someday I'll tear you apart an' see what kind of yellow blood runs out of your veins. Put that gun away while you're in town!"

Dan blew the smoke out of the barrel of his gun. He put it back in its holster. "Who's gonna help you tear me apart?" he demanded. "Answer me that. Who's gonna help you?"

Several men had come out of the stores along the street and a few of them moved closer, grinning. Scenes like this between Al Ernshaw and Dan Cozad occurred every once in a while and were never without their humorous side. Dan noticed these men and he noticed, too, that Frank Paulson had come out of the Plata Concha and was drifting this way. Paulson was tall and thin and darkly handsome. He wore a fancy vest, a tall black hat and black coat and trousers. He carried his gun in an invisible shoulder holster.

"Who's gonna help me?" Ernshaw yelled. "Why, no one!"

Dan Cozad shook his head sadly. He said, "Ernie, you're gettin' old. Why, you could hardly get your gun out of your holster when you jerked up. An' your sight ain't what it used to be."

"I'm faster with my gun than you ever

were," Ernshaw snarled. "I can see clearer than you ever could."

Dan looked around, as though searching for something to test this. Finally he pointed up the street.

"See that sign?" he demanded. "The Plata Concha sign?"

The name of the saloon was painted in foot high letters on a board above the door. Ernshaw looked that way. "Of course I see the sign."

"See the O in the word, Concha?"

"Of course I see the O."

"Right in the middle of it," said Dan Cozad. "Right in the white spot of the O there's a fly."

Ernshaw squinted across the street. "Sure I can see the fly."

Dan Cozad laughed. He turned to face the sign. His hand slapped down to his holster, jerked up his gun, and he fired it as the gun leveled.

Ernshaw shook his head. "You missed," he said briefly. And as he spoke he flipped his own gun up and fired.

Several of the men hurried toward the Plata Concha sign to examine it but Frank Paulson after a glance that way moved on up to where Dan Cozad and Ernshaw were standing.

"What's the idea?" he asked sharply. "That's my sign you're shooting at."

Dan Cozad looked at the man and a scowl came into his face. "Then keep the flies off it," he growled. "I don't like flies."

Paulson took another step forward but before he could say anything one of the men standing under the sign shouted, "Both shots dead center. One of 'em cut the ring of the other."

"Not bad, huh?" Ernshaw asked, looking at Dan Cozad.

"We were too close," Dan growled. "That was no test. Come in the office. I want to see you."

He ignored Frank Paulson and moved on into the office. Al Ernshaw followed him.

Paulson moved back toward his saloon and joined the crowd looking up at his sign. There were two bullet holes in the circle of the O, one cutting the rim of the other.

"I won't stand for that again," Paulson said grimly.

One of the men in the crowd looked at Paulson and shrugged. He said, "Brother, you can take on those two old coots if you want too, but my advice is, leave 'em alone. This part of the country never saw two better shots or two men quicker with their guns than Al Ernshaw and Dan Cozad. Just look at that sign if you doubt me. Or talk to any of the old-timers around here."

IN THE sheriff's office Al Ernshaw looked sourly at Dan Cozad. "What was that exhibition for?" he growled.

"It was for Paulson," Dan answered. "It's time he was handled, Ernie, an' since all you can do is sit in the shade an' sleep, it's up to someone else."

"You, huh?"

"That's right. Me."

"By damn, I'm still the sheriff here!" Ernshaw exploded. "When I get ready to handle Paulson, he'll be handled. You keep your nose out of this."

"I can't," Dan answered. "It's in."

"I ought to lock you up for your own safety."

"Try it."

Ernshaw took a turn around the office. "I know you, Dan," he said finally. "You'll just get yourself in a mess of trouble an' I'll have to move in an' help you out. By damn, this job isn't worth it. What are you going to do?"

"Give him a chance to sell out an' move on," Dan Cozad answered promptly.

"He won't do it."

"He will or we'll plant him here, Ernie."

"An' that ruckus is where I come in. How many times have I pulled you out of the fire?"

"How many times have I saved your job for you?"

"You never saved my job. All you ever did was make it harder. Some men get married. I've had to live all my life in the same part of the country with you. It's no wonder I look old. Why in hell don't you move someplace else?"

"I like it here," Dan Cozad said grimly.

"I like everything about this country but the winter blizzards and the sheriff. I try to keep out of the blizzards an' away from the sheriff, except when I have to step in an' do his job."

"Get out of here before I throw you out," Ernshaw flared. "An' don't you go messin' with my job."

"I've got to live here too," Dan Cozad answered. "When you let things get out of hand someone's got to step in."

"Frank Paulson isn't alone in the Plata Concha," Ernshaw warned.

Dan grunted. He said, "What of it?" and turned to the door.

Ed Harman, who had sold the Plata Concha saloon to Paulson, also ran the store, and Dan Cozad dropped in to see him after leaving the sheriff's office. Harman was about fifty. He was a mild, easy-going man, popular with everyone. He was almost as bald as Ernshaw and had a round, jovial face.

"I want you to do something, Ed," Dan announced. "In fact, you've got to do it."

"Sure. Just name it."

"I want you to buy back the Plata Concha."

A scowl came into Ed Harman's face. He shook his head. "I tried it," he said slowly. "I tried it about a week ago and Paulson turned me down. I didn't know what he was like, or I never would have sold the saloon to him in the first place, but I figured that running the store was enough and Paulson came along an' well—I made a bad deal."

"Have you got the money to buy it back?"

"Sure, but Paulson won't sell."

"Have you got it in cash?"

"I could get the cash from the bank."

Dan nodded. "Then get it, Ed, and drop by the Plata Concha at about one o'clock tonight. Stick around until I get there an' don't talk to anyone about this."

"I tell you, Paulson won't sell, Dan."

"He'll sell."

Ed Harman's eyes narrowed. "Are you and Ernshaw in this together?" he demanded.

"Me in anything with that skunk?" Dan shouted. "A mangy coyote's got more gumption than Al Ernshaw. This is my deal alone. You be there with the money—that's all."

Still highly indignant, Dan Cozad stalked out of the store. He had one more call to make and he made it promptly, talking for a few minutes to Wes Lockridge, who ran the stage line.

"I can do what you ask," Lockridge said finally, "but I sure hope you know what you're up to."

"I know what I'm doing," Dan Cozad growled. "You may have another passenger, too, for this extra trip."

"Who?" Lockridge asked.

"Al Ernshaw. Maybe we ought to ship him out, too."

Lockridge had looked worried, but at this he suddenly chuckled and turned away.

DAN had his noon meal and in the early afternoon sat in the shade on the hotel porch next to the sheriff's office, sat there and scowled at Al Ernshaw on the adjoining porch. After a time he dozed, and Al Ernshaw, noticing this, stalked over and woke him up.

"You seem to be awfully busy," Ernshaw growled. "When are you going to start something?"

"Soon as I get ready," Dan snapped. "Now go away an' leave me alone."

"I've got to ride out to the desert tonight," Ernshaw said slowly.

"That's about what I expected," Dan answered. "Just as usual, you're running away from trouble. Well, be sure you're out of town by midnight."

Ernshaw grunted. He turned and walked

back to his own chair and sat down. And after a while he, too, dropped off to sleep.

Dan Cozad glanced at him occasionally and, as the afternoon wore on, sat up and began to take an interest in the men passing up and down the street. He knew nearly everyone around here, spoke to nearly everyone who passed the hotel. There was an advantage in having lived in one place as long as he had, he decided. A man could never get really lonesome. There was also a disadvantage. A man couldn't do anything without its being known.

Sitting there on the hotel porch Dan's mind ranged down along the years. He hadn't had a bad life. There had been excitement in the early days, plenty of excitement. It had started with Indian trouble and had moved into the lawless years of early settlement and then into the days when an established law had been taking hold of this part of the country. There had been outlaw bands to deal with, and rustlers, and bad men of every type and description. There had been a range war in which he had had his part. There had even been a woman over whom he and Al Ernshaw had fought and who had run off with a whiskey drummer and left them both.

No, it hadn't been a bad life, and there might still be years ahead depending on what happened tonight. He stared toward the sign of the Plata Concha. They had hit the center of the O, both he and Al Ernshaw, but his draw hadn't been as fast as it had been a dozen years before. It might have looked fast and it might have been better than average, but he had slipped a little. And Ernshaw, too. Ernshaw had slipped as much as he had.

This might count against them tonight, Dan knew. Today's exhibition could help, but if it didn't, if there was shooting tonight, he and Al Ernshaw might not come out of it so easily. Ernshaw would be there, of course. Dan was sure of that. This talk of a trip to the desert was just a fishing expedition to find out when Dan intended to move in on the Plata Concha. Ernshaw would be there and if things worked out, would hog all the credit. Dan looked over at the sheriff and scowled.

In the early evening Dan Cozad dropped into the Desert saloon and took a hand in a penny-ante poker game at one of the tables. He was three dollars ahead by ten-thirty. Ernshaw looked into the saloon several times and once stood at the bar for a drink but he didn't come over to the table.

"With the cards you draw you ought to get in one of the games over at the Plata Concha," one of the players said to Dan.

"I might not draw cards like these at the Plata Concha," Dan answered.

The man gave a short uneven laugh. "You

wouldn't pardner. 'Less you was playin' for the house."

The game broke up shortly after midnight, with Dan still ahead, and, drifting outside, Dan crossed over to the Plata Concha. He took a look through the door. There were half a dozen men at the bar and three games still running. Dan moved on down the street. He sat for a while on the hotel porch. Al Ernschaw passed him and glanced at him sourly but had nothing to say.

Dan loaded his pipe. He stared thoughtfully toward the Plata Concha. After a time he moved on to the stage station. There was activity in the corral back of it. A team was being harnessed to one of the extra stages. Dan swung around and angled for the saloon. Several men came through the door and headed for the livery stable, and their horses. They were grumbling about the cards they had held and their poor luck. They hardly noticed Dan Cozad as they passed him.

THERE was still a fair crowd in the Plata Concha when Dan got there. Among the men at the bar was Ed Harman. Dan nodded to him and glanced around the room. Frank Paulson was seated at the back table with Fats Travers. Fats was a big man. He stood well over six feet and had shoulders like an ox, long arms and a thick neck. He was ruddy faced. He was supposed to be as fast as lightning with his gun.

Bill Jellico was closing up one of the games and Manny McNab was still sitting in the other. Jellico was short and thin and had a yellowish skin. McNab was heavier and wore a dark, sullen scowl. They were gunhands as well as gamblers, these two, and while they didn't look as formidable as Bill Jellico, were perhaps equally as dangerous.

The bartender, too, was a man to be considered. He wasn't a local product. He had come in here with these others. He was older, stoop-shouldered, and could swing a mean bottle if necessary. He went by the name of Sam Ott.

The others who were still here were men from the town and from neighboring ranches. Dan knew all of them. He spoke to two men who worked on a ranch in the Redondo hills and to three from the valley. Peg-leg Davis came in and crossed over to the bar and ordered a drink. The stableman didn't even glance at Dan. Al Ernschaw wasn't here. He was probably outside, Dan decided, watching through a window, waiting to see what happened.

Dan broke away from the men to whom he had been talking and headed for Paulson's table. He stopped when he got there and stood facing Paulson and Fats Travers. There was a stern, tight look on his face.

"Ed Harman's here," he said quietly. "He's standing over there at the bar."

Paulson's eyes flicked that way, then came back to Dan Cozad's face. "What of it, grandpa?" he demanded.

"He's come here," said Dan, "to buy back the Plata Concha. He's got the money."

Fats Travers jerked to his feet. "Shall I throw this gent out, Paulson?" he asked.

His voice broke off. His eyes widened and he stiffened. A gun was in Dan Cozad's hand, covering him. He stared at the gun as though he couldn't believe what he saw, as though he had been sure no draw could have been as fast as Dan's.

Dan Cozad moved back to the wall and leaned there, still covering Fats Travers with his gun and, incidentally, Frank Paulson. The others in the room could now see the gun and everyone was staring toward this corner. All talk had stopped. Halfway across the room, Bill Jellico was watching this, his hand inches from the gun belted around his waist. Manny McNab was watching, too, from his table. He hadn't come to his feet. His hands were out of sight under the table's edge. He was at an awkward angle to try a shot, but a shot from McNab was possible.

"Any of you who want to can be in on this, I reckon," Dan Cozad said clearly. "Frank Paulson, here, is going to sell the Plata Concha. He doesn't like it in San Esteban. He's going to sell and get out with his crowd.

"I am like hell," Paulson said harshly.

Dan glanced at the man. "Oh, you're going to sell, all right. The question you've got to decide is whether to sell while you're still living or after you're dead. You might start thinking about it."

There was a sudden scuffle at the bar and several men glanced that way. Sam Ott had ducked down to get the rifle he kept there for such emergencies as this. When he had straightened up his head had run into a bottle Peg-leg Davis had been swinging. Sam Ott was down back of the bar.

"It's like this," Dan went on. "The Plata Concha is bankrupt, bankrupt of the good will of San Esteban. When a place goes bankrupt, you either close it or sell it to someone who will start out fresh. Ed Harman is ready to buy the Plata Concha back, so I reckon that's what'll happen."

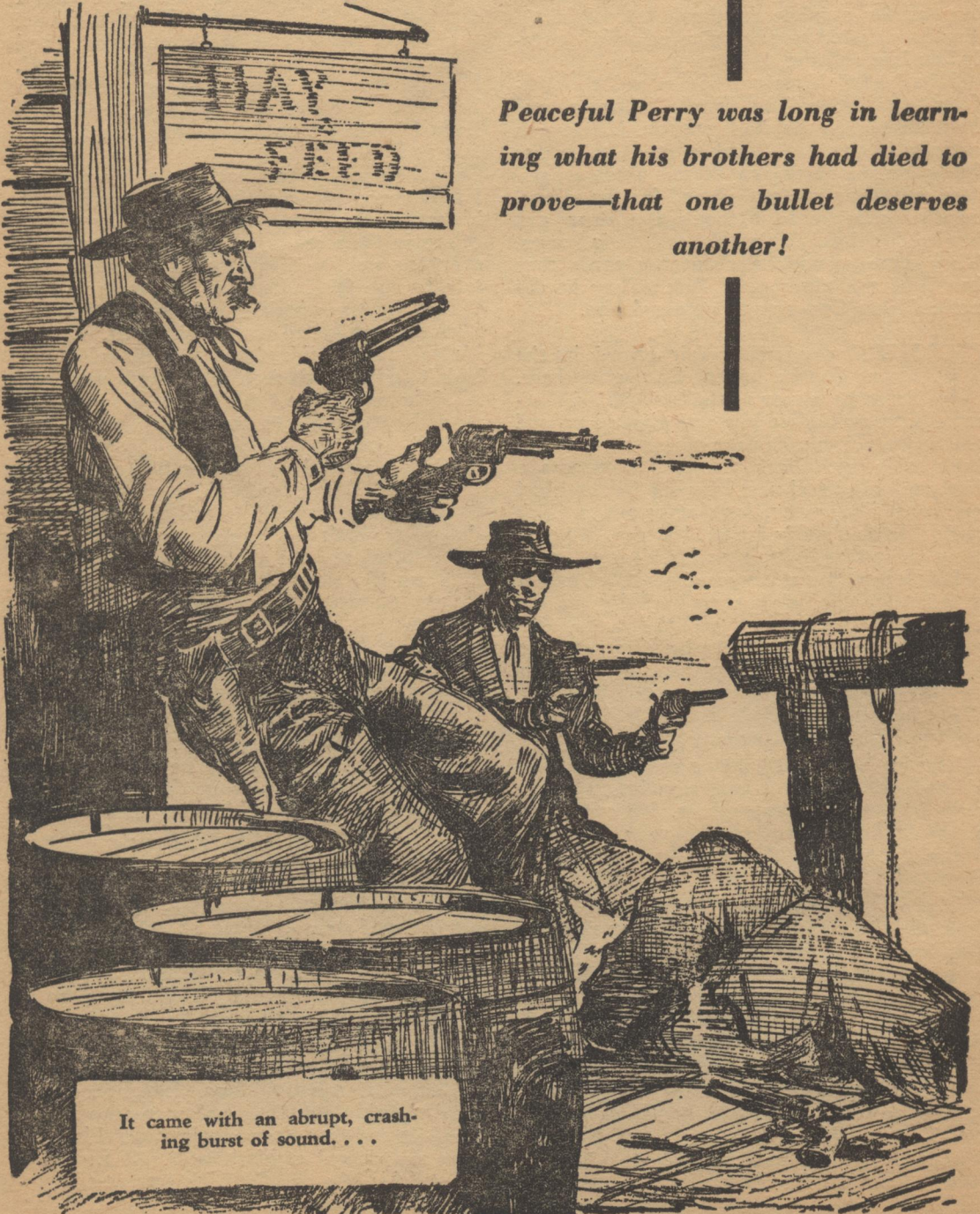
The street door opened and Al Ernschaw stepped into the saloon. He came in so quietly that no one noticed him. Bill Jellico had been edging toward several men who stood near him and now he suddenly stepped behind them and clawed at his holster. Al Ernschaw snapped his gun and fired. A scream of pain tore from Jellico's throat. He stared down at his shattered hand.

(Continued on page 126)

A STAR FOR

By KENNETH FOWLER

Peaceful Perry was long in learning what his brothers had died to prove—that one bullet deserves another!



It came with an abrupt, crashing burst of sound. . . .

PEACEFUL PERRY

CHAPTER ONE

Shootout at Mescal Wells

CLIFF PERRY halted his drooping chestnut at the hitch-rack in front of the Cattle King Saloon and stepped down carefully from the saddle, a tall, lean man, with the habit of vigilance in his eyes. He knotted the chestnut's reins around the smooth

shaft of the rail and mounted the board walk, conscious of a pushing eagerness, a sharply renewed expectancy, despite the insistent inner voice warning him that this too probably would be just another dead-end, another switchback to nowhere on the long-cold trail he had been following. But after what had happened back at Mescal Wells, there was a hard core of stoicism in Cliff Perry, min-



gled with the stubbornness that wouldn't let him quit.

He crossed Second and went on down Main; he reached the livery opposite the hotel and, for a moment, stood staring across at the scabby sign running the length of its high second-story gallery, reading: STOCK-MAN'S HOUSE. R. MORELAND, PROP. His glance swept the long lower gallery and came to an abrupt stop. The occupant of the last chair, at the far end of the gallery, had his back turned, but there was a familiar erect flatness to the broad shoulders, and something startlingly reminiscent in the way those flat-heeled old Congress boots were propped against the porch rail.

A sudden unsuppressible excitement gripped Cliff Perry as he started down from the board walk. The hitch-rack was directly in front of the hotel steps. He quickened his gait, heading for it. And then. . . .

UP UNTIL eight o'clock of the night Tom Perry was killed, the roistering, brawling trail-junction town of Mescal Wells had been phenomenally, preternaturally quiet. At one minute to eight, Tom, with his two deputies, Ernie Ivers and Long John Elverson, had been in the billiard parlor behind Keno Smith's bar, shooting a game of billiards. At one minute to eight, Doctor Hite Brooker was just coming down the steps of Luke Perry's house at the corner of Main and First, toting his little black satchel. At one minute to eight, Ruth Clanton and Cliff Perry sat in a buckboard outside Jim Dakota's Elite Lunchroom, indulging in the banal, inconsequential small-talk of lovers. And at one minute to eight, Finn Clanton moved stealthily in the alley behind Keno Smith's saloon, and while Ben Morrell stood in the mouth of the alley, on Utah Street, holding the bridles of their horses, he crept up to the narrow rear door of the billiard room and slowly raised a sawed-off shotgun.

The lower panels of the door were of solid wood, but the upper half was quartered with glass, the under panes painted white, the two upper ones clear. Long John Elverson was bent over the billiard table, preparing to make a shot. Tom Perry stood with his back to the door, chalking his cue. Ernie Ivers was seated in a corner adjacent to the door's window, out of the line of fire.

The sound of the shot ripped the early evening stillness like a thunderclap. Outside Jim Dakota's lunchroom, in the buckboard, Ruth Clanton and Cliff Perry abruptly stiffened.

The girl jerked her head around, and even in the nebulous light thrown from the store lamps, Cliff could see the sudden pallor of her cheeks.

"Cliff! That sounded close."

Cliff Perry dropped the reins of the buckboard he had been on the point of tooling out into the street. "Close, all right. I suppose I'd better see."

He stepped down from the buckboard, and in the dimness Ruth Clanton's hand slid out and caught at his shirt sleeve. "Cliff! You be careful!"

Cliff Perry laughed harshly. "You're telling that to Peaceful Perry—the black sheep in the clan of the Fighting Perrys? The only Perry who never packed a gun?"

"And I thank God for it!" Ruth Clanton said vehemently.

He grinned at her. "Better wait right here for me, Ruth. I'll be back soon's I find out anything." He strode away, heading automatically towards Keno Smith's, the direction from which the shot had sounded.

Keno's was on the next block, between Second and Utah, and as he crossed Second he could see the crowd congregating outside the Keno Saloon and knew he had guessed right. He hurried on, a sudden foreboding hitting him and running icy little tremors up the back of his neck.

Suppose it's Tom, he thought. If it's Tom, it will just about finish the old man.

He punched a path through the crowd milling around outside the Keno's batwings and wormed his way inside. Keno Smith himself stood behind the bar, his voice rising peremptorily above the excited hubbub within the room. "Now take it easy, gents, just take it easy! Ernie Ivers is back there, taking charge, so the more of you stay out here the quicker he'll get his job done."

At that moment Keno spotted Cliff and jerked his head slightly to indicate a narrow door behind the bar. Cliff elbowed his way to the end of the bar and Keno said, "In my office, Cliff," and he followed the saloon owner through the door, which Keno carefully closed and locked behind them.

Keno nodded to a chair, then took a bottle and glass from a drawer of his desk and came over. "You better take a slug of this, Cliff," he suggested quietly.

Cliff tensed. "Don't run around it with me, Keno. How bad is it?"

"Bad as it could be, Cliff." Keno poured a drink, and Cliff took the drink and downed it neat. His stiff-set face, met Keno's fumbling glance.

"All right, Keno. It was Tom. What happened?"

Keno said, "Tom, and Long John Elverson. But it was meant for Tom, Cliff. They were with Ernie Ivers, shooting a game of billiards. Tom got it through the back—a double load from a sawed-off shotgun. Seems funny Ivers just happened to be out of line. I never trusted Ernie too much."

"Anybody know anything, Keno?"

"Nobody saw anything, Cliff." The saloon owner's voice abruptly hardened. "By God, I wish somebody had!"

Cliff pulled himself stiffly out of the chair. His gray eyes ran past Keno in a vacant stare. "Thanks, Keno. I'll have to break it to the old man."

"Tough," murmured Keno. "If there's anything I can do—"

"What can anybody do?" Cliff interjected bitterly. "It's over now, Keno. The fighting Perrys gave it, and now the fighting Perrys have taken it."

Keno Smith said, "It couldn't have been anybody but Finn Clanton, Cliff."

Cliff strode to the door and came to a stop. He looked back into Keno Smith's bluntly challenging eyes and their glances looked.

He said, "You think the answer to this whole dirty business is to get Clanton. But there's no proof Clanton fired that shot."

"Maybe the right man could get the proof, Cliff."

"And then what?"

"And then give Clanton what he gave Tom."

A heavy sigh drained out of Cliff Perry. He unlocked the door, pulled it part way open. "That's not the way, Keno. If it's done that way it will just start another round of killings."

Keno Smith shook his head thoughtfully. "I can't see it that way. I say that if somebody gets Finn Clanton, it will be for the good of every decent citizen in Mescal Wells."

Cliff said tightly, "You're mayor here, Keno. You'd like to pin Tom's star next on my shirt front, wouldn't you?"

"You're a Perry, Cliff. You'll never be able to get away from that."

Cliff Perry laughed flatly. "The Perry fighting blood! Only nobody's seen the color of mine yet. You've heard it's yellow, haven't you, Keno?"

"I've heard it, kid."

"Well?"

"It's hard to believe, Cliff."

Cliff said, "This I'll tell you—I'm not putting on guns. People can believe whatever they damned please!"

He jerked open the door and walked out.

HE HAD broken past the crowd outside Keno's, and was almost to Second Street, when a vague shape shuffled out of a doorway and plucked urgently at the sleeve of his jacket.

"Cliff!"

He spun around, startled, and recognized

Booger Johnson, an old mossback who usually hung around Arnie Darnell's Big Ox Saloon, cadging drinks.

"Make it some other time, Booger," he said impatiently. "I'm in a hurry tonight."

Booger tightened his grip on Cliff's sleeve. He said with a fierce, almost angry urgency, "You ain't in too much of a hurry to hear this," and, tugging insistently at Cliff's arm, he pulled him into the shadows of the alley. There he glanced furtively around, then brought his mouth close to Cliff's ear.

"I seen the getaway," he whispered tensely.

Cliff stiffened. He stared hard at the old man. Booger had been drinking, but he wasn't drunk. *Not drunk*, Cliff thought, *but wants to be*, and suffering a friendly impulse, dipped into his pocket and pulled out a silver dollar.

He pressed the cartwheel into Booger's palm. "I'm in a rush tonight, Booger. Drink this up. I'll see you some other time."

Booger stared at him, said bluntly, "I don't want your damned money for this, Cliff. I tell yuh I seen 'em hightailin' it! I was sleepin' one off in that empty store across from the alley. The shot woke me up and I got to the winder just in time to see this jasper skallyhootin' outa the alley. Other feller was out on Utah Street, holdin' the hosses. I couldn't reckonize their faces, Cliff, but so help me Moses, one of them hosses was that blaze-faced sorrel Ben Morrell rides!"

The information hit Cliff with peculiar and sudden shock, and his awareness that it was unwelcome caused him to wonder abruptly why he should feel that way.

He said gruffly, "Well, *muchas gracias*, Booger," and heeled around, anxious to get away and think this out.

"You savvy, Cliff?" Booger's voice blundered irritatingly after him through the dark canal of the alley. "Ain't nobody rides that blaze-faced sorrel but Ben Morrell. You keep cases on Morrell and—"

Cliff jerked around, conscious of a chafing annoyance. "Somebody might hear us, Booger. You've told me. Now forget it."

Booger's voice was edged with a mild surprise, a faint hurt. "Why, sure, Cliff. I just wanted you should know."

He stepped up to the board walk and started rapidly upstreet towards Jim Dakota's. Staring ahead up the shadowy aisle of the street, he was conscious of a dark and troubled trend of thought, disturbed not only by the knowledge Booger had placed with him, but by the remembrance of Keno Smith's attitude, back at the saloon.

They think I'll pick it up now, he thought angrily, *They think I'll pick up that tin star my brothers wore and follow the same blind and bloody trail they followed. Well, maybe it takes more courage to walk in this town*

without guns, than with them. They can't credit a man's sincerity when he honestly believes that killing isn't the way to build peace and law.

He found Ruth Clanton in the buckboard, waiting for him, and the moment he saw her face, he knew that she knew. Her soft, hazel eyes fell on him with a worried gravity and, as he came up, she reached out impulsively and gripped his arm.

"Oh, Cliff, when will it stop? When will it ever stop?"

He shook his head, pushing his tight gaze at her with a somber fixity. "I guess not till book law catches up with Mescal Wells, Ruth—if it ever does."

"Art Gaines came by. He said it was—Tom." She studied him uncertainly, hesitatingly. "Did—did anybody find out—"

"No." He wrenched the word out painfully and watched her small troubled face, struck suddenly by the thought of how seldom she smiled, how rarely laughter leavened the sadness in her voice. Ruth Clanton, he reflected bleakly, had never had much to laugh about, yet in her grave and quiet way she had a grace, a sweetness of countenance, with which few women ever were blessed. Even now, with only the pallid light from Jim Dakota's to illumine her pale features, he could see the blue-black gleam of her dark hair under the flat-crowned Stetson, the soft swell of her bosom under her open-throated shirt.

"First Dave," she murmured. "And now Tom. Cliff—" she squeezed his arm with a pressure that made him wince suddenly—"Cliff, you're not—you won't—"

"Don't worry." He spoke with an abrupt and angry vehemence. "Tom was the last Perry who'll ever tote a star, Ruth." He stepped into the buckboard and gathered up the reins, his gray eyes remote, inscrutable. "Well, looks like I'm elected to break it to the old man."

"I wish I could go in with you, Cliff. If it would be any help—"

Cliff's laugh grated harshly. "You know how that would help. Just throw him into another frothy spell. No, I'll have to handle this alone, Ruth."

"Just because my name happens to be Clanton." She was simply stating the inescapable fact, but for all that the bitterness was in her voice for him to hear and feel.

He muttered, "Simple as that, Ruth," and as though from some involuntary compulsion, they both fell silent.

CLIFF'S thoughts drifted back to the only days he could recall with any warmth, the days of his youth. The days when he was growing up on his father's vast cattle empire on the Brazos—the Rafter P, whose

brand letter, under Luke Perry's dominant and forceful direction, had come to signify profit. Cliff's mother, whose innate gentleness and physical frailty had been badly adapted to the loneliness and hardship of such a way of life, had died when he was still in short pants, and Luke Perry had raised his three boys with a hand of iron. He had made a lot of money on his journeys to the rail-head towns up north, and finally, having had his bellyful of cows and roundups and the dust and heat and stink of cattle drives, he had settled in Mescal Wells and had built what then had been the town's only hotel, with a general mercantile adjoining.

Luke Perry's enterprises had prospered, and then he had sought power. And in seeking power, his ambitions had collided with those of big Pike Clanton, who, until his advent, had held undisputed leadership of the hell-roaring boomtown.

A showdown had been inevitable, and it had come, finally, with the lines of conflict clearly marked. Luke Perry was an honest business man who stood rigidly for civic dignity, the right of citizens to build decent homes and raise children decently in a clean and wholesome environment. Pike Clanton had stood for diametrically opposed things—a wide-open town where anybody who had the price could get wine, women and song, and more often than not, in the end, a bullet in the guts. Pike Clanton had owned the Prairie Queen, a combination saloon, dance hall and gambling palace that inevitably had become the spawning ground for the town's most vicious element. And inevitably the clash of interests had become a clash of two stubborn wills, and the battle had been joined. . . .

It had stretched over a period of a year, in which time the law-abiding element of Mescal Wells had flocked to the banner of Luke Perry, while the town roughs, gamblers and fiddle-foots had become the adherents of the Clanton faction. Luke Perry had been appointed marshal, and that had brought the fight into the open. With a strong citizens' committee of vigilantes behind him, he had padlocked the Prairie Queen, and shortly thereafter fire of mysterious origin had broken out in the Perry Hotel and burned it to the ground. Proof eventually was brought to Marshal Luke Perry that henchmen of Pike Clanton had started the fire, and the vigilantes had finally caught up with the owner of the barred and padlocked Prairie Queen in the Big Ox. There had been a swift and spectacular gun duel, in which Luke Perry had temporarily lost the use of his right arm, and big Clanton had lost his life.

But this battle had decided nothing, for there were two sons of Pike left, Cab and Finn Clanton, and three sons of Luke Perry,

Dave, Tom and Cliff. Dave had pinned on the old man's star, and a week later had been mortally wounded in a shootout with Cab Clanton, whom he had killed. Then Tom had pinned on the star. And now Tom was dead. . . .

Suddenly Cliff Perry was remembering, with a tight frown contracting his brows, what Luke Perry had said when he had fastened the star on the chest of his son, Tom. There had been a fierce pride, almost an arrogance, in the old warrior's faded eyes as he had augustly performed the ceremony.

"Boy," he had declared in his rolling, sonorous voice, *"there are two ways for a man to live—decent and clean, the way God intended, or swingin' a pitchfork for the devil, like the Clantons. An honest man can't compromise between good and evil, so wear this star with honor, son—and vaya con Dios!"*

And now Luke Perry's last star-toter was dead, for his third and youngest son, sickened by the blood already shed and his father's inflexible Old Testament code of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, had vowed when his brother Dave had been killed that he would never wear a gun as long as he had the power of will in his brain and the breath of life in his body.

The old man had refused to believe him when, following Dave's death, he had announced his decision. "Tom will take Dave's place," Luke Perry had decreed sternly, "and you will take Tom's place managing the Mercantile. And don't let me hear any more of that damned claptrap about not wearing guns. You're a Perry, Cliff, born and bred, and no Perry ever lived and breathed who would light a shuck from trouble."

Then one day the old man had come storming into the Mercantile, pale with anger, and Cliff had guessed the reason for his agitation even before he had caught his breath and started to talk.

"Cliff," he had panted out finally, "some damned gossip-mongering Clanton scum in this town has started a contemptible lie, and I want to hear you nail it right now with your own lips!"

Cliff had been stacking a new shipment of seal-tights on the shelves behind the long counter in front of the store. He turned slowly and faced Luke Perry, his stomach frozen suddenly into a hard knot, his whole body tensed expectantly.

"What lie, dad?"

"Thank God, you haven't even heard it, then! Cliff, somebody's started a rumor that you're sweet on the Clanton girl, and that you've even been seen talking with her in public. Nail it, Cliff! Let me spit the damned taradiddle back in the face of the filthy swamper I heard it from!"

Cliff felt the blood rush from his face. Finally he said, keeping his voice deliberately level, "Dad, have you ever heard anyone speak the slightest scandal about Ruth Clanton?"

Luke Perry stared at his son aghast. "Scandal!" he blurted out at last. "Why, she's bone-and-blood a Clanton, isn't she? Hell's fire, does a man have to say anything more than that?"

"A lot more," Cliff said quietly, "before I'll listen. You might as well hear this now as later, dad. Ruth Clanton and I are engaged. And as soon as I can get ahead a little, we're going to get married."

For a panic-stricken moment, Cliff was afraid the old man was about to have a stroke. His broad, fleshy face turned violently crimson and his lips twitched convulsively. When he did speak, finally, his voice drove at Cliff with a strangled fury.

"Get out!" He jerked out the words with a taut vehemence. "Get out of my sight and don't come back here, you—" He had been unable to finish. He had fallen back into a chair and Cliff had run to fetch Doc Brooker.

NOW, remembering, a slow dread of the job that lay ahead of him built up in Cliff Perry. He had halted the buckboard at the corner of Main and First, and for the last couple of minutes had sat unmoving in the seat beside Ruth Clanton, silent, trying to blunt the edge of his tension by smoking a cigarette.

Ruth, understandingly silent, said nothing until he spoke, finally, flipping the finished cigarette from him in a fiery little comet through the dark.

"Well," he murmured, "reckon I'd better get it over with. Waiting only makes it harder."

Ruth Clanton said simply, "I'll be right here, Cliff. I'll want to know if everything is all right."

Cliff said absently, "Don't guess I'll be very long. All right, Ruth, wait for me," and he leaped out of the buckboard, opened the white picket gate, and started up the gravel path to the veranda. His boots thumped hollowly on the boards of the porch. Lamplight from the living room sifted out through the slots of the drawn blinds. Cliff tried the door and found it unlocked. He walked into the hallway; simultaneously, a voice from the living room challenged sharply: "Who's there?"

Cliff open the door to the room and walked in and Luke Perry hitched around abruptly in his old Salem rocker. His pale eyes hardened as they fell on his youngest son.

"What do you want?"

"Now take it easy, dad. I wouldn't be here if I didn't have to be."

"Then speak your piece and get out! And don't call me dad. You're no son of mine, Cliff."

A quick anger burned through Cliff, and on a savage impulse he flung it at the old man with a brutal directness. "I'm your only son, dad. Since eight o'clock tonight."

Luke Perry lunged up out of the rocker. His faded eyes flared wide, his wedge-shaped jaw clamped rigidly.

"What in the devil are you blathering about?"

"Tom," said Cliff Perry quietly. "Tonight, at Keno Smith's."

Luke Perry walked erectly to the shelf of the little corner cabinet at the far end of the room. He poured himself a drink, downed the liquor with a toss of his iron-gray head, then turned, slowly.

"Well, don't stand there like a sun-struck dogie! What happened?"

"Tom was playing billiards in Keno's back room with Long John and Ernie. Somebody stuck a shotgun through the back window. They got Tom and Long John."

For a time that seemed interminable, Luke Perry didn't speak, didn't move. He stood beside the cupboard like a block of granite, his bullet-shattered right arm tucked inside his shirt, his stern blue eyes clamped on Cliff with a piercing fixity.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he blurted out finally. "Tom was your brother. Dave was your brother. Are you going to run for your corner like a damned rat, or stand up like a Perry and fight?"

Cliff said levelly, "I'm not going to run, and I'm not going to fight. There's been too much senseless bloodshed already."

Luke Perry lurched away from the cupboard and lumbered across the room to stand facing his son, his blunt-jawed face contorted with sudden fury. "You call it senseless to rid this town of trash like the Clantons? You call it senseless to ram some steel up that mushy backbone of yours and put on a gun and go out and kill vermin? By God, if you were my son, I'd horsewhip you! I'd flog you till—"

"You can't even whip your own vicious temper," Cliff cut him off vehemently. "You can't whip your crazy pride, or your crazy lust to kill. You sent Tom and Dave to their deaths. You can blame yourself for that."

Luke Perry's mouth flopped open and his breath came finally in terrible bubbling gasps. He advanced on Cliff with his palm upraised, his broad face purple, apoplectic. The arm swept back; at the same instant Luke Perry's jaw seemed to warp out of shape and his blocky body trembled with an odd convulsion.

Blood frothed from his lips and he sagged suddenly, dropping back to collapse heavily in the big rocker.

"Tom," he muttered faintly. "Tom—" Abruptly his head pitched forward against his chest and his voice ebbed away.

Cliff spun around and ran to the door. He went off the veranda in a flying leap, then was running down the gravel path, his heart pounding with sudden panic.

At the buckboard, Ruth's tense face loomed palely out of the gloom.

"Cliff! Cliff, what is it?"

Cliff's hands tightened on the arm of the buckboard. "Ride for Doctor Brooker, Ruth. For God's sake, hurry!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Long Trail Back

SPRAWLED out behind the rimrock, with the muzzle of the rifle crotched in the notch of a flat boulder, Cliff Perry waited with a mounting impatience, an increasing tension. Far in the distance he could see the Mescal Wells stage rolling briskly through Catamount Canyon on its way to Butte Springs. But nowhere on the trail could he pick up any sign of a rider; there was nothing to see but barren undulating hills and blue heat haze and, far to the south, those long pennants of dust kicked up by the whirling wheels of the stagecoach.

The long barrel of the Sharps' was getting hot from the blistering rays of the sun, and now Cliff drew it back out of the notch and laid it in a thin belt of shade behind the boulder, to let it cool. Presently he took makings out of his pocket and, putting his back to the rock, sought a curb to his restlessness by slowly shaping a cigarette.

Six months—it didn't seem that long to the night he'd gone rushing out into the starlit darkness to send Ruth for Doctor Brooker. It seemed more like a couple of weeks ago; more like yesterday. Yet the calendar said six months, and the calendar didn't lie. And in six months many things can happen, and many had. Puffing abstractedly on the cigarette, with his back braced against the smooth shank of the boulder, Cliff Perry's mind became a blank page on which his bitter thoughts wrote the changes wrought by those months.

The Perry Mercantile sold . . . his father taken to a hospital in Chicago, his entire right side paralyzed, able to speak only in a stammering whisper . . . Doc Brooker dead from a sudden heart attack. And back in Mescal Wells, the Prairie Queen again running high, wide and handsome under the unhampered management of Finn Clanton.

The day after his father had been taken away, Ruth Clanton had come to the lonely house on First Street. He'd had no plans, no place to go, even, since the day Luke Perry had come to the Mercantile and turned him out as the store's manager. The next day Art Gaines had been running the Mercantile, and Cliff hadn't been near it since.

"Cliff," Ruth had said, "there's a rumor your father intends to sell the Mercantile to Art. What will you do?"

Cliff had shrugged fatalistically. "Get out of Mescal Wells, I guess, and try and snag a job. There's nothing more for me here."

"I'm here," Ruth said.

"Yes, you're here," Cliff said dully. "And you're also a million miles away. I've got stage fare to Butte Springs, Ruth. And that's about all."

Ruth said quietly, "Father left me that little spread up in the Ringstones, you know, Cliff. And what's mine is yours."

Cliff's voice turned bitter. "That would be just fine, wouldn't it? Can't you imagine how it would look if I let you marry me under those conditions?"

"We never worried about wagging tongues before, Cliff."

"This time we'd be a family. A family has a longer future than yours or mine."

"Come up and help me out, then, till you can tie onto something else. Reb Jackson needs an extra man. We lost our contract buster yesterday. And right now we're getting a cavvy together for the Army remount station at Butte Springs."

Cliff stared off thoughtfully. "If it's honestly a question of your needing help, Ruth, I'd be glad to give you a hand."

"Then it's decided," Ruth said crisply. "I have a few errands to do in town. Pack your warbag and throw it in the buckboard. I'll be ready in about half an hour."

It had been a place to go, a job to jolt his thoughts out of the rut of misery into which events of the past few weeks had sunk them. And so he had met Reb Jackson—and, to his bitter astonishment, the real Cliff Perry.

Reb had shown him around, introduced him to Grubpile Langtry, the chuck wrangler, and an elderly rider named Gimpty Partridge, who was mostly an odd job man, and then had steered him up to the corral.

A tall, lanky redhead with bland eyes and a quick grin, Reb had nodded to the bronses penned up in the corral and said, "We still got two-three of these ringtails to bust. That skew-bald over there is kind of an oily bronc, but I taken him out this morning and he won't be so ornery after he's wrinkled his spine a couple more times. Like to try him?"

Cliff stared at the big brown and white uneasily. As a kid back in Texas he had

ridden plenty of highpolers, and this skew-bald didn't look like much more than just an ordinary catback. But he hadn't forked a real sun-fisher in years, and now a sharp apprehension stabbed him as he stared at the skew-bald's mean and glaring eyes.

"Why—" he was aware of the doubt in his voice—"I suppose I could make a dab at it."

"Hell, yes!" Reb said, and while the ramrod eared down the bronc, Cliff laced a tree on him and reluctantly went up.

"Ready?" grinned Reb.

Cliff nodded nervously. "Ready as I'll ever be. Let 'er go."

The skew-bald immediately kettled, then suddenly pitched, fence-cornered. Cliff felt his head snap back. A moment later it seemed as if his spine would be driven right up through his hat as the bronc came down on ramrod-stiff legs. The skew-bald was a pile-driver! Panic gripped Cliff as the bronc again bogged his head and abruptly jackknifed. Desperately, Cliff tried to hang on monkey style, gripping the saddle horn with both hands and pushing himself sideways in the plaster and standing in one stirrup. The maneuver infuriated the skew-bald and, with a wild snort, he reared up again, pawing frantically with his forefeet.

The suddenness of it caught Cliff flat-footed. He had no time to get back his knee grip, despite a saddle with an extra large fork swell, with which Reb Jackson had thoughtfully accommodated him. He was tossed off backward, and the fall knocked out his breath and sent a violent explosion of pain up through his body.

He rose groggily as Reb Jackson started at once towards the skew-bald, building another loop.

"We'll hook onto him again," Reb said. "You curry him out a little more this trip."

Cliff shook his head. His back throbbed, and a hollow roaring filled his ears. "I had enough of that kettleback for one day," he muttered.

"Why, hell," Reb said, "you done all right. Screw down on him more. He ain't nothin' but a catback."

"Screw down on him yourself," Cliff jerked out, and was conscious of Reb's eyes probing at him in a peculiar studying way.

And in that moment, Cliff Perry knew the hard and bitter truth. He was scared. He was yellow as hell!

BEFORE this sharp and overwhelming realization, the remembrance of his father's words hit him with sickening impact: *Ram some steel up that mushy backbone of yours. . . .* He stared shakenly into Reb Jackson's accusing eyes.

He said slowly, wonderingly, "I'm scared."

I'm yellow as hell, Reb. And never thought it."

Reb Jackson said finally, studying him quietly, "I wouldn't reckon so," and turned away. He went out and roped the skew-bald and got it fast to the snubbing post in the center of the corral. "All right, mister," he said evenly. "She's yours."

"The hell she is," Cliff said.

Reb Jackson knotted the end of the rope to the snubbing post and walked over to him, stepping lightly on the balls of his feet.

He spoke softly, almost gently. "Cliff, sometimes a gent needs wakin' up. You can't argue law an' order with an outlaw bronc—or with this." He swung back his arm and drove it solidly to the point of Cliff's jaw.

Cliff staggered back. Then, suddenly furious, he lunged at the ramrod, clipping him on the chin, ramming him back with short, wild punches that Reb parried, grinning. Then Reb halted abruptly, came under Cliff's flailing arms, and hooked a right to his chin and sat him down with his arms flung back and his long legs spraddled out ludicrously in front of him.

He stared up sheepishly at Reb Jackson's grinning face."

"You pack a good wallop," Reb said. "But I took a few boxing lessons once and savvy some of the tricks."

Cliff got slowly to his feet. "I'd admire to have you teach me a few, Reb," he said finally. "Enough to whale tar out of you some day."

Reb's grin widened. "Be plumb pleased, Cliff—soon as you've curried down this damn' crow-hopper for me."

Cliff's jaw tightened. "Ear him down, Reb."

And this next time, Cliff rode the jughead until the weary animal halted finally from sheer exhaustion, whipped, his head drooping in surrender.

"You busted his bedsprings that trip," was all Reb said to him as he slipped tiredly down from the saddle. But later, as they walked together up to the bunk house, he said, "Knew your brother Tom, Cliff. And I was plum certain no brother of Tom's would let an ornery little gut-twister like that skew-bald pin his ears back."

Cliff said, feeling inexplicably warm inside, "Thanks for that poke on the jaw, Reb."

Reb gave him that odd look again. "Got somebody you'd like to work over, hey?"

"Maybe," Cliff said. "You, first."

"Well, come on up back of the bunkhouse," Reb said.

And that had been the start of it, the planting of the seed, the watering of the idea. Slowly, as the days wound into weeks and the weeks merged into months, and the understanding between Cliff and Reb Jackson

ripened, the knowledge came to Cliff that he had been wrong about a lot of things. Wrong in supposing that an outlaw, bronc or man, lived by a code, and could be fought with one. Wrong in thinking that a forced issue could be side-stepped by moving the battle to a different ground. After six months in the Ringstones he went up to the little adobe ranch house on the hill and had broke the news of his decision to Ruth Clanton.

"Now I've got to do it, Ruth," he told her, an earnest pleading in his voice. "I've got to prove this thing to myself. I've learned that you can't throw a book at a man—not if that man has a gun on you. I still hate guns—I hate everything they stand for, all the hate and pain and killing. And I'm still proud of the name of Peaceful Perry. But I'm not very proud of the man who wears it."

Ruth looked at him, and her hazel eyes slowly hardened, and her voice had a flat bitterness when she answered him, finally.

"I know you're not a coward, Cliff. Isn't that enough? You don't have to prove it by killing my brother—or by getting killed yourself. Ernie Ivers is marshal of Mescal now. And he's not asking help from you or anyone else."

"Ernie Ivers does what Finn tells him to do, Ruth. There's no honest law in Mescal."

Ruth Clanton spoke stiffly. "You've already decided about this, haven't you, Cliff? You're not asking me what I think you should do—you're telling me about something you've already made up your mind to do."

"I'm asking you to understand, Ruth."

"Maybe I understand too well, Cliff. If you really cared about me, you'd understand, too."

"Have it that way then," Cliff said harshly, and stepped to the door. Out on the veranda he looked back, hesitating momentarily. Had he really thought his way to this decision—or was it something deeper, something bred in him, something inextricably a part of his blood and bone? He thought of his father, an old man now, crippled, brooding his last years away, bitter and alone, defeated in his attempt to bring justice to Mescal Wells. He had written the hospital and learned that Luke Perry had left there a month ago. He had left no address.

Softly Cliff Perry shut the door behind him.

Back in the bunkhouse, Reb Jackson waited for him.

"Well, what did she say?" Reb asked, as he came in.

"It's finished," he answered dully.

He lit a cigarette, inhaled on it deeply. "Ben Morrell still at Larkin's?" he asked, after a lengthening silence.

"Still there," Reb said. "Larkin's been

running wet cattle, and Ben's been the middle-man for him. He still goes to town every day to report to Finn. Finn's in on it too."

"I'm seeing Ben this morning, Reb."

CHAPTER THREE

Showdown at Moral

HUNKERED behind the rimrock, with the sun a dazzling disk of fire in the brassy sky, Cliff thought back on this morning. He thought of Ruth, thought of Reb's clumsy effort to cheer him up. It had helped, but in this he was on his own. As much on his own as if he were on the back of a sun-fishing bronc.

A faint jingle of saddle gear froze him into alertness. He peered cautiously around the edge of the rock. Morrell was less than fifty yards from the rimrock. In his peaked black sombrero and leather chalicos, he looked like a slouching Mexican in the saddle of the blaze. He was almost to the rimrock now, his narrow, hook-nosed face bent over a cigarette, his long tensile fingers shaping it up negligently.

Cliff's finger tightened on the trigger of the Sharps'.

"All right, Morrell!" he called flatly. "Drop the cigarette and throw up your hands!"

Ben Morrell stiffened. His arms shot up, the tobacco spilling down his legs. His glance flicked to the rock. His eyes steadied warily on the rifle covering him.

"Who is it?"

Cliff rose slowly, holding the Sharps' steady. "Get down off that horse, Morrell. I want to talk to you."

A startled recognition stretched Ben Morrell's eyes momentarily. Then he laughed.

"I jes' can't believe it."

Cliff came down around the rock. He halted five paces from Morrell and said, "Morrell, you were seen outside Keno Smith's the night my brother was bushwhacked. I want to know who was with you. I want to know who killed Tom."

Morrell grinned flatly. "Who saw me there, Peaceful? You?"

"Never mind that. Answer the question."

Morrell slid easily down from the horse. His arms dangled casually. "Peaceful, that Betsy gun shore is puttin' a heap of sand in your craw."

"Stand tracked, Morrell!"

Disdainfully, Morrell advanced another step. "What for? You'd never get up nerve enough to yank that trigger. Nerve, Peaceful—not chicken guts." He took another deliberate step forward, his cold eyes calculating, arrogant. "Besides—" his voice took on an edge of mockery again—"a dead man

would tell you no tales, would he, Peaceful? And you want to know."

The finger Cliff Perry had hooked around the trigger of the Sharps' seemed paralyzed as Morrell lowered his head and with a sudden diving lunge butted him savagely in the midriff. He let out a pained grunt and staggered back, the muzzle of the Sharps' dragging on the ground.

Morrell leaped after him and kicked it out of his hand, and the shock of that abrupt, jolting wrench to his arm was like icy water, clearing his fogged brain. Morrell's leaping kick threw him off balance momentarily. A wave of anger swept him then and he dove forward and caught Morrell's eye with a blow that stunned Morrell and drove him back.

With a bellow of rage, Morrell came at Cliff again, hammering in clumsy, slugging blows that Cliff parried with his forearms and shoulders; then, as Morrell spent himself with this effort, Cliff pounded his bleeding eye again and finally hooked another right that snapped Morrell's teeth together and shot his head back with a sickening jerk.

Morrell wobbled, and mercilessly Cliff drove at him. Morrell's knees buckled. His breath came out in a winded gust and he sank to the ground, drawing a hand slowly across his mouth and then staring down at the blood on it with an expression of amazement.

Cliff went over and stood looking down at him. "Well, what about it?" he panted. "Who was it?"

"Go to hell," Morrell muttered.

Cliff gripped him by the wrist and jerked him back to his feet. Then, very coolly and deliberately, he knocked him down again.

"Who was it?"

Morrell's move to his gun was slow, and Cliff booted it out of his clutch when he had it only half drawn. He leaned down and slapped Morrell hard on both cheeks.

"I can keep this up the rest of the day," Cliff told him. "Now tell me."

Morrell's puffed lips opened painfully. "You know who it was. And a damned lot of good it will do you, hombre."

"Finn Clanton?" Cliff said, and watched Morrell's head nod slowly.

Cliff picked up the fallen Colt and tucked it into his belt. Then he walked over and retrieved the Sharps'. His chestnut, ground-hitched up behind the rimrock, nickered as he approached it. He punched the Sharps' into the saddle boot and swung up.

Slowly, then, he rode down around the rimrock. Paying no further heed to Morrell, he reined up beside the sorrel and quirted it. The startled animal leaped away, then headed at a loping run back towards Larkin's.

Cliff giggled the chestnut in the direction of Mescal Wells.

THE next morning, after taking a quick breakfast at the Elite Lunchroom, Cliff Perry headed for Keno Smith's, a small warbag tucked inconspicuously under his right arm.

It was early now—not quite eight-thirty yet—and the bar at Keno Smith's was deserted except for Charlie Knox, the bartender, who stood on its sober side, polishing glasses.

Charlie glanced up as Cliff entered, greeted him casually and nodded to the door of the private office.

"In there," he said. "They're waiting for you."

Surprised, Cliff came along the bar and said, "They? Nobody was expecting me, Charlie."

"Somebody is now," Charlie said. He winked slyly. "Had fire in her eye, too."

A sudden foreboding stabbed Cliff. He swung around the end of the bar and opened the door to the office. Keno Smith was rocked back in the swivel chair behind his battered desk. And seated stiffly in a chair in front of the desk, dressed in her crinolined Sunday best, was Ruth Clanton.

Keno said, "Why, howdy, Cliff. You've met Miss Clanton. She taken a notion you might be dropping in here this morning." He avoided Ruth Clanton's angry gaze. "Something about a job," he added softly.

Cliff was aware of a cold tightening of her eyes as he said dryly, "I am here to see about a job, Keno. You know the one."

Keno thoughtfully stroked his grizzled cheek. He said, "Miss Clanton seems to think Ernie Ivers is about all we need in that line," and studied Cliff Perry calculatingly from under drooped eyelids.

Cliff's voice flattened. "Has Ivers ever done anything about the murder of my brother?"

Keno's pale eyes ran a quick glance towards Ruth Clanton. "No," he murmured, looking back at Cliff finally. "Ernie never sticks his chin out much. Leastways, not far enough for anyone to take a poke at it."

Cliff said, "I stuck mine out, Keno. Yesterday. To Ben Morrell."

Keno stiffened. "H'mm? What happened, Cliff?"

"I found out who bushwhacked Tom."

Keno started another glance towards Ruth Clanton, then quickly jerked it away. The girl had twisted around in her chair and was staring up at Cliff with a sick dread pinching her eyes.

Keno said, "Want to talk about it, Cliff?"

"Privately, Keno," Cliff said bluntly.

Ruth Clanton came up abruptly out of her chair. She flounced around, bringing her angry face close to Cliff's. Her voice lifted hysterically.

"Oh, in heaven's name, why don't you say it? Why don't you say it and get it over with?"

Keno stared at the girl, an honest pity welling in his tight-set eyes. He nodded, finally. "Better that way, Cliff. Cut the deck now. It's the best way."

Cliff's shoulders lifted, dropped heavily. "All right, Keno. It was Finn Clanton who bushwhacked Tom."

Watching Ruth, he saw the color drain abruptly out of her cheeks; at the same instant she turned, her head rigidly erect, and walked to the door and out.

A weighted silence fell between the two men in the room. Keno Smith's voice broke it, finally.

"I knew you'd come back, Cliff. You're a Perry—the same damned, war-necked breed as the rest of 'em. I feel sorry for that girl, Cliff. She's in love with you."

"Was," Cliff said bitterly.

"Is," Keno Smith's eyes studied him a moment. "Still want to go ahead with it, Cliff?"

"What about Ernie Ivers?"

"I fired him this morning."

"Have you heard anything from dad, Keno?"

"Not a word, Cliff. He just dropped out of sight."

Cliff said, "Reb Jackson wanted to come in on this," and Keno grinned.

"Reb's an early bird, Cliff. He's been here and gone. He's been your deputy since seven o'clock this morning."

A warm glow flooded Cliff. "That Reb," he said huskily. "He sure has got hell in his neck."

"Be a handy man to have around," murmured Keno mildly. He pulled back the center drawer of his desk and fished out a silver star. He pushed it casually across the desk top.

"Better take this with you—marshal."

Cliff picked it up and pinned it on.

"Now," said Keno Smith softly, "you look like a Perry, Cliff."

"I haven't changed, Keno."

He reached down for the warbag he had dropped at the side of the desk. He took out the gunbelt and strapped it around his waist. Then he chocked the walnut-butted .45 in the smooth-worn holster—his father's.

"No, you haven't changed, Cliff. You've got that cursed Perry fighting blood in you, and you've always had it. Here, wait a minute. For a new marshal, the drinks are always on the house."

ON MAIN STREET he ran into Booger Johnson. The old catawampus had apparently been watching for him. He came hurrying out of the Big Ox, wearing an air of suppressed excitement.

"I seen Reb, Cliff," he blurted out breathlessly. "He's waitin' fer us at Jim Dakota's."

Cliff eyed the suspicious bulge in the right-hand pocket of Booger's pants; a bottle of Old Tanner, no doubt.

"That's fine, Booger," he said. "I'll see you later. I've got to hurry now."

"Wait a minute, Cliff! You ain't heard it all yet. I seen Ben Morrell and Ernie Ivers coyotin' around the Prairie Queen, a while back. Ruth Clanton went there too. Somethin' in the wind, Cliff—they two gents ain't travelin' double harness jes' to swap tongue oil."

It's going to come fast, Cliff thought somberly, faster than I figured.

He said, "Well, I'm much obliged, Booger," and started on. The old man fell into step beside him.

Wrapped in his own difficult thoughts, Cliff forgot Booger momentarily as they crossed Utah and headed toward the flamboyantly false-fronted Prairie Queen, at the corner of Main and Market. *Ruth tried to stop it, he thought. But Finn won't pay any attention to that. And if Morrell's been there, Finn knows now that I'll be looking for him.*

He slowed his step deliberately, pulled his impatience down to a cold and careful watchfulness. A tug at his shirt sleeve jarred him out of his introspection.

"Up there," Booger blurted hoarsely. "Here it comes, Cliff!"

Cliff tensed. The door to the Prairie Queen had opened, and Finn Clanton's broad shape stood outlined under the wooden awning.

Booger whispered, "He's too damned sure of himself. Keep your eyes on him, Cliff. I'll watch the alleys," and for the first time Cliff noticed the old man's hand, held close to that bulge in the pocket of his shabby jeans. It hit Cliff, then—that wasn't a bottle in Booger's pants; it was a six-gun!

Opposite Jim Dakota's Finn Clanton halted and threw his voice at Cliff with a flat, sharp clarity.

"That's far enough, Perry! If you want to mix medicine with me, you can do it right there."

Cliff stopped, and this moment came to him with a sense of overpowering satisfaction. His body was keyed to a hair-trigger vigilance, ready to respond instantly to whatever commands his brain might give it.

He said, "I've come to arrest you, Clanton. Unhitch that gunbelt."

Finn Clanton threw back his head and

laughed raucously. "Peaceful Perry!" he jeered. "Too proud to cut hay, and not wild enough to eat it! Who you gettin' all the brave-maker talk from, Peaceful—your deputy Booger, there?"

Cliff heard Booger's angry ejaculation, saw Booger's hand twitch towards his pocket. At the same instant, the door to Jim Dakota's swung open and Ernie Ivers stepped out.

The first shot didn't come from Booger, who was having trouble getting the gun extricated from his pants. Neither did it come from the door of the lunchroom, where Ivers stood ready to cross-rip Cliff from the right, nor from ahead, where Finn Clanton stood on wide-spread legs, a mocking smile fleetingly relaxing the corners of his tight lips.

It came with an abrupt, crashing burst of sound from behind and to the left, and as Cliff startledly spun he saw the smoking snout of the gun projecting from the mouth of the alley, and simultaneously heard Booger's choking gasp as he dropped his up-raised gun and crumpled like an empty grain sack.

Suddenly guns seemed to crash from all sides in a stunning volley, and one of the guns, Cliff realized vaguely, was his own, fired as he instinctively leaped sideways and threw a fast shot at the crouched figure of Ben Morrell, coming out of the alley. Cliff saw Morrell fall and then forgot him. He spun around to see Finn Clanton's gun swiveling on him. But before Clanton could fire, three shots blared stutteringly into the echoes of the others and he saw Clanton lurch and at the same instant felt his right knee jerk, then bend under him agonizingly.

Ernie Ivers stepped out leisurely from the awning of the Elite, his gun pitching up.

With a tight gasp, Cliff straightened the bullet-twisted knee under him and lined his gun on Ivers and they fired together. Ivers' left arm lurched back crazily as Cliff's bullet hammered it, and he felt Ivers' slug crease his hip as he threw himself flat in the road and aimed his Colt from a propped elbow. In panic at the sight of Cliff's gun steadying on him, Ivers fired wildly and missed, and Cliff's careful second shot hit him in the belly and he bent over abruptly, staggered a step, then tipped and fell, his head skidding grotesquely across his outflung right arm.

As in a fabulous nightmare, Cliff saw Finn Clanton lurching towards him through the swirling gunsmoke, but now, strangely, Clanton's gaze was tipped up to the roof of Jim Dakota's lunchroom. Cliff could have killed him then, but thinking of Ruth, his finger remained frozen on the trigger of his Colt, and then suddenly there was no longer any need for him to think about it.

Clanton's gun was wobbling as he tilted it up towards the roof of the Elite, and now a sharp splinter of flame spurted from its smoking muzzle. Instantly, an answering shot hammered down from the rooftop, and with a startled amazement Cliff glanced up and saw Reb Jackson crouched behind the false-fronted parapet.

He shunted his glance back to the street. Little powdery swirls of dust were rising where Finn Clantor had gone down in the soft, wheel-churned bed of the road. Clanton didn't move. And from its utter inertness, from the way he lay in a loose, misshapen sprawl, Cliff knew he would never move. . . .

His gaze ran up to the roof again, but Reb had disappeared. Then he saw his deputy coming towards him out of the alley between the Elite and Eric Sundstrom's next-door saddle shop. A grin was creasing Reb's lean jaw and his gun, chocked back in its low-tied holster, was riding jauntily at his hip.

Reb came up and said, "It took three shots to down him. The last one did it," and then he was beside Cliff, helping him up, steadying him as Cliff stared down, with a feeling of stiff hands clutching at his throat, at the huddled shape of Booger Johnson, the old-timer whose last big casino had been trumped by death.

THREE months of futile searching, three months of following a vague, twisting trail to nowhere. And now Moral, and suddenly, unexpectedly, he'd reached the end of that trail.

Cliff reached the hitch-rail in front of the Stockman's House and dove under it. As he did, the occupant of the last chair on the long lower gallery saw him. The flat-heeled old Congress boots came down off railing with a slap, and then the old man was standing, his lips trembling, his mouth wobbling in tremulous recognition.

Cliff started up the steps. As he did, the door to the hotel opened and Ruth Clanton stepped out. Cliff halted, stunned.

"Ruth! Ruth, how—"

"I've been looking too, Cliff. I found him just yesterday. I—I'll be waiting—inside." She vanished.

The old man's arms were spread wide. Cliff wheeled, took a stumbling step towards them.

Then the arms were gathered around him, were hugging him with a fierce, almost savage joy.

"Son!" It was all, for that one moment, Luke Perry could find to say. But to Cliff Perry, marshal of Mescal Wells, it was enough.

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 31)

1. An *alforja* is a saddlebag. The term is now also used in reference to other sorts of canvas and leather bags.

2. A "base-burner" is a drink of whiskey.

3. Back in the old days, Texans used to refer to the annual Texas Rangers list of fugitives as "Bible two."

4. "Brown gargle" is one of the West's many slang terms for coffee.

5. Ever gifted at shortening Spanish words, or changing them around a bit, the cowpuncher apparently evolved his term, "wrangler," from "*caverrango*." Roughly translated, this word means "one who takes care of horses."

6. When mounting, a cowpuncher will often first grasp the cheek strap of the bridle. This forces the horse to turn his head, and also causes him to move into the rider, if he moves any direction at all. The latter is thus automatically almost swung into the saddle.

7. According to the Westerner, a "fence stretcher" is an instrument for stretching fence wire tightly between two posts.

8. True. "Gun wadding bread" is light bread.

9. True. A lazy brand "lies down."

10. Mug is a cowpuncher term which means "bulldog a calf."

11. True. A "mule-hipped" horse is a horse having hips which slope too much.

12. In the language of the cowpuncher, a "leather slapper" is a gunman.

13. "Hair pants" are chaps covered with hair.

14. "Final horses" are horses which are used near the end of a rodeo. The toughest horses, of course, are saved for the last.

15. True. "Choke strap" is a cowboy term for necktie.

16. You would know your friend was going to look for a tricky human being. A "chaparral fox" is a sneaky, sly person.

17. False. A "brush hand" is a cowpuncher who works in the brush country.

18. A "bill-show cowboy" is any showoff puncher. The term, of course, originates from the apt label often applied by real Westerners to members of the so-called "wild west shows."

19. False. A bayo coyote would not ordinarily be fond of meat. A bayo coyote is a dun horse having a black stripe down its back.

20. When a person is said to be "all horns and rattles," he is angry.

*"How fast you pull
your iron, mister, has
nothing to do with how
fast you die!"*

GUN CURE

By
**WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER**

Roby's face began to turn color. "Did you poison me? You sneakin'—"



HE STOOD in the middle of War Bonnet's sun-drenched street, a smoking gun in his hand, his heavy-featured face showing vast pride in his accomplishment. He holstered his gun, pale blue eyes sweeping one side of the dust strip and then the other. Like an actor waiting for a curtain call. But only Doc Vernon moved. He knelt

beside the dead man and made a perfunctory examination, for it took no more than a glance to tell him that Pete Becker was dead. Then he picked up his black bag and moved deliberately toward the marshal, his narrowed eyes and tight-lipped mouth hinting at the rage that was in him.

"It was another unnecessary killing, Buck," the medico said evenly.

Roby had expected some word of commendation. For three months he had basked in the spotlight; he said now, "Hell, Doc, you saw Pete go for his gun. Want me to stand still and let him plug me?"

"He wouldn't have gone for his gun if you'd arrested him and let it go at that, but you had to prod him into a fight so you could kill him. He was just a kid having some fun. Now he's dead."

"You're gonna make me cry, Doc," Roby said sourly. He rubbed a sleeve over his polished star. "Long as I'm marshal I'll run this town the way I see fit."

"Then you ain't marshal any more," Vernon said grimly. "You're fired."

Roby stared blankly at the medico, as if this thing he had heard couldn't have been said. Then meaty lips flattened against his teeth in a grin that was entirely without humor.

"Doc, you ain't man enough to fill them pants you're trying to wear," Roby said insolently. "You're just the mayor. You can't fire me. I'll quit when a majority of the town council votes against me, and you know damned well you can't get a vote like that."

Roby wheeled away. Doc Vernon, staring after him, knew the marshal was right. He could call a meeting of the council, and they'd remember Roby had gunned it out with the McCall gang the day they'd aimed to rob the bank. The thing was still fresh in their minds—besides, there wasn't one in the lot who had the guts to fire Buck Roby.

It was later in the day, after Pete Becker's body had been laid out and his folks notified, that Doc Vernon stepped into Joe Smith's restaurant for a cup of coffee and a piece of pie. Joe was a mild little man who walked with a limp and had a stiff right wrist. He'd been in War Bonnet five years, but what he'd left along his back trail nobody, not even Doc Vernon, knew. It was enough that he made the best pies in town. At one time or another during the day most of War Bonnet's male population dropped in for pie and coffee.

"Howdy, Doc," Joe said. "I've got fresh peach and dried apple pie today."

"Peach," Doc said glumly as he perched on a stool at the counter.

Joe poured a cup of coffee and set it and a wedge of pie before the medico. He said, "Doc, you want to fire Buck and he won't fire. That right?"

Doc spooned sugar into his coffee. "That's right. How did you know?"

"Talk like that gets around. I've seen young fellows just like Buck. Kill crazy. I figured he'd pull his iron and salivate you when you were talking to him this morning."

"I never thought about that." Doc scowled at his coffee. "I don't reckon he's that far gone."

"If he ain't now, he will be. For a glory hound like Buck, killing is the same as forty-rod is to a drunk. It calls for more and more till he runs into somebody that's faster'n he is. On the way, he'll kill some good men."

The medico looked at Joe quizzically. "How'd you know about that?"

Joe shrugged. "I've run a restaurant in a lot of places, Doc. Cow towns, mining camps—they're all the same. I've seen a lot of fellows like Buck. After he gives up the star he'll hit the owlhoot unless something makes a changed man out of him."

"It'll take a miracle," Doc grunted.

"I'm gonna pull that miracle off for you," Joe said.

VERNON almost choked on his pie. He stared at Joe as if he'd never seen him before. Joe Smith was the kind of man you took for granted, the same as you took dust in the street for granted. Or a fly buzzing around your ear on an Indian summer day.

"You can perform miracles with pie dough and peaches," Doc pushed back his empty plate. "You'd better leave the gunsmoke kind to somebody else."

"You've got a treatment for different diseases, Doc," Joe said mildly. "I've got a treatment for the kind of sickness Buck has. First off I'm gonna send down to Durango for Duke Halcom."

"Halcom," the medico murmured. "I've heard that name."

"Mebbe. He ain't doing nothing right now, but he's cleaned up several camps in the San Juans."

"Is he as fast as Buck?"

"No."

"What's the use of sending for a man just to get him killed?"

"He won't get killed." Joe reached for his hat. "Let's go over to O'Malley's Bar, Doc. I just seen Buck go in there."

Doc went across the street with the restaurant man, thinking this made about as much sense as a hound pup tackling a grizzly bear.

Roby was at the bar emptying a bottle as fast as he could pour it down his throat. He wasn't drunk, but he was ugly. When he saw Doc, he snarled, "Called that council meeting yet, Doc?"

"Not yet," Doc said.

Joe walked up to Roby. He said softly,

"Pete Becker was a friend of mine, Buck. A good kid who'd come to town for some fun and you shot him."

Roby scratched a chin made dark by a three-day stubble. He looked at the medico and then brought his eyes back to Joe. "I've heard that talk before. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm sending for Duke Halcom to run you out of town, Buck."

Roby laughed. "I can shake five slugs out of my iron before Halcom even drops hammer. Go right ahead and send for him, Joe."

"I've seen men cash in who weren't ready to, Buck," Joe said in that same mild tone. "You're like that. Was I you, I'd go have a talk with the preacher. You've got about two days to see if there's anything you can do to make your soul fit to leave this world."

Without another word Joe turned and limped out, Doc Vernon with him. Roby glared after him, his mind gripping the little man's words and worrying them until their meaning came clear. It was a new thought to him.

"Who in hell does he think he is?" Roby demanded of the barman.

"I dunno, but I've seen Joe play poker, Buck," the apron answered. "I never saw him bet his pile unless he had a winning hand."

The next day Doc had to make a long ride into the west end of the county, so it wasn't until the following morning that he had a chance to talk to Joe. He was having breakfast when Buck Roby came in. He was, Doc saw, a little worried, and that wasn't like the marshal.

"Ham'n eggs," Roby said and took a stool beside Vernon. "Maybe I have been a mite quick on the trigger, Doc, but War Bonnet's been a pretty tough town. You ain't seen any hardcases hanging around since I taken the star."

"I'll be the last one to discredit your good record," Vernon said quickly. "I saw what you did to the McCall outfit. For straight out cold courage you've got all a man could have, but there's something wrong with you when you set up a killing you don't have to."

"So you're going to get me?"

"I aim to," Vernon said coldly.

Roby's laugh wasn't pleasant. "Now, that sure as hell is gratitude. I risk my neck stopping a bank robbery. I risk it again going after a drunk Injun. I've given the town a name for being bad for toughs. What do I get?" He motioned toward Joe. "A sandy that you and this gravy-slinger try to work off on me. I don't bluff, Doc. Savvy?"

"After you pull off another killing," Vernon said, "the council will be voting my way."

"If you're still around," Roby said.

"He'll be around," Joe said. "Duke Halcom will be in on this afternoon's stage."

"He'd better bring an army," Roby snarled.

After the marshal had gone, Vernon loitered over another cup of coffee. He said, "Joe, if this Duke Halcom doesn't stack up like you think he will, I guess you and me will be leaving town."

"I won't," Joe said. "I like it here. First town I ever settled down in. I've got a lot of friends." He shook his head. "No, Doc. I ain't leaving."

"Seems like I've heard of this Halcom hombre," the medico said thoughtfully. "The name's been kicking around in my head ever since you said it, but I don't think I ever heard of him being in the San Juans."

"He had a father named Fancy Pants Halcom," Joe said. "Might be him you heard of. Made quite a reputation for himself in some of the Kansas trail towns years ago. He was a trigger happy gunslick like Buck, but Duke isn't like him."

Doc Vernon made his rounds quickly that morning and returned to his office. There was no telling how Buck Roby would react to Joe Smith's scheme, whatever it was. Vernon was certain that it was more than importing Duke Halcom, but Joe hadn't given him the slightest inclination of what he had in mind.

A FEW minutes after one, Roby went into Joe's place for dinner. Vernon dropped a short-barreled .38 into his pocket and followed. Roby looked up when Vernon came in, scowled, and went on eating. Joe came behind the counter.

"What'll it be, Doc? I've got stew and roast beef. Or I'll fry you up a steak."

"Stew."

Doc sat half-turned so that he could watch Roby. When his plate came he ate sitting that way, nerves jumpy, right hand ready to drop his fork and go for the .38 in his pocket. It wouldn't do any good. Roby was fast enough to drop Joe and put another slug into Doc while he was letting go of his fork. But a man had to try.

Roby finished his steak and started on his pie. He took a bite and gulped. He took another bite and chewed meditatively. Then he sprinkled sugar over the pie, finished it and stood up.

"How much, Joe?"

"Not a cent, Buck," Joe said mildly.

Roby took his hat off a peg. "Figure you ought to pay for the condemned man's last meal, do you?"

"It ain't that, Buck. I'm responsible for you getting killed, so I just don't have the gall to charge you."

(Continued on page 128)

RIDERS OF DIE-HARD RANGE

By
**ROD
PATTERSON**

CHAPTER ONE

Last-Stand Rancher

JEFF LORING stared steadfastly out through the dust-paned window in the kitchen of his log ranch house on Roaring River. Spreading as far as he could see, bright under the early summer afternoon, lay his grazing lands, withered again this year by the incredible drought, scarred by dry soap holes and bogs, no pale green tufts of dwarf bunchgrass on the high rock ridges or in the bottoms. It was weeks past the start of green-ing-up time around Bar-Anchor, but the range was dead, blackened, worthless to man and beast.

"Last of the old hay went this mornin'," Jeff said to his wife who was washing the dinner dishes, "and it sure beats all how a mess of critters c'n eat their heads off when times're bad. Good thing we still got a few dollars in the bank!"

Libbie clattered crockery in her dishpan, a grim lassitude in every line of her still young-looking face. "Warren Slayback was



**Jeff Loring had gun savvy to a point—but
buried somewhere inside him was a loco
danged fool that didn't know how to die!**

"We got the house surrounded, Loring," Ben-
teen spat. . . .



here this morning, right after you left," she said. "I told him he better come after supper, when you'd be sure to be here."

A stiffness pulled Jeff's thin mouth tight. Pretending he hadn't heard her remark, he went on absently, "Guess we c'n buy a few tons of brome in Pinnacle to tide us over till rain comes."

Libbie went about her dishwashing, blue eyes fixed suddenly on the wall above the sink. "I saw Harv Satterlee ride out with

his war bag a while ago. Did you have to lay *him* off, too?"

Jeff coughed, embarrassed. "It's only for a month—maybe two." He hadn't wanted her to find out so quickly about his letting their last hand go. "Lib," he said hopefully, "just gimme another year or two and we'll have

the best danged cow spread in the country. I counted forty slicks up near the rock pile. That's pretty good for a dry year."

Even anticipating her scornful laugh, he felt a distinct shock when he actually heard it. "It was a hard, harsh sound. 'Sometimes,'" she said, not looking around, "I think you was born a complete fool! But then I think the good Lord wouldn't play such a mean trick on a man, knowin' it would hurt his folks as much as him."

Chagrin flickered over Jeff's eyes. "Maybe I was born stubborn, Lib," he said without resentment, "but not a fool. However," he sighed, "I don't blame you for bein' kind of discouraged."

Her laugh was so harsh it made him cringe inwardly. "Fed up, you mean!" Her voice had a whiplash sting. "Sometimes I think I can't go on. . . ." It broke, but she pinched her lips together, finishing after a long pause, "You're thirty-seven, Jeff, and I'm thirty-two—still young, but not for much longer. We've never had any happiness or real content since Hoagy was born. Twelve years is a powerful long time to work and slave—for a dream that never comes true."

"A dream?" His tone was wistful, appealing, though he did not look at her. "Why, Lib—"

"If we had something to show for it, I could stand it better. But all we got is a mortgage and a bunch of broken-down critters."

"On a cow spread," he broke in quickly, "cattle come first and people afterwards."

"That's the trouble." Libbie drove ahead, angry now, her shoulders drawn up. "The critters come first, and they ain't worth it! We work to put tallow on 'em and then get just enough from the buyers to restock and start all over again!" Her hands suddenly gripped the dishpan, knuckle-white. "I'm fed up, Jeff! Up to here!" She jerked a hand to her throat.

"If you c'd just see a ways ahead," Jeff told her urgently, "'twould be worth goin' without things for a while. Some day. . . ."

The crash of a shattered plate on the floor stopped him. His head turned her way, a bewildered questioning in his eyes.

She was faced around toward him now, strain biting the line of her lips, her eyes ablaze with her desperation, her suffering. "Some day!" She said it in a strangled tone. "You said that twelve years ago! It's all I been hearin' for so long I think I'll scream every time I hear it!"

He stared at her numbly, thinking, She's sick! And if I try and hold her here, I'll lose her for keeps!

She left the sink and came toward him, her eyes startling in their dark sincerity. Her

shoes crunched the broken plate, but she did not halt until she reached the window where he stood. She was really beautiful, even white and shaking, like an avenging angel, all but the sword. . . .

"Jeff!" Her mouth had quit quivering, but the angry blaze stayed in her eyes. "We've got to thresh it out now!"

Anger was building up inside of him, smothering his remorse. Warren Slayback had been here during the day and had talked to her. Warren had stirred Lib up to this. Jeff couldn't see it any other way at the moment. He had always hated Slayback, the cattle king, but now he was beginning to fear him, after all these years.

THEY had been married, Jeff and Libbie, under rather unusual circumstances.

He had driven up to the house of Lib's older sister Maude, at Pinnacle, that morning many years ago. He was driving a buckboard drawn by a just-purchased team of dun ponies, a stocky, resolute young man, on fire with ambition and self-confidence.

He had known Libbie Echols only a little while, but when she came out to meet him, he leaned against a veranda post and said, "Two months is long enough to wait. You c'n have Warren Slayback, or you c'n have me. If you take me, we won't have much at first but some day we'll have the biggest house, the biggest cattle range in the state. I'll work hard and stay sober and take care of you and our children."

Libbie had turned a little pale. "Now, Jeff? Right—now?"

"Now," he nodded, his bronzed face puckering with a grin, brashly unaware of what it meant to take a wife in this rough wild land he had adopted.

They were married that morning at the court-house in Pinnacle. And when they returned to the buckboard they found Warren Slayback waiting for them, a blackness on his ruddy, high-boned face, his shock turning him surly. He owned Rafter S, a herd of three thousand steers, and was a director of the local bank at twenty-three, but he had lost the woman he had thought belonged to him. He would have shot Jeff Loring down where he stood if Jeff had been alone.

But Jeff could afford to be tolerant, even generous, as he held Libbie's trembling arm and said, "You lose, Warren. Too bad. . . ."

When Libbie had gone into the mercantile to make some last-minute purchases, Slayback confronted Jeff, his wave of recklessness past, but the maddened brightness still in his hazel eyes. "Damn you, Loring!" he said, and lunged at Jeff.

Jeff jerked backward, lifting his fists, taking the big man's savage blows on the chest

and shoulders. Then he reached out and struck Slayback down with a single punch. He stood there in the street's thick dust, breathing hard, watching Slayback get up and charge at him again.

The scrape of their boots raised a cloud of dust around their shifting bodies, and they fought in that haze while a crowd came running and circled about them, while the dull beat of their blows laid flat echoes between the high false-fronted buildings. Then Jeff went down sprawling, his cheek split open by Slayback's round-house swing.

But Jeff got up and flung himself at Slayback. He slugged all consciousness out of the man in a sudden burst of cold hatred, then swayed above him, waiting for him to come back to life. He had broken Slayback's nose and had beaten his mouth to crimson pulp. When Slayback finally stirred in the dust and peered up from blackened eyes, he made no move to rise but lay back on propped elbows, snarling, "All right—all right! Sometime you'll see!"

Now, here in the silence and warm smells of the Bar-Anchor kitchen, Jeff reckoned that this was what Slayback had meant that day as he lay in the dust and hurled his threat. Jeff looked steadily at Libbie, thinking, If he dares come back here again, I'll kill him, so help me!

Libbie's eyes held a sudden haggard tiredness. She seemed to sense something of what lay in his mind, guessed that he had discovered what was in hers, and that he was going to offer no argument, no resistance.

For an instant she was frightened, then she stiffened and said, "Jeff, you'll have to reckon without Hoagy and me from now on. I've stood by you all these years when I could have earned a good livin' for us both as housekeeper for a dozen different outfits. It isn't that I hold you to blame for all the bad luck we've had; it's because you keep on buttin' against a stone wall, and won't holler 'Calf-rope' when you're licked!"

Her calmness more than her words goaded him to a rash retort. "Did Slayback tell you to say that? *You're* the fool if you listen to him, knowin' he's wanted Bar-Anchor for ten years—an' wanted *you* ever since you married me!" He regretted having said it as soon as it was out, but it was too late to retract, and he saw the ice come to her blue eyes.

"You know in your heart Warren's got nothing to do with me!" She put a hard emphasis on each word, meeting his gaze accusingly. "If I needed anything to help me decide it's havin' you say that. I'm goin' back to my sister's in town till I can get work somewhere and give Hoagy the kind of a life he ought to have, to amount to something!"

Jeff felt sickness rise in his throat. He said,

thickly, "You'll never make a town boy out of Hoagy! He was born to the range like me, and won't ever know anything else!"

"God forbid!"

Dull color climbed to the edges of Jeff's untrimmed sandy hair. He struggled with his slipping temper, said evenly, "All right. Maybe a change and a rest'll do you good. I'll hook up the team whenever you're ready—the sooner the better. But the boy is old enough to decide for himself what he wants to do."

"I've already spoken to him about it," Libbie answered, a thin coldness in her tone, "but you can ask him if you want. We'll leave right after supper tonight."

The thought returned to him that she was really not responsible, that hard work and too much worry had done this. "It's kind of sudden-like," he said gravely. "If I'd only of known. . . ."

"I've given you all the warning I could, Jeff. If you'd sold out to Warren last year, when he—"

"Why d'you think I've stuck all these years?" he flung out bitterly. "I'll tell you, Lib: For the same reason Warren Slayback's wanted this spread and the range and water rights that go with it! This whole country's comin' back! You'll see! If he could buy it at the insultin' price he offered, in two or three years he'd make twenty times what he paid for it! Why, Lib, he's already bought out Slash-M and T-in-a-Box and Crazy Q! He's got me hemmed in on three sides, and if he ever fences off the trails between me and Pinnacle, I'll have to fight him or drive my stuff clear over the Muleshoes to get to market!"

She met his pleading outburst with neither warmth or sympathy. He realized suddenly that she had become a stranger, remote and withdrawn. His eyes gleamed. "It's been grunt and grab to make a livin' because Slayback's made it so for ten years. But I wouldn't sell Bar-Anchor to that blackleg if I got to turn outlaw to hold it!"

JEFF sat in the stable, hunched forward on a keg of horseshoe nails, staring bleakly at the ranch yard through the wide-open double doors. He hadn't digested his supper because of the weight of worry on his mind, because of the strain between him and Lib. And now he was waiting for the arrival of Warren Slayback, and was dreading it worse than sin.

In the fast-fading light, the yard seemed to move closer to him, shrinking to ugly smallness. The sheds looked as gaunt and gray as old skulls, paint worn away by wind and sun and winter's buffeting. The wagon house had a caved-in side and a sagging roof. The buck-

board and the ranch dray wagon showed through the hole in the wall, along with the mowing machine which had not been used in a year because of the failing hay crop.

It was a ghost ranch as far as appearances went, but Jeff wasn't seeing the desolation, the rundown condition of the buildings, the seared grass. He was seeing the spread as it would be when his luck changed, when normal seasons came back to Roaring River Range.

But then his doubts returned to harry him. Staring at the log house with its red shale roof from which weeds sprouted, he thought, She could have had it easy if she'd married Slayback. Maybe I'm no account after all.

But he knew some things Libbie couldn't be expected to know. One was that the land had never actually died. It might burn up and lie dormant under layers of dust, but it always came back—the same as a man could come back when determination conquered misfortune. It just took faith and fortitude. Well, he had the faith, and it remained to be seen whether he had the will to stick it out alone against solitude and the growing opposition of Warren Slayback.

His stubborn courage cut through this moment of uncertainty, and he stiffened, saying aloud, "I'm right. I got to be right!"

Footsteps in the yard came closer. He squinted against the sun-glare that hurt his eyes, saw young Hoagy walking toward him, heard him call, "Dad! Hi, Dad!"

"Hullo, son." Jeff straightened on the nail keg, trying to appear casual as he felt for his pipe, then remembering he had no tobacco, and hadn't had any for two weeks now.

Hoagy was just past twelve, a lean and muscular lad, with his father's gray eyes and sandy hair, his mother's keen perception and clear complexion. He sauntered through the doors and leaned a shoulder against the hay mow. "Been lookin' all over for you," the boy said with some embarrassment, shuffling his boots on the plank floor, drawing a line with the toe of one in the dust and hayseed. "Slayback and a rider are comin' up the river trail."

Something took Jeff by the throat. He set his mouth in a hard line, then said, as matter-of-factly as he could make it, "Son, you better go back to the house. Your mother wants you to help her pack."

Hoagy cast a longing glance at his father, then turned and went out across the yard, between the post-oaks, climbing the steps to the front porch, vanishing inside the house.

The clatter of wheels and hoofs came a moment later. Jeff, on his feet, let a hand stray down to his gun belt, then drew the skirt of his duck coat over it, and stepped into the yard.

He was in time to see a new pole buggy with yellow wheels drawn by Slayback's spirited team of blacks slide up before the house. A horseman rode leisurely along behind the buggy and drew rein a short distance away, a wiry, dark man under a hat that looked too big for his close-shaven bullet-shaped head. Jeff recognized him as Ferd Benteen, foreman of Rafter S.

Warren Slayback sat on the tufted maroon seat cushion, whip and lines in hand, a big man with a red neck and broad, high-colored face.

"Well," he said in his heavy voice, "how's the old Die-Hard tonight?"

Jeff halted a yard or two from the buggy, hardening his eyes. "If you've come about a sale, you're wastin' your time," he said flatly. "I told you I'll never sell to you!"

Slayback sat back on the seat, lines held slackly in a big-knuckled hand. His smile spread thinly, then disappeared. His eyes darkened as he spoke. "You're a loco fool, Loring. This country's not big enough for the two of us, and I'm givin' you a chance to pull out with a little cash. If you stay, you'll go broke. You ought to know by now I get what I want, sooner or later!"

Jeff's anger flamed up in his eyes. He was thinking about Libbie, and the way he thought about her and Slayback made him want to draw his gun and have it out here and now. His thoughts must have telegraphed action to his right hand for it twitched an inch downward before he checked it.

The quick voice of Ferd Benteen cracked at him, "Never mind the gun, Loring!" Jeff could see the mounted foreman from the edge of his eyes, and saw the sudden glint of a revolver near the man's hip. He knew he had been drawn down on.

WHAT happened then surprised them all. Hoagy's voice came from the veranda, sharp, peremptory, "Drop your reins, Benteen! Put your hands under your belt and take your feet out of the stirrups! Now move on outa here. You, too, Slayback!"

Jeff whipped his gaze past the startled man in the buggy and saw the boy standing in the open front door, the barrel of an ancient, rusty-actioned rifle angled on the fork of Benteen's collar bone. They all stared, and slowly the foreman kicked his boots out of the stirrups and hooked his thumbs under his belt.

"Hoagy," Jeff gasped, "where in creation did you get that rifle, son?"

Benteen snarled from his horse, "Prob'ly been robbin' an Injun grave!"

"It didn't come out of no Injun grave," retorted Hoagy, white around the mouth, "Mind me, or I'll prove it shoots! Ride out!"

Slayback recovered from his surprise in time to snap at Jeff, "Loring, take that thing away from him 'fore he gets hurt!"

"Leave him alone!" Jeff said tightly, but moving toward the veranda, protest on his bronzed face. "Hoagy, there ain't no call to smoke 'em up yet! Take it easy, boy!"

Hoagy lowered the rifle reluctantly, color seeping back to his cheeks. Jeff climbed to the porch and put an arm over his shoulders, hugging him once, hard, then taking the weapon and canting it against the logs. Just then Libbie's swift step sounded in the hallway, and she appeared out of the shadows, a look of alarm in her blue eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked a bit breathlessly, then she saw Slayback in his buggy, called, "I won't be but a few minutes, Warren."

Jeff knew suddenly that Slayback had driven here to take Libbie to town. His rage flamed again, but he checked himself, wheeled and went inside, Hoagy following him shamefacedly.

Jeff said, "Lib, I told you I'd drive you to Maude's."

Libbie turned at the bedroom door, reserve shaping her expression. "No need of you takin' a twenty-mile drive at this hour. I told Warren I'd go back with him if he came."

Jeff had a slipping hold on his temper. With an effort he said, "It won't look right, Lib. Everybody in the country knows how I feel about him."

"I don't care what people say." Her answer was utterly cold, though her eyes showed the glint of close-held tears. "I'm over twenty-one."

Now he put coldness into his own voice. "Don't look for work, Lib. I'll send money enough."

"Where'll you get it?" she asked sharply. "You've got just fifty dollars at the bank."

His eyes narrowed. "I'll raise it, some way."

"By turnin' outlaw?" Scorn lay in her tone. "I won't have *that* on my conscience! It's bad enough, me leavin' with Hoagy this-away."

The boy had come toward them slowly. Now he stood beside Jeff, his chin up, his gaze on his mother's a moment before she averted it and said, "I ain't goin', Mom. Dad needs me here, and—you don't, because you'll have Aunt Maude, and—"

"Why, Hoagy!" Libbie stared at him, incredulous. "I thought—"

The boy couldn't meet her gaze. "Dad'll need me now more'n over," he said, stammering, "with the hands gone, and you leavin', and—everythin'."

Jeff looked at the boy, then at Libbie. He had trouble keeping elation out of his voice.

"He's old enough to know what he wants. You see?"

Libbie turned abruptly and entered the bedroom. They both stood in the hallway, staring at the open door, hearing her banging things. But Jeff knew all the noise was to cover her astonishment and grief.

Staring at nothing, Jeff felt his son's gaze come to him. His thought was, A man shouldn't ought to have this happen to him where he's got to hurt himself to save somebody else!

Then he said softly to Hoagy, "Thanks, son, but your mother's been through a heap of trouble. She needs you more'n I do. Maybe if you was to go along with her for a while. . . ." He couldn't finish it, somehow.

Hoagy's quick catch of breath was like a sob, and Jeff turned away, trying not to think about Lib's look when she had said, "I've give you all the warning I could, Jeff. If you'd sold out to Warren last year!"

CHAPTER TWO

Son of Battle

JEFF stayed near the home ranch during the two days that followed the departure of Libbie and Hoagy. At no time did he ride more than two miles from the house. He repaired the wagon house wall and roof, and hauled in the usual three barrels of water from the canyon spring.

He was too busy to be lonesome but not too busy to note that two of his nearest neighbors failed to pay him their customary week-end call.

Ed Hulick, Double-H owner, and Slim Cahoon, of Spade, usually dropped in late Sunday afternoon to yarn a while and compare notes. Jeff turned in early, reflecting that most likely his friends had got wind of Libbie's leaving, and were shying off, embarrassed in the face of such an unusual circumstance.

Sleep fled him that night for long hours. He lay alone in the quiet house for the first time in twelve years, in the darkness of the silent room, trying to push away the discouragement that nagged at him. He was frightened, and he had never been afraid of anything before.

He lay staring out at the moonlight, listening to the yipping of coyotes and the eerie alarm of a screech owl, the scrape of an oak limb on the roof. For a long time he wondered if it wouldn't be easier all around if he rode down to Rafter S tomorrow and made the deal with Warren Slayback, then tried to land a riding job with one of the river outfits.

Abruptly he heard boots thud on the front

veranda, and men were running down beside the house, heading toward the rear. A rifle butt was hammering on the front door and a voice yelled, "Open up, Loring! We want you!"

Jeff flung off his blankets, struggling up out of confused dreams of trouble. Then he remembered where he was and sprang up, running bare-footed into the hallway.

"Open up!" the voice shouted, "or we'll bust 'er down!"

Moonlight was a bluish glow through the windows as Jeff halted near the arched door. He slid his suspenders over his shoulders. He lifted the old bone-handled .44 hung in its cartridge belt from the deer antlers, and belted it around his waist.

"What d'you want?" he called.

"You! You can't rustle Rafter S and git away with it!" Jeff knew that voice. It belonged to Ferd Benteen, Slayback's foreman.

"Stand away from that door!" Jeff warned, pulling back the gun-hammer. Then he heard the splinter of a window pane behind him. He wheeled and fired without warning at one of the windows where a shadow crouched. The shouting and trampling ceased, and he could hear the groaning curses of the man he had hit.

But he knew what blood-letting might do to the tempers of those men in the yard and on the porch. He stood for a brief moment, then went back to the door where the banging started up again, heavier this time, as Benteen and his men, armed with a fence post battering-ram, smashed at the oaken panels.

They had called him a rustler. That meant Slayback had waited until he was alone at Bar-Ancor and then had begun his first attempt to seize the spread by treachery, even by murder!

Holding his gun hip-high, he reached out for the chain and bolt. The men out there cursed and swung their post. "Harder!" came Benteen's snarl. "We'll learn that cow thief!"

Jeff threw the bolt clear as the fence-post struck again. Two men, Benteen and a cowboy named Stickney, broke into the hallway, dropping their post, facing the man in the shadows, covering them with the .44.

Benteen and Stickney lifted their hands to shoulder level, staring through the dim moonlight. "We got the house surrounded, Loring," Benteen spat. "Drop that hawleg and come with us!"

Jeff answered, "Stand where you are and holler for those boys out there to ride on home. If you don't, you'll never leave here alive!"

Stickney, short and thickset, snarled, "Loring, you're standin' in the shadder of a rope! What about that bunch of Rafter S yearlin's in your holdin' corral?"

Jeff held his gun steady. "If there's some of your boss' stuff in the corral, it was drove there by you! Now, you can holler for your men to drift, or I'll put a bullet through your hide!"

Benteen's hoarse command echoed hollowly through the empty house, followed by the movements of men in the yard and then the thud of hoofs fading off along the pole corals.

"They'll come back with Slayback," Stickney warned. "And when they do, you'll go with them—or be buried here!"

"I'll be ready."

Throughout the long months of doubt and worry, of pillar-to-post survival, Jeff had needed something to hit and hit hard. Now he had it, and he had a feeling of savage joy, forgetting the risk and the odds against him.

He stared through the haze of moonlight in the hall. "Pick up that post and git!" he said.

Jeff followed the two retreating men as they obeyed. From the veranda, he watched Benteen and Stickney melt into the shadows under the oaks. He had their guns in one hand, his own in the other, and he fired one shot into the air to spur their departure. Benteen's snarl came sailing back as the two men rode away, "This ain't the last of it, mister!"

Jeff stood a moment, listening to the fading beat of hoofs, his head buried in thought. No, he came to the conclusion finally, this isn't the end of it! It's the beginning. And I wish I knew how it's going to break!

MONDAY morning he was up before daylight, cooked his own breakfast half-heartedly, then cleaning up the kitchen and the hall, because it would seem less as if Libbie were gone. But it was a poor pretense. The house, the ranch, reeked of loneliness and danger now.

He strapped on his gun and went out to the barn to hook up the team and heavy wagon against his planned trip to Pinnacle for the hay he needed.

Suddenly he remembered Benteen's accusation concerning the Rafter S stuff in the holding corral. He took time to walk the quarter mile to the canyon where he discovered and released twenty of Slayback's white-face yearlings. The critters high-tailed as soon as the bars were down.

Back in the yard, he was hooking up tugs and hames when Ed Hulick and Slim Cahoon paid their delayed visit. The two ranchmen rode up beside the barn, Hulick a grumbling, pessimistic man with bushy brows and a lantern-shaped face; Cahoon younger and more cheerful, with very blue eyes and reddish hair.

Cahoon said, "We stopped by to tell you Slayback's fenced off Bluestone Springs and just finished haulin' a load of cedar posts up to Dry Ford. Looks like he's makin' another trail-closin' play. This 'un will hit us all, right where it hurts!"

Jeff said nothing about his trouble with the Rafter S crew the night before. He looked at Hulick and Cahoon, not speaking for a long moment, and this silence was more portentous than anything he could have said.

Hulick grumbled, "Wish't I was a long ways off from here, or out of this business." He bit off a cud of tobacco, ruminating moodily. "You hear about Slayback buyin' up all the hay in the country?"

Jeff frowned, shook his head.

"If you was headin' for town," Cahoon advised, "save yourself that trouble. We jest come from there and there ain't a ton of brome to be had without Slayback's sanction. It's a freeze-out, Jeff. I've fought him three years, but now it's gettin' too tough for me."

Jeff went back to his team and deliberately went about unharnessing it. Over his shoulder, he said, "You mean you're goin' to sell to Slayback and get out?"

"Look, Jeff," Hulick cut in, "you been on this range longer'n either Slim or me. You still think it'd be worth the risk if we stood together and made a try at stoppin' Slayback from spreadin' out any more?"

Jeff stared at the speaker. "Yes," he said grimly. "It's what I aim to do, whether I get any help or not!"

"But," argued Cahoon, "you've laid off your men! You can't fight Slayback alone!"

Jeff shrugged, went back to the team. "Who says?"

There was silence during which Jeff stabled the team, then got his saddle horse out of the corral and threw a tree on it, afterward mounting and riding up before the two ranchmen. "There oughta be laws in this country to protect men like us against braggers and grabbers like Slayback. I'm goin' to see Sheriff Ben Santee again and ask his help. If that fails—" he shrugged, "then I'll try something else."

Hulick and Cahoon watched him ride out of the yard and hit the trail through the timber toward Roaring River and the town of Pinnacle.

Cahoon murmured finally, "Guess it must be so, about his woman leavin' him."

"He's on the prod," Hulick opined. "I got a hunch we better string along with him!"

Jeff had started his journey in the coolest part of the day but, as the miles slipped by beneath the shod hoofs of his pony, the steady heat came out of the sky and the earth and the roadside rocks. The baked-up smell

of pine-needles gave away gradually, as he dropped into the lowlands, to the acrid odor of alkali and dying weeds.

All along the trail he saw Rafter S cattle and thought that Slayback had scattered his herd over the whole country without regard for legal boundaries, all the way from his headquarters, four miles from town, clear out beyond his own range to the county line. The brands Jeff read as he rode along were mostly all Slayback's, his own could be counted on the fingers of both hands.

He passed the wagon road that led toward Rafter S, and then saw the big house, the barns and sheds and corrals sitting among the cottonwoods and wild willows along the nearly dried-up river bed. The steady smarting of his rage increased with the cantering rhythm of his mount.

He entered the sun-dried little town along about nine o'clock, seeing the beginning of activity on the street, shopkeepers sluicing off the wooden walks and opening shutters and pulling blinds against the sun's bright glare. He moved the roan down the street, and turned in at Hondo Lane where Libbie's sister Maude lived in her cottage under the chino trees.

When he left the horse at the carriage block and walked up to the door, knocking softly, a quick step sounded inside. The door opened, and Jeff was looking at a middle-aged, stern-eyed woman who said, "Why, hullo, Jeff! Won't you come in?"

He pushed his hat back, uneasy as always in the presence of the woman he felt had never liked him, "No, ma'am," he said. "I just want to see Lib for a minute."

Stiffness came into Maude's high-boned face. "She ain't here, Jeff. I thought you knew. . . ."

"Not here?" His eyes narrowed. "Why, she said. . . . Where's Hoagy?"

"He went with her," Maude answered with some truculence.

"Where to?"

"Why, to Slayback's ranch, of course! Warren offered her a hundred a month and Hoagy's keep, and . . ."

JEFF'S hat hung on the back of his head. Beneath his sandy forelock his face turned gray and still. Only his eyes seemed alive, but even they were not the eyes of a quiet cowman any more—they were two points of hard, hot light.

He did not speak for a long moment, and when he finally did it was only a grunt. "Oh!" Then he wheeled and went back to his horse without another word.

He neck-reined the roan and headed back toward the main drag, not hurrying but wanting to spur the animal to a run. He

would have done so, had it not been for his wish not to attract undue notice from the townspeople. And so he walked his horse back up the main street, feeling a hollow void inside of him that was filled with the suffocating drumbeat of his heart against his ribs.

He was not worried any more, almost not lonely—just set on a hair-trigger and pointed toward Warren Slayback, like his gun would be when he reached Rafter S. He was thinking so hard about Warren that he hardly heard Libbie's voice calling his name from the sidewalk in front of Prentiss & Holcomb's General Store.

He reined in hard, and turned his head, his face grim in the shadows. He saw his wife prepare to climb into the rear seat of Slayback's two-seater buckboard which was driven by the Rafter S wrangler, Tip Ringo. Libbie's face held real alarm as she turned and came toward him. She grabbed his stirrup, saying, "Jeff, where are you goin'?"

"My business," he said shortly, meeting her upturned gaze with no softening of his own. "Let go my stirrup, Lib."

But Libbie held on, her eyes pleadingly on his. "Don't dare do it, Jeff!" she said tensely. "What?"

"You know what." She was looking at his gunbelt and holster.

"You lied to me," he told her harshly.

"How?"

"Maude just told me you got Hoagy out there with you."

"There's no harm in that, Jeff. He's all right. And besides, I told you I was goin' to get work—"

"Not at Slayback's, you didn't!"

"He made the first good offer."

"Stand back, Lib! This horse is movin'!"

"No, Jeff!" she cried, hanging hard to his stirrup. "He'll kill you, or you'll kill him!"

"He's had it comin' a damn' long time!"

"He's got his crew! They'll get you—or the sheriff will!"

"Lib, leggo my foot!"

But still she clung to his stirrup leather, an expression in her blue eyes he had never seen before. And suddenly he realized how much she had changed.

Misery had left its bitter mark on her. She was older, warier, harder; not the bright, shy, gentle girl he had taken to the courthouse that day twelve years ago where the justice of the peace had married them. At that fine moment he had been hers, she his.

Whatever he could give her back in time to come, if ever she would let him, she would never have the same mysterious bright beauty again; never have the look of helpless uncertainty she had had then. Now she was a woman, hard in the knowledge of suffering,

capable, almost cold. And he knew something else: he loved her more than he ever had.

He heard her say, "Jeff, don't go near Rafter S. You'll spoil something that I—"

"I'm goin' after Hoagy!" he said angrily, lifting his reins, thrusting her hand off his stirrup with a jerk of his spurred boot. "And this time I'll keep him with me!"

She started to try to restrain him, but his final words struck like a blow and she drew back, hands flying to her cheeks. He did not look back, but pressed his knees against the roan.

The horse pricked up its ears and headed up the street, past rows of shops and saloons, the hotel, the hay and grain yard, the courthouse with its yellow cupola, and on out of town to the river trail.

About a mile from town he cut off the road and rode straight into Slayback's home meadows. The old and dying grass moved by under the roan's fast-flying hoofs; and off to the north and west the black, bald Muleshoes stood up sharp and brilliant against the intensely hot blue sky.

Finally he eased the horse down to a walk, caution at last pulling his gaze ahead. Then he came to Slayback's first line of wire, found a bar-way, dismounted and led the horse through, replacing the bars through force of habit, and riding on. Presently Rafter S was a low huddle of red-roofed buildings in the cottonwoods along the river bank.

He came into the broad wagon yard, breaking out of the mesquites that rimmed it like fringe. First he saw a pair of men on the low-railed front porch, then a third man working in the horse corrals. As he approached the house, both men on the porch had gone inside and another—Stickney—had come out and was staring his way.

Jeff pulled up fifteen or twenty feet from the gallery, seeing the surprise on Stickney's blunt-jawed face. Jeff said, "If my son's in there, tell him to get his things and come out."

"He won't come out," Stickney grunted, "because he ain't here." Then he looked toward the wide-open doorway, and raised his voice. "Warren, Jeff Loring's jest rid in!"

A heavy man walked through the house. There were voices in the rear yard, roughly talking and afterward ceasing. Then Slayback's big form filled the doorway. He speared Jeff with his river-colored eyes, and said, "Well, you got a gall, ridin' in here like it was a picnic!"

Jeff said, "I want my boy, and you've got him."

Slayback threw Stickney a quick, dark look, then glanced at Jeff, sneering, "You're a bigger fool than I figured, Jeff, after what

happened at your place last night. You winged one of my boys."

Jeff kept his stare on the big man, hating him now more thoroughly than at any time in the past. "Let's stick to the question of my boy, and let the rest slide."

"He ain't here," Slayback stated, rancor in his tone. "Took one of my best horses and hit for town. I warned him not to."

"You're lyin'," Jeff said harshly. He leaned over his saddle horn, his face lean and deadly under his big hat. "I oughta settle with you right now, Warren, because I'm goin' to have to, sooner or later."

"Take a tip," Slayback jeered, "and look around you 'fore you do anything foolish."

While he spoke, Stickney had moved as far as the corner of the porch and had signaled to someone out back. Now Jeff was aware of the soft scuff of boots, the jingle of spurs behind him.

It was a tight spot, and he knew it.

"Ride out!" Slayback said in a blustering voice. "Your boy ain't here."

Jeff sat motionless on his horse, his hands holding the reins. Maybe Slayback was telling the truth after all, but if he was, why had Hoagy returned to Pinnacle? Jeff caught a movement of two Slayback men slowly advancing toward him.

Then, suddenly, there came the sound of an advancing rider behind him. Everybody looked toward the sound—everybody but Jeff who kept his tight gaze pinned on Slayback.

The rider came into the yard, calling at once, "What's up here?"

That was Slim Cahoon's voice. Jeff caught the suddenly sly, triumphant glint in Slayback's eyes, almost an expression of relief at this interruption. Cahoon came on until he was beside Jeff, reining up his buckskin. He was assessing the danger here and driving a wedge between Jeff and the hard-faced men who encircled him. "I'm ridin' your way, Jeff," he said casually. "Better come along, if you're finished here."

"I'm through," Jeff murmured. He had a flat-jawed look as he turned his roan and pricked it with a spur.

When they came to the main trail, they pulled up of common accord, Jeff saying, "I'll ride home first. I heard Hoagy was here."

"Me and Hulick," Cahoon said casually, "decided to throw in with you and fight it out with Slayback. Ed's got three men and I got two—that'll make eight all together. Slayback's got the edge on us by three-four, but I've set out many a poker hand agin worse odds. By the way, what did Sheriff Santee say when you—"

"I didn't see him," Jeff said bluntly.

Cahoon fell in beside him. As they climbed into the timber near Jeff's upland ranch,

Cahoon mentioned something he had forgotten. "Ed and his boys went over to Dry Ford a while ago and set fire to them fence posts Slayback dumped yest'd'y."

The sound of a galloping horse up-trail interrupted Jeff's reply. Both men drew rein, listening, then put their mounts quickly off the trail into a stand of pines. The pounding hoofs came closer, then abruptly a rider whipped past them, heading south at a break-neck clip.

"That was Fred Benteen!" Jeff gasped.

"Jeff, he was bad hit! Somebuddy potted him with a gun."

Cahoon gasped.

Jeff kept staring at his friend, trouble growing in his smoke-gray eyes. Then he blurted, "Slim, you better hit for home and get your boys. And pick up Hulick on the way. When Benteen reaches Rafter S, all hell will bust, and we'll be plumb in the middle!"

When Cahoon had gone, flogging his buckskin through the timber, Jeff returned to the trail and jumped his horse ahead.

Moments later, Jeff shoved the horse off the trail and, following an unused logging road, rode between the pine trunks and through the sunlight and shadows on the mottled earth. Over the thick carpet of pine needles the roan traveled with hardly any sound.

The first thing Jeff noticed that was startling was the faint smell of woodsmoke; and then he saw movement in the brush ahead of him. He sat back and pulled the roan sharply, reaching for his .44.

Twenty feet or so in front of him the brush stirred again, and a vague shape appeared, a human form. Jeff started to raise his gun, then his hand turned stiff. "Hoagy!" he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Through the Smoke

THE thin face that rose ludicrously from the screening leaves was gray and puckered and staring. "Hoagy," Jeff cried, "what the tarnation hell—"

The boy came all the way out of the brush, stumbling, staggering, his arms upraised as Jeff swung off his horse and went to meet him. Hoagy put his fists to his eyes and let the tears run down. His shirt hung from his shoulders in bloody strips, and long red welts showed on his chest.

Jeff reached him and held him, feeling the violence of the boy's trembling, the sobs that shook him. Hoagy was crying, a deep, almost inhuman sound, a strangled groaning, savage and lost and endless.

Jeff said, "Why, son, you're all cut up like you'd been rawhided!"

"Benteen done it!" Hoagy finally managed. "Follered me home and whupped me with his quirt!"

Jeff went rigid, staring. The boy continued, "Benteen set fire to the house! I—tried to put it out, but the water gave out, Dad! I tried—" He stopped, pulling out of Jeff's arms, ferocity in his swollen eyes. "I got that old rifle, Dad! I shot him when he was leavin' the yard! I—I hope he's dead!"

Jeff felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. "Come on, son. We'll ride double and see what can be done," he managed to say.

They reached the south pasture a few minutes later, and then they smelled and saw the smoke. Even before they came within sight of the house, they knew there was no use trying to save it. That smoke meant ruin. Jeff thought, And I could have kept it from happening if I'd only listened to Lib!

Then, as they topped a rise at a high lope and quartered down into the ranchyard, they saw what was left of their home beneath the sheltering oaks. Where the log house had stood so solidly now was a great, billowing column of black smoke shot through with vicious-looking snakes-tongues of crimson flame.

The heat was so intense that they had to dismount behind the barn, for the roan, in its terror, wanted to buck and rear. The crackling roar of the flames reached a crescendo, then suddenly faded as the roof of the house crashed in with a geyser of sparks.

It was Hoagy's quick warning that cut through the blackness of Jeff's thoughts. The boy was jerking at his father's arm, crying, "*Here they come! Dad! Dad!*"

Jeff whipped around in time to see a blur of riders at the edge of the yard, men ramming their ponies through the smoke, the glint of guns in their hands.

Then came the crash of the shots, and a yelling of angry men such as he had never heard before.

Jeff was running toward the barn even before he realized it, towing Hoagy with him.

They broke through the open barn doors, sprawling on the plank floor, scrambling back to the sill. Slayback and his men were fanned out and came on, their guns winking through the smoke, their bullets slapping into the barn.

Jeff and Hoagy lay on the floor, and Jeff had his .44 in his hand, firing swiftly at the black shapes as they wheeled and came charging back, the steady round claps of their gunfire a brittle thunder across the yard.

Hoagy left his father's side, then flung himself down again, the ancient rifle gripped in his hands, his cheek against its stock as he opened up on Rafter S.

The pressure of Slayback's men grew greater. Riders went thrashing past the barn, firing into it. Jeff spotted the high-riding shape of Warren Slayback himself in the background. The big man was sitting his sorrel, one arm in a sling, directing the attack from safe vantage, like a sagebrush general whose life came first before his men.

Jeff heard Slayback's long, loud shout, "Lay it on 'em, boys! Give 'em hell!"

JEFF punched one shot at the cowman, and saw him pull his horse farther back toward the barrier of mesquites and scrub brush. Bullets smacked into the barn, howling through it, whanging splinters from the haymow and the floor.

Hoagy's rusted weapon kicked up in his hands; the backlash shifted his propped elbows. "That's one for me!" he yipped, throwing a fresh cartridge into the chamber with a clatter of the breech block.

Slayback's crew opened up on the open barn doors. But the wild plunging of their horses destroyed their aim. Jeff and Hoagy endured that withering hail of lead, unharmed as yet, though the bullets struck close.

Now Rafter S was steadier in the yard, with riders shifting more slowly beneath the seared oak trees, circling toward the barn. Some charged in short, savage rushes, veering suddenly, then coming back to try again. Jeff threw a snap shot at one rider who showed himself cautiously far out on the left, and he saw horse and man go down in a great, rolling cloud of dust.

"That was him!" Hoagy screamed suddenly. "That was Slayback you jest hit!"

But Rafter S lead still sang around them, splattering the floor and siding of the barn. Jeff reloaded and went on carefully firing, picking one more rider off his saddle and rolling him in the dust.

Then, with startling suddenness, back in the hills and jungle of brush to the northward, a fresh burst of gunfire lifted against the louder uproar in the yard. With it came the fast-arriving rumble of horses' hoofs against the earth.

The sounds drew rapidly nearer, and Jeff and Hoagy heard the shouts. Pale gunflashes blinked in the brush, and the hollow booming of these new guns reached a long, rousing thunder.

A queer silence clapped like a lid upon the ranch. Both Jeff and his son suspended firing, though the deafened ringing went on in their ears. Then all that hush was broken by the arrival of a party of horsemen debouching on the yard, scattering the Rafter S forces in disorder. They tried to reform again, but the newcomers swept at them, guns blazing as they charged.

Jeff stumbled to his feet, Hoagy with him. They both glimpsed Slim Cahoon's red hair, and the lantern face of Ed Hulick. But still more horsemen were streaming into the yard, these new riders coming from the south, from the direction of Pinnacle. As Jeff and Hoagy ran into the yard, they saw the leader of this party—Sheriff Ben Santee!

The remainder of Slayback's men threw down their guns and reached their arms above their heads.

Jeff and Hoagy moved toward a cluster of riders.

Sheriff Santee, preparing to mount, stared at Jeff over the pommel of his saddle.

Nearby lay the bodies of Warren Slayback and his top hand, Stickney. One other dead man was sprawled near the barn.

The sheriff said, "I knowed for a long time that Slayback was throwin' too big a loop, but I had to have proof."

Jeff answered a trifle coldly, "The evidence was all over this country—his beef grazin' wherever he felt like throwin' it! Water holes pre-empted, trails closed off!"

"I know," the sheriff nodded irritably. "But when I accused him, he'd deny it was his men that had done it. He blamed you and Cahoon and Hulick and some others, sayin' you was tryin' to stir up a war."

The hardness around Jeff's mouth softened a little. "You got your proof today, didn't you? What you found here?"

"Mebbe," Santee said, "and mebbe not. Some one of you *orejanas* killed Ferd Benteen. He died at Rafter S right after we got there. I might've had to admit Slayback had cause for cleanin' you out, only for one thing that happened."

"What was that?" Jeff inquired.

"Your wife," Santee said unexpectedly, "came and paid me a call one day last week. Libbie told me a lot of things I didn't know about Warren Slayback. . . . How he'd told her he was out to bust you down to your socks unless she left you. Why, mister, that blackleg even said he'd have you shot, if she didn't move off Bar-Anchor!"

Jeff could only stare. There wasn't much he could say, anyway, and so he let the silence run until Hoagy, speaking up proudly, said, "My mother wasn't afeerd of Slayback, even when everybody else was runnin' away from him." He turned toward Jeff, his grin going clear out to his ears. "Come on, Dad. We got to go and bring her home afore she gits to worryin'."

WHEN Jeff drove the old buckboard and team of bronses up before the carriage block in front of Maude's cottage later that day, Hoagy said eagerly, "Why, there she is, waitin' for us, Dad!"

Jeff looked as he wrapped the lines about the whip socket. Libbie was standing on the front porch, her luggage at her feet, a quiet dignity in the way she waited and smiled at them. But, as they moved up the cinder path, Jeff saw her tremulous expression of uncertainty. That look made his heart jump into his throat. It was so much like the way she had seemed twelve years ago, on their wedding day.

"Hullo, boys," Lib said softly.

Jeff and Hoagy climbed to her side, and Jeff pushed his hat back off his forehead. He met her gaze steadily, saying in his slow and easy drawl, "I'll take your bags."

Libbie came close to him suddenly, and whispered, "Stop starin' at me like you was lookin' at a ghost! The neighbors'll think you didn't expect me to come home!"

He swallowed against the choked-up feeling in his throat. And then he laughed with gentle mockery. "What d'you care what people think? I thought you told me you was over twenty-one!"

"Hush!" Lib admonished him. And then she was hugging him openly, crying and laughing all together. "Jeff," she whispered, "I've been so lonely, so afraid! When you left me this morning I almost told you everything—that the sheriff was goin' to help us at last. But I didn't dare, for fear you'd pick a fight with Warren and be killed, or be held for murder!"

The sun-wrinkles deepened around Jeff's gray eyes. But he had to fight to get hold of himself. Being so gol'darned happy could make a man bust down bawling like a fool if he didn't watch out.

"Lib," he finally managed without stammering, "I—we—they burnt down the house on us. Don't rightly know how I can take you back—"

Libbie was smiling through a haze of tears.

"Don't be silly, Jeff! We still got the barn, haven't we? Well, Maude's going to lend us some things for housekeeping until—"

The deep rumble of thunder stopped her in midsentence, and they all looked up toward the distant mountains. Black clouds inked a heavy line against the blue.

"Well, I declare!" Libbie cried excitedly, "it's goin' to rain at last!"

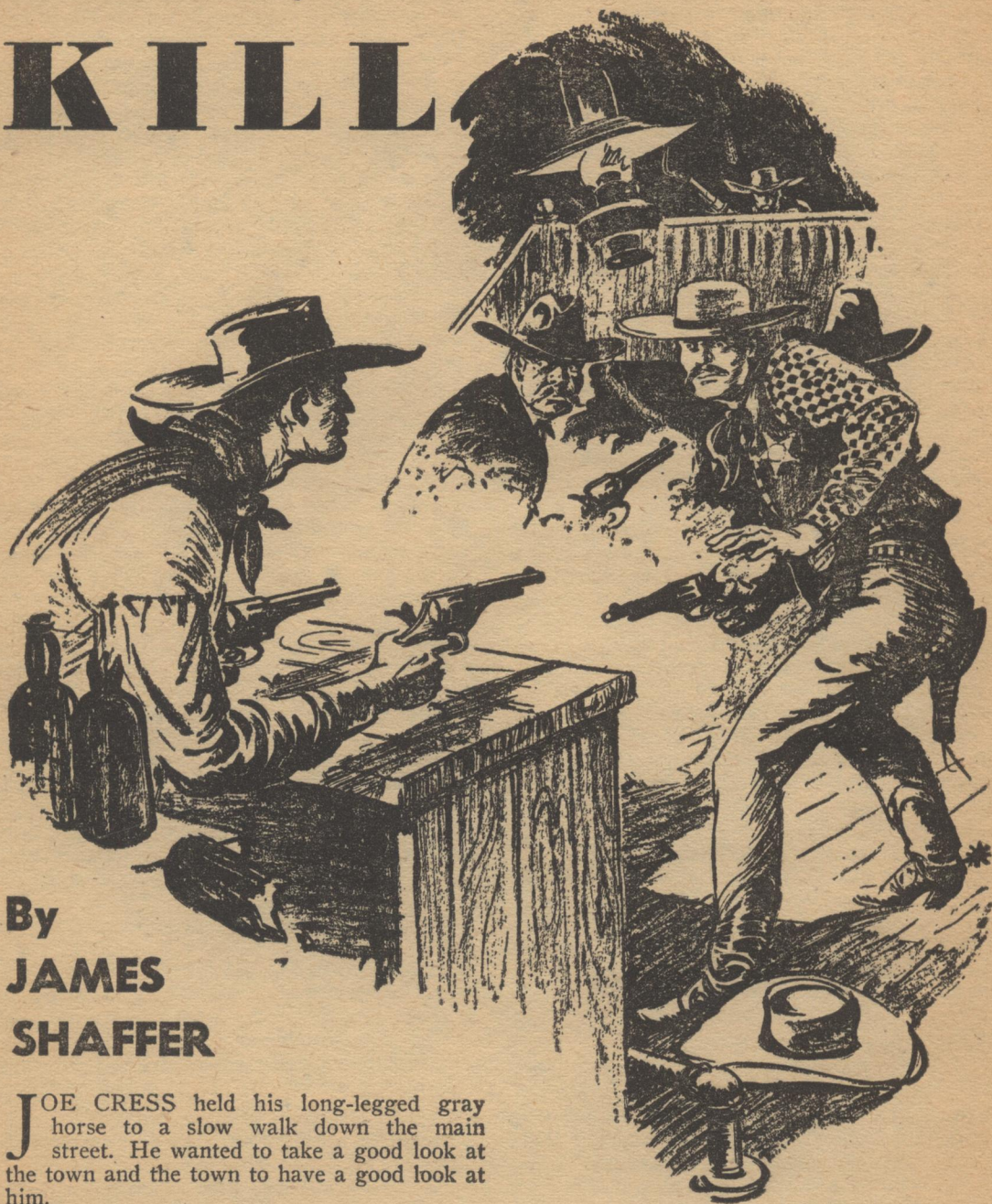
Jeff heard Hoagy's exultant words. "Gee, Dad, now the grass'll git green again!"

Libbie glanced sidewise at the grinning boy, a mock severity on her face. "Son," she said, "there's dirt behind your ears and in your hair!"

"Now, Lib," Jeff said reproving her, though it was spoiled by the note of laughter in his voice. "A man shouldn't oughta be told in public when to wash his blasted neck!"

BORN TO KILL

"So this is your law an' order, is it?" Joe Cress yelled derisively. . . .



By
**JAMES
SHAFFER**

JOE CRESS held his long-legged gray horse to a slow walk down the main street. He wanted to take a good look at the town and the town to have a good look at him.

Why had he come back to Perryville? Joe Cress hadn't answered that question even to

Perryville's powdersmoke prodigal came home looking for a grave—and a gent to fill it!

himself. There were a number of things that could have brought him back—memories that made the old anger and resentment well up within him. And other memories that weren't so bitter.

Was it the girl, Judy Marlin? Maybe. Judy had once told him that if he sent for her, she would come. But there had been strings to the promise, and Joe had never sent for her.

Then there was the ranch that had once belonged to the Cress family. It had been sliced into three neat packages, with a slice going to increase the big acreage already held by Henry Sullivan, Kent Mayhew and Ned Taylor. Joe wondered if that were it. The little C Bar could have been a prosperous spread, but it hadn't prospered under Cress rule. It hadn't had a chance to prosper.

And there was Will, his younger brother. Will was married and running the town's blacksmith shop. He had a son eighteen months old. Joe doubted if Will liked blacksmithing, but he had to earn a living for Elsie and his son.

Then there was the last thing that could have brought him back. Pride? Maybe. A man is proud, and he doesn't like to leave a town, the way he'd been forced to leave three years ago.

These were the things that might have brought him back to his home town. The reason he admitted to himself was that he simply wanted to come back and see the show.

He was back to see the man who had humiliated him three years ago taste the bitterness of defeat, to see him find out how it felt to come out of the little end of the horn.

Joe's memory turned back three years to the day when Sheriff Matt Wheeler and the big ranchers who had put Wheeler in office had faced him with their guns drawn and cocked. His dad had been hanged that morning and buried about noon.

"Joe, git on your horse and ride," Matt told him. "You're a gunslinging trouble-maker."

"Not that, Matt," Joe replied, eyeing the big ranchers that stood behind the sheriff. "But I mean to get the men that put the squeeze on dad and drove him to the wall. Just the big fellows like Henry Sullivan, Kent Mayhew and Ned Taylor. They're—"

"Git going!"

"Soon's I wind up my affairs," Joe told him. "I got property to sell. The C Bar belongs to me and Will and there's stock—"

Joe had looked into their drawn guns and their grim faces and had quit Perryville. He'd ridden out with the acid shame of a loser corroding his soul. Will had stayed. He hadn't been working on the C Bar when the trouble had started, and Elsie hadn't wanted him to leave.

Joe had heard later about the sheriff's sale of the C Bar. All legal, of course. . . That had been three years ago, and things had happened since then.

GREG BOWER had moved to Perryville. Greg had been looking for a town he could run to suit himself, and he'd stopped one night in Perryville. He hadn't pulled out the next morning. Greg knew how to run towns—and he intended to run Perryville before he was through.

Joe Cress was conscious of the hard stares of the townspeople as he neck-reined the gray over to the tie-rack and stepped to the ground. He untied his bed roll and started for the Commercial House.

There was a faint grin on his face as he strode up the sidewalk. He stayed in the middle of the walk, and saw people he'd known three years ago step aside and make way for him. Then a man stepped out of a store and moved to the center of the sidewalk. He didn't step aside as Joe came up.

"Hello, Matt," Joe said. He didn't call him by his title of Sheriff, although Matt Wheeler still wore his badge. But, Joe reflected, there was the election coming up tomorrow.

"What," Matt Wheeler asked flatly, "are you doing in town?"

Wheeler was as tall as Joe Cress, but much heavier. Joe still carried the liteness of youth.

"Are you giving me my walking papers again, Matt?" Joe asked quietly. He had the bed roll over his left shoulder. His right hand dangled near the jutting butt of his six-gun. The faint grin was still on his face.

"When the time comes," Matt Wheeler replied calmly. "We've heard that you once worked for Greg Bower—as a troubleshooter. Now you're in town because you think Bower will be running Perryville after election tomorrow."

"I'm back in town to get something that was taken from me three years ago," Joe told him. "Something that was taken from me at the point of a gun."

"The ranch?" Wheeler asked. "That was sold, fair an' square."

Maybe it is the ranch," Joe cut in softly. "Maybe—after tomorrow—I'll be taking back the C Bar. I'll take Will out of that blacksmith shop and we'll go back to ranching where we belong."

He looked at the lawman, and knew that Wheeler was reading his thoughts. When Bower was in the saddle, things would be different around town and Joe Cress would be riding high.

The lawman shook his head. "Will's happy where he is, he and Elsie and the youngster. He's gained the respect of the town, knuckling

down to hard, honest work. I think he values that more than what he'd gain throwing in with Bower and his crooks."

The old anger and resentment that had ridden him for three years welled up strong inside Joe Cress. It was funny as hell—Matt Wheeler talking about honesty and hard work, when it had been Wheeler who had helped his friends steal the C Bar. But he fought the anger down. The time wasn't right yet. But it wasn't going to be long.

"You're callin' me a crook?" he chuckled. "But you haven't given me my walking papers—you haven't told me to get out of town, like you did when you and your bunch were rodding this town. How come?"

The sheriff didn't answer right away. He cut his gaze up the street. Halfway up the block, a man cut diagonally across the street and entered the ornate Golden Bower saloon. Joe Cress knew the man. It was Ned Taylor, one of the three big ranchers who'd sliced up the C Bar. And the saloon he'd entered was Greg Bower's saloon. That was peculiar, Joe thought, and noticed that Matt Wheeler had seen Taylor enter the place.

"You'll get your walking papers when the time comes," Matt Wheeler said again, still looking up the street. "Remember, Greg Bower isn't running Perryville yet."

"He will be—"

Gunfire rocked the town. Its thunder rolled out of the batwing doors of the Golden Bower saloon, and Ned Taylor's high yell of triumph followed it. Matt Wheeler had whirled at the first sound of shooting, and now he was running toward the saloon, his gun in his fist. Joe Cress waited a moment, when he heard Henry Sullivan yelling in the saloon. Then he realized what was happening.

He dropped his bed roll on the sidewalk and ran toward the Golden Bower. He saw Matt Wheeler disappear inside and a fresh burst of firing broke out.

"We got 'im cornered without his gunslicks, Matt!" The voice belonged to Kent Mayhew. Joe Cress' lips pulled back in a grimace. That completed the picture.

Ned Taylor, Henry Sullivan, Kent Mayhew, and Sheriff Matt Wheeler; the same four that held their guns on him three years ago and made him ride out of town. He knew now what Wheeler had meant when he said Greg Bower wasn't running Perryville yet.

His shoulder hit the batwing doors and he hurtled inside. The Golden Bower had a high balcony running around three sides of the room. There was a man up on the balcony. He'd tipped a table over for protection, and his gun was answering those below.

There were four guns firing at the balcony. Joe Cress stepped quickly to the bar. His gun lifted, then came down, hard. Henry Sulli-

van sighed and sprawled out on the sawdust covered floor, and Joe Cress hunkered down behind the bar.

"Greg!" The sound of his voice brought quick, flat silence in the saloon.

Ned Taylor broke into a fit of swearing. "What the hell's Joe Cress doing in this, Matt?" he demanded.

"How come you didn't take his gun the minute he hit town?" Kent Mayhew rapped out angrily.

"I didn't know he'd buy into this," Matt Wheeler replied. "Stay out of this, Joe!" Wheeler bellowed. He was behind a pool table.

"So this is your law an' order, is it?" Joe Cress yelled in derision. "The sheriff and his cronies ganging up to kill one man."

"Bower was ordered out of town," Wheeler rapped. "Him and his kind. We give him till noon today and he didn't go. Every man in here is a legal deputy."

"But I didn't choose to go," Greg Bower's cool voice came from the balcony. "What can you see from down there, Joe?"

"All three of them, Greg," Joe Cress called back. "Sullivan's out cold. Start your thunder and tomorrow you won't have any opposition at the polls at all."

Silence fell in the Golden Bower again, broken only by the brassy click of shells as Greg Bower pushed fresh loads into his gun. Then Matt Wheeler stood up.

"Hold it!" he ordered, and shoved his gun in his holster. "Kent, you and Ned give me your guns." He walked over and collected the guns from the two ranchers. "Pick up Henry and let's get out of here," Wheeler told the two.

"Calling off the party just when it was getting interesting," Joe Cress laughed. He leaned against the bar and twirled his gun. "But I forgot—you fellows don't fight unless you got the cold drop on a man. Not when the odds are anywhere near even."

Matt Wheeler's face turned scarlet, and his big body trembled. His hand dropped to his holstered gun.

"Damn you! You're going too far!" he said in a choked voice. Ned Taylor and Kent Mayhew were sidling close to the sheriff, ready to grab their guns from his waistband. Greg Bower's cool voice stayed their hands.

"Pick Sullivan up and get out of here," he told them. He'd come quietly down the balcony stairway and was walking toward them, a pearl handled Colt in his soft white hand.

Kent Mayhew's weatherbeaten face was white. "This isn't the finish of this," he choked. "Remember that." He helped Ned Taylor pick up the unconscious Sullivan and the four of them left. The crowd that had gathered at the saloon's doors gave way, and

Joe could hear Wheeler ordering them to scatter.

Greg Bower poured two drinks and shoved one at Joe. "Sent my boys out electioneering today." His smooth features wore a grin. "Didn't expect Wheeler and his crowd to pull anything like that. Lucky you dropped in."

"I could have told you," Joe Cress said, "if you'd asked."

"That so?" Bower asked. He was silent a moment, then asked, "How come you're here?"

"This is my home town."

Bower's eyebrows went up. Then he grinned. "Back to vote?"

"I could be," Joe replied. "After the election, I'm interested in seeing some changes take place around here. My folks once owned a ranch near here. I don't own it now—but it was never sold by me."

Bower grinned and filled Joe's glass again. "I'd like to talk to you again, before the polls open in the morning."

"I'll manage that," Joe said and left the Golden Bower.

Perryville was quiet as he stepped back into the street. But it was an ominous quiet, a silence that seemed fragile, as if the slightest jar would break it. He stood for a moment just outside the doors of the saloon and let his eyes travel up and down the street.

Matt Wheeler was leaning in the doorway of the sheriff's office, smoking a cigar. Ned Taylor was walking up the street toward his buckboard. There was no sign of Henry Sullivan or Kent Mayhew.

Satisfied, he walked up the street and picked up his bed roll. Then he went over and registered at the Commercial House, threw his belongings into his room and started for the other end of town to the small blacksmith shop.

"Joe!" The one word spun him around quickly. Judy Marlin had stepped out of a store.

"Hello, Judy." The sight of her brought the same old tingle back that he'd always felt in her presence. And it also brought back the anger and resentment against the town that had separated them.

"You never sent for me, Joe."

HE STARED into her eyes, trying to fathom the feeling that lay behind them, but he realized that she was holding herself in check, and that there was more than the town between them. This barrier had risen since the day he'd ridden out of Perryville with Matt Wheeler's gun trained on his back.

Maybe, he thought, he was beginning to find out what that strange urge was that had brought him back to this town. The urge to

come back and regain something he'd lost here.

"I never meant to send for you, Judy." He saw the color mount in her face, and realized how the bare words he'd just spoken must have sounded. He hastened on. "I didn't want to send for you—I wanted to come back to find you. I wanted to come back and take back what was mine and make it ours."

"With that?" She inclined her head toward the gun at his hip.

"That was the way it was taken from me," he said through tightened lips. "Why shouldn't I buy it back with the same coin?"

"Anything you buy in this town that way, Joe—" her voice was hardly above a whisper—"will be yours alone. I want no part of it."

"I told you once I wasn't built for fighting—I've found I'm not built to quit, either. This fight was put on me." He tried to keep the hard brittleness out of his voice, but it was there anyway. "So you want me to quit—tuck my tail between my legs."

"You're not fighting. Will is the one that's fighting. He's fighting with hard, honest work to regain the Cress family reputation. You don't want the C Bar back. You only want the satisfaction of having taken it."

"You can't split hairs with a six-gun."

"No. You're like your dad. When things got too tough, he wouldn't fight. He quit."

"Meanin'?" His voice rasped.

"He took the easy way," the girl went on. "He tried the long way—and lost."

He shook his head doggedly. "Dad fought to keep what was his the only way they left him—there's nothing wrong in that."

There was deep sorrow in her eyes. "I want you to fight, Joe, and I want you to win. But you can't win the way you're going about it."

She turned and walked swiftly away. He stared after her, then started to call her back, to run and catch up with her. But he didn't. He just stood there.

Let her go, he thought. It was probably better this way—women didn't understand what was in a man.

Will Cress looked up as he stepped inside the little shop, then laid his hammer down and wiped his hand on his leather apron.

"Heard you were in town, Joe," he said. "I was just getting ready to—"

"Will!" Elsie had stepped into the little shop behind Joe, and now she faced him as he turned. "We saw you ride into town," she told him. "I wouldn't let Will go and meet you."

"Probably just as well," Joe said with a grin. "There was a little trouble and Will never was much good with a gun."

"And I pray that he never will be!" Elsie said fervently. "Why did you come back?"

"To get back what belongs to us—Will and me."

"This belongs to *us*," Elsie said. "This shop, and the house right behind it. It's ours."

Joe Cress ran his eye over the shop and looked at the little shack through the back window of the shop. He looked at the patched and faded pants that Will wore, and noticed how thin from many washings was the dress that Elsie had on.

He snapped, "You'll be moving out of all this in a week or two. Will and I'll be back ranching where we belong." He looked at Will. "Is there some place we can talk, Will?"

"You go back in the house, honey," Will told Elsie. She stood there a moment, wanting to say more but not knowing what effect it would have.

"All right, Will," she said quietly and turned to leave.

"There's things women don't understand, eh, Will?" Joe looked hard at Will.

"Yeah, reckon so," Will said. He was building a little mound of dirt with the toe of his boot and didn't look up.

Joe chuckled and slapped him on the back. "Reckon I don't have to tell you what's going on in this town, Will. You already know—and I'm an old friend of Greg Bower. We'll have the C Bar back before you c'n say scat!"

"Where'll we get the money?" Will asked.

"You kidding?" Joe snapped. "It was taken from us without any money, wasn't it?"

"But the sale was legal, Joe."

"Sure it was legal, Will," Joe said softly. "And that's exactly the way we're gonna get the ranch back—all legal." He chuckled.

"With Greg Bower's help?" Will's voice was dubious. "Bower's been pulling a lot of crooked stuff since he's been in town, Joe."

Joe demanded, "Wheeler and his crowd told you that?" He grinned. "It just depends on who's runnin' things. All the law they used when they run me out was what they packed in their guns."

Will rolled a smoke and puffed on it nervously, avoiding looking at Joe.

"Matt Wheeler's been pretty good to me, Joe," he muttered. "Got the bank to loan me money to set up shop here. And Kent Mayhew offered to cover the loan till I got on my feet."

"Maybe it was bothering them a little that they stole from you," Joe said sarcastically.

"I never figured they stole anything from me, Joe," Will replied.

Joe laughed. "Set down, Will, and let me talk to you a while."

Joe Cress talked. The minutes ticked away and his voice droned on. His words dripped sarcasm at times, and at others, persuasion. Will's eyes began to narrow, and he nodded understandingly.

After a while he clenched his hands tight. "You're right, Joe," he muttered. "We been kicked around—high time we reared up—"

Joe grinned. "Kid, I've seen Greg Bower handle elections before—and the way he handles them, he always wins. Let's go up and talk to him."

HE WAITED for Will to take off his leather apron and get his hat, and they walked through Perryville. Matt Wheeler was still in his office door, and he watched them up the street, and was still looking as they strode into the Golden Bower.

Greg Bower looked up from a game of solitaire.

"We're throwing in with you during the election tomorrow," Joe told him. "Me'n Will here, my kid brother."

"There'll be plenty to do," Greg Bower said. He stood up and led the way to his office in the back. He nodded them to seats and then said dryly, "The boys were out electioneering, but they didn't gather many votes."

"Looks bad, huh?" Will butted in. Greg Bower glanced questioningly at Joe.

Joe told him, "Don't worry, boss. I'll keep an eye on him."

"You'd better," Greg Bower said bluntly. "I didn't figure on as much opposition as we're going to have tomorrow. We'll need every gun we can get."

Joe Cress saw Will's face go white.

Bower went on. "Don't pass anybody into the voting booth until you get the nod from me. The boys have been passing the word—but a lot of people are bullheaded."

He paused and lit a cigar. His eyes shuttled from Will's white face to Joe's cynical one.

"About pay—"

"We don't want no pay!" Will blurted out quickly. Joe Cress fought down his annoyance.

"We got a stake in the election tomorrow," Joe said. "So what we intend to get out of it later will be pay enough for us."

Bower nodded, and shrugged his shoulders. "The polls open at seven. Be in the Golden Bower by six in the morning. And the drinks are on the house tonight, so drop in."

Will led the way out, with Joe trailing behind.

"Uh—we better get along home," Will muttered. "Supper must be about ready."

"I got more important things to do than eat, Will," Joe grinned. He didn't want to go home and watch Elsie's mournful face when Will told her what he was going to do. There'd be an argument. "Just be ready bright and early in the morning—"

A footfall sounded behind them and a hard

voice cut in. "You're not selling out to Greg Bower, are you, Will?" Kent Mayhew's face was hard as granite in the gathering dusk.

Joe put in harshly, "When any of the Cresses need your advice on anything we'll ask for it. Rattle your hocks, Mayhew."

"Damn you, Joe!" Mayhew exploded. "This is long overdue!"

His work calloused hand jerked toward his gun. Surprise whipped through Joe, but it didn't slow his draw. This was one thing he'd waited for a long, long time. Fierce elation shot through him as his hand snaked his gun out, elation and almost contempt for the slowness of Mayhew's draw.

His gun was leaving leather and its muzzle was lifting when Will grabbed his arm.

"Let go, you fool!" Joe shouted. He tried to wrench clear, but his brother clung desperately. He twisted Joe's arm upward, and the six-gun exploded into the air.

"That's enough!" Matt Wheeler yelled. His feet were beating a tattoo as he raced up to the scene. "Drop it, Joe! Leather your iron, Kent." The lawman had his gun out, and its muzzle covered both men impartially. "Kent, hit leather and leave town. Joe—"

He had shaken himself free of Will's grip and now he stepped back, his smoking gun in his hand, and the faint grin on his face.

"You gonna give me my walking papers, sheriff?" he jeered.

"If your gun shows again tonight," Matt Wheeler said, "I'm coming after you—shoot-ing."

"Remember what I told you, Will," Kent Mayhew said, as he strode off, "don't let that brother of yours talk you into anything you'll be sorry for later on."

Matt Wheeler was looking at Will with a queer expression. "I'd like to have a talk with you in my office, Will, if you got time?"

"I ain't got time," Will replied promptly. "I'm due home for supper." He turned and went down the street. The lawman watched his retreating back for a moment, then walked off.

JOE rolled over and looked at the battered clock on the dresser. Twenty minutes after five. He got out of bed and drank big gulps of water out of a pitcher on the washstand. His mouth was dry and hot from last night's drinking.

He washed, dressed and was on the street in five minutes.

Lights were blazing in the Golden Bower. Joe looked in the windows as he passed. Greg and five or six gunmen were having an election morning drink. Bower was giving instructions. Joe didn't stop.

The aroma of frying bacon hit his nostrils as he neared Will's little house. And then

something else. Angry voices. Will and Elsie were having an argument. Joe could hear Will's shouting, and Elsie's tearful pleadings. Joe lifted the latch and stepped in.

"Morning," Joe said. "That bacon smells fine."

"I'll set another plate," Elsie said. She kept her back toward Joe, and he saw her wiping her eyes on the hem of her apron. Will was hunched over the table.

"All set, kid?" Joe asked.

Will stared at his plate for a moment, then glanced at Elsie's back. Joe waited silently.

"I'm ready," Will said. "The quicker we get the C Bar back, the better off we'll be. Wait'll I get my hat and gun."

He stepped into the other room, and when he came back buckling on his gunbelt, Elsie turned to face him. She was dry-eyed now, and her mouth was set firmly.

"If it's what you want, Will—then I'm with you. And I hope our side wins."

Will went over and put his arm around her shoulder. "That's the way to talk honey." His voice steadied optimistically. "We'll be able to send the young 'un to school—"

Elsie nodded. "I'd like for him to get a lot of schooling," she said.

"He'll get all he can fit in his head." Will laughed a little shakily.

"Will—" she placed a hand hesitantly on his shoulder—"we'd better send him some place to school besides Perryville—send him a long ways off, where he won't—"

"Yeah," Will said. "We'll send him some place away. It will be better that way." He turned to Joe. "Let's go."

They stepped out into the bright new morning sunshine and started up the street. Milling feet hadn't raised a dust yet, and Perryville looked bright and clean in the morning sun. A bright clean little town where kids played in the street and went to school. . . .

But Will and Elsie, Joe was thinking, wouldn't be sending their son to school in Perryville. Not after what Will would do today. It suddenly hit him that it wouldn't do for the other kids to tell him what his dad had done on this election day. It came to Joe with a mild shock how they would look, seen through the eyes of kids—both he and Will. Then he hardened his thoughts. Young 'uns saw through their parents' eyes.

But the idea kept eating at him and suddenly he knew what Will had been fighting for these all three years. And this fight Will was walking into now; it wasn't a fight. It was a surrender for Will. He'd given up fighting.

He slowed down. Will looked at him, puzzled. Joe saw Matt Wheeler come out of the sheriff's office and start up the street toward the courthouse, where the polls were.

(Continued on page 130)

VIGILANTE

"God bless you, boys!" Red Yager said as the Montana vigilantes strung him to a tree. "You're on a good undertaking."

THE true story of Western frontier life affords striking testimony to the inherent love of the Anglo-Saxon for order and justice—and to his capacity for government. Only briefly did communal anarchy prevail, even in the mining camps. The records of the settlements during the fifties and thereafter, show that every community contained within itself forces which, when summoned, as they finally were to the establishment of law, proved irresistible.

No more picturesque and striking instance of this truth can be found than in the career of one man, who, by his force and fearlessness, undertook what seemed a hopeless task, and with others like himself throttled the blustering and bloodthirsty rule which had long terrorized the people of Montana.

The man in question was Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders, later a United States senator from Montana.

Sanders, a New Yorker, had fought in the Union Army. He went to Montana, then a part of Idaho, in 1863. He settled in Bannack City and undertook to practise his profession of law in a mining camp thronged with desperados from every part of the world, who feared no law except the swift code of Judge Lynch.

The scene of the campaign in which Colonel Sanders bore a conspicuous part was in what is now the southwestern corner of Montana, a hundred miles or more south of the present cities of Helena and Butte, and northwest of the Yellowstone National Park, among the mountains directly on the great divide.

To understand the situation, it should be remembered that Montana was invaded and settled from west of the Rockies. The approach was from California and Oregon, or from Salt Lake at the south.

Bannack, on Grasshopper Creek, was the first considerable mining camp on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, and it was only a year old when Colonel Sanders arrived. The rich discoveries in this new gold country were the signal for the stampede of 1862, first to Grasshopper Creek, then to the newer diggings at Virginia City and Nevada City close by, then down the Deer Lodge Valley and gradually across to Last Chance Gulch, where the town of Helena now stands.

The centers of turbulence and of population were at Bannack City and Virginia City, and no rougher, livelier settlements existed at that time on the face of the earth. California gamblers and cutthroats, Mexicans, deserters from both the Northern and Southern Armies, fugitives from justice from a dozen different countries, bullies and roughs graduated in the class of '49, thieves and murderers picked by natural selection from the forlorn hope of advancing civilization, poured into the new gold country, along with the honest miners and the peaceful immigrants.

There was no law, no government, no protection for life or property, other than by shotgun or rifle. The communities were doubly isolated from the East by the Civil War. And the Pacific Coast gave its worst.

Attention generally was focused on the region which Colonel Sanders chose as the field for his professional endeavors. His first public appearance was as the prosecutor of George Ives, a renowned member of Henry Plummer's gang of road agents.

Plummer's band was the only well-organized power of any sort in the area—and it was organized solely for crime. It consisted of two dozen or more of the worst scoundrels then unhung, with a full quota of spies, scouts, decoys and outside correspondents in every part of the gold producing region. It had a perfect system of communication between the various members of the band, of designation of suitable objects of plunder, and of rescue and support in case of trouble.

The road agents wore mustaches and chin whiskers, and knotted their neckties in a peculiar way. In action they covered their faces with black handkerchiefs, or a bit of blanket. They had early intelligence of every shipment of treasure or freight out of the territory, and they did not hesitate to waylay and rob the arriving emigrant for the sake of the few dollars in his pockets. They held up coaches and express wagons in the finest frontier fashion.

On their individual account the members of the Plummer band swaggered, bullied, robbed and murdered without check. They fired at women to frighten them—butchered and scalped inoffensive Indians in pure wantonness—shot and killed men for vengeance, for personal dislike and sometimes merely "for

SHOWDOWN

The terrible brevity of the first campaign of the vigilantes yet saw the end of Henry Plummer's rule. . . .



By
Harry Van Demark

luck." Respectable citizens lived always in terror.

Everybody knew the authors of the crimes that followed each other in daily succession, but nobody uttered his suspicions or proclaimed his knowledge. There was no law to appeal to. The only shadow of constituted authority was a so-called sheriff.

A STRIKING illustration of conditions is the fact that the office of sheriff, both at Bannack and Virginia, was held by bandit leader Henry Plummer himself, and that his deputies were Buck Stinson, Ned Ray and Jack Gallagher, selected from his own band of highwaymen.

The remarkable leader of this gang was a man of wily address and mild, polite manners, who had emigrated to Bannack from California early in the stampede. He had served as city marshal of a California town, had received a nomination for the Assembly and had taken part in an attack on Wells Fargo's bullion express. He had murdered not less than three men in that state.

This consummate villain maintained almost up to the end of his career the semblance of amicable relations with law and order, and it was one of the polite conventions of life at Bannack to consult him as sheriff in cases of crime. He met, on equal and friendly terms during the day, the men he had already marked as the victims of that night's enterprise.

When Sam T. Hauser, long afterward president of the First National Bank of Helena and governor of the territory, started for the States with a train of treasure, Plummer pressed upon him a woolen neck comforter and urged him to protect his throat well from the chilly night air. Down the road Plummer's highwaymen were already waiting for a man with a woolen scarf.

When J. M. Bozeman and others started for Salt Lake City with about \$80,000 in gold, Plummer had already stationed Dutch John and Steve Marshland in ambush in Black-tail Deer Canyon. When Oliver's Salt Lake coach rolled into Bannack, having been held up and robbed on the road from Virginia City, by George Ives, Bob Zachary and Whiskey Bill, it was Plummer himself who first interviewed the passengers to learn what clues there might be to identify the highwaymen.

In a hundred ways Plummer's social and official relations enabled him both to plan and cloak the crimes his gang committed. Under his masterly leadership, besides the men already mentioned, were Erastus Yager, known as "Red," G. W. Brown, George Lane—or "Clubfoot"—George—Frank Parish, Haze Lyons, Boone Helm, Bill Bunton, Cyrus Skinner, Bill Hunter, Aleck Carter, Joe Pizanthia, or "Greaser Joe," and many other desperados whose names are famous in the early annals of Montana.

The gang had its headquarters at Rattlesnake Ranch, but its places of rendezvous were everywhere. The reign of terror had reached the stage where no man's life was safe.

In the few months preceding the first uprising against the power of Henry Plummer, not less than 102 known murders had been charged to the account of this gang. The extent of the list of undiscovered or unproved crimes, of disappearances where the fate of the victim was never known can be only a matter of conjecture.

The murder of a German named Nicholas Tbalt in the Stinkingwater Valley, for the price of two mules which he had been sent to buy, was the immediate cause of the organization of the Montana Vigilantes. George Ives was caught red-handed. Twenty-five citizens dragged him out of a wickiup near Dempsey's Ranch and escorted him to Nevada City.

It was characteristic of the times that on their way back to town the party should organize a series of scrub races, in which captors and prisoner compared the speed of their cayuses in the most friendly way, and during which Ives almost escaped.

The news of impending proceedings spread rapidly, and people flocked into town from every part of the surrounding country. The situation was not regarded as serious for Ives, least of all by the murderer himself. Prosecutions under such circumstances had ended in farce over and over again. This time the miners sent for Colonel Sanders to take charge of the prosecution.

With ability and courage Colonel Sanders presented the case against the murderer, and when the verdict of guilty was returned he moved that Ives be hanged on the spot. The prosecutor's hold on life seemed for a time even more precarious than that of the prisoner, for the crowd around the bonfire was full of friends of the Plummer gang and Sheriff Plummer's arrival from Bannack with a rescuing force was momentarily expected.

Part of the mob made an attempt at rescue, but it was repulsed. A forty-foot pole was run out through the window of an unfinished house close by and a rope fastened to its end. In fifty-eight minutes after his conviction, Ives's body was swung from the end of the pole. The campaign of extermination against Henry Plummer's gang had begun.

COLONEL SANDERS and his associates lost no time. Five men in Virginia City, one in Nevada City and Colonel Sanders and three others in Bannack started the organization of the Montana Vigilantes, a secret tribunal which, for more than twenty years continued to exert a powerful influence upon conditions of life in the territory.

There were no more public trials. The hand of vengeance descended directly and without warning. Border justice was dealt out with a speed and a vigor which have no parallels in Western history. The methods by which it was administered were not justified except by the plea of absolute necessity. It was a question of kill or be killed, and public sentiment supported proceedings which under any other conditions would have been intolerable.

When "Red" Yager was hanged, he shook hands with all of his executioners and said,

"Good-by, boys! God bless you! You're on a good undertaking."

He was left swinging by the roadside with the legend pinned to his coat:

RED, ROAD AGENT AND
MESSENGER.

Plummer weakened when in the hands of Colonel Sanders' Vigilantes, and the once formidable personage begged for his life, declaring with tears and sighs that he was too wicked to die.

"Give a man time to pray!" were his last words.

Boone Helm died game, telling Jack Gallagher, who was cursing and crying at the gallows, "not to make a damned fool of himself."

As the Vigilantes pushed the box away from under Gallagher's feet, Boone Helm shouted to his late associate, "Kick away, old fellow—I'll be in hell with you in a minute!" Then he added, just as his own rope twanged, "Every man for his principles—hurrah for Jeff Davis! Let her rip!"

One of the most frightful tales was that of the execution of Joe Pizanthia. The Bannack Vigilantes had determined to arrest this Mexican desperado. A party started for his cabin which stood on a hillside. "Greaser Joe" was summoned by the leader of the Vigilantes, but refused to appear. Two of the Vigilantes, Smith Ball and George Copley entered the hut and each received a pistol shot, Copley being killed.

The excitement in Bannack rose to madness. There was a dismounted howitzer somewhere in town. Under the direction of a vigilante who had had military experience, this was dragged up, loaded and trained on the cabin. Three shots were fired from the howitzer, then a few friends of law and order rushed into the Mexican's hut.

They found Pizanthia and hauled him out, Smith Ball emptying his revolver into the captive as he was pulled into the open air. The Mexican was then hung to a pole by a "jamb hitch," and, as his body swayed there, a hundred shots were poured into it.

Meanwhile someone had set fire to the cabin, and a proposition to burn up what was left of Pizanthia was received with exultation by the infuriated crowd.

On the whole, it must be said that the Montana Vigilantes acted with discretion, caution, and with a steady regard to the terrible responsibility they assumed when they put on masks and went forth, rope in hand, to hunt men against whom no magistrate had ever issued a warrant. Politics never influenced their decisions—personal interest or private malice rarely. They made civil law respected and when it eventually came into power, they bowed to it and went out of business.

THE terrible brevity of the first campaign of the Montana vigilantes cannot be exhibited in more striking form than by this table of names, dates and places of execution of Henry Plummer's men:*

Road Agent:

George Ives
Erastus Yager, alias "Red"
G. W. Brown
Henry Plummer
Ned Ray
Buck Stinson
John Wagoner, alias "Dutch"
Joe Pizanthia
George Lane, alias "Club Foot"
Frank Parish
Haze Lyons
Jack Gallagher
Boone Helm
Steve Marsland
William Bunton
George Shears
Cyrus Skinner
Alexander Carter
John Cooper
Robert Zachary
William Graves, alias "Whisky Bill"
William Hunter

Captured:

Nevada City
Stinkingwater Valley
Stinkingwater Valley
Bannack City
Bannack City
Bannack City
Bannack City
Bannack City
Virginia City
Virginia City
Virginia City
Virginia City
Virginia City
Big Hole Ranch
Deer Lodge Valley
Frenchtown
Hell Gate
Hell Gate
Hell Gate
Hell Gate
Fort Owens
Gallitin Valley

Hanged:

Dec. 21, 1863
Jan. 4, 1864
Jan. 4, 1864
Jan. 10, 1864
Jan. 10, 1864
Jan. 10, 1864
Jan. 10, 1864
Jan. 11, 1864
Jan. 11, 1864
Jan. 14, 1864
Jan. 14, 1864
Jan. 14, 1864
Jan. 14, 1864
Jan. 14, 1864
Jan. 14, 1864
Jan. 14, 1864
Jan. 16, 1864
Jan. 19, 1864
Jan. 24, 1864
Jan. 25, 1864
Jan. 25, 1864
Jan. 25, 1864
Jan. 25, 1864
Jan. 25, 1864
Jan. 26, 1864
Feb. 3, 1864

*Thus Henry Plummer and twenty-one members of his gang were hanged within the short space of fourteen months after the Vigilantes began their operations.

Cordiss looked up and
gave a cry. He was too
late. . . .



*Some folks play with fire—others
are extra careful, but mostly
about whom they burn!*

By THEODORE J. ROEMER

BLOOD, SWEAT -AND SIX-GUNS!

CHAPTER ONE

Kid From Nowhere

BARNEY MATTS came across the kid the night he learned he'd been under-bid on the Army horse contracts. The bidding was the toughest jolt he'd taken since he'd bought the little Running R with the savings of his bronc-busting years.

He was thinking, *I've got fine horses, a five thousand dollar stallion—and a ten thou-*

sand dollar mortgage. Then he thought of what the basin said. Some called him a plunger, others just said he was rattle-headed from the days of forking broncs, but all agreed he was crazy. A five thousand dollar stallion!

With a hard grimace Barney turned his gelding up the main drag of the cowtown, somehow lovely and soft in the cold moonlight of early spring. But it was spoiled for him by the thought of Joe Cordiss' bidding. He couldn't understand how Cordiss had done it. It didn't seem possible Cordiss had raised high-standard Army mounts on that rocky, starved spread of his in the short time he'd been in the basin. Cordiss had started on a shoe-string, guns and guts, but miraculously, he'd produced the horses, and all Barney Matts



had for his years of work was a rejected bid and grain bills and interest payments coming due and notes coming up.

He thought, *Now if Wade Keefe with his big Bar M had done it, I could understand, but Cordiss. . . .* He closed his knobby fists as he remembered his fight with Cordiss at the Sheridan Horse Sales Barns when he had outbid him for the big Morgan stallion. Cordiss had tried to club the stallion when he thought no one was around. Cordiss had tried to ruin Barney and his Running R right there.

I wouldn't have minded if it'd been Keefe out bid me. . . .

Then it was that he saw the wagon. He stopped, almost from shock. It was in the center of the rutted street, headed uptown, a prairie derelict if ever there was one. Bolsters broken, felloes warped, losing their irons, canvas strips sighing in the night wind on splintered oak bows.

Barney stared, then rode to the front. He saw the team, facing up the street as if they'd tried but hadn't quite made the final distance, and their owner, giving up, had gone on alone toward the yellow blob that was the town's lone saloon and the only business place open.

Big Barney, a lover of horseflesh, stared at the skeletons, then at the pieces of wire and rope and broken straps that hung on their bones and served as harnesses.

"How in tarnation did it get this far?" he said with slow, emphatic amazement and then he stiffened. A hat moved on the sagging spring seat above and underneath it a boy's head appeared. The boy sat up and two solemn dark eyes stared down at Barney. And suddenly Barney wished he'd kept his big mouth shut. The lad's underlip was quivering.

"Hullo, button," Barney said with gruff kindness. "Kinda chilly sleepin' up there, ain't it? Where's your old man?"

The kid didn't answer.

Barney grinned. "Shuck over behind me, fella, an' we'll go up to the Brass Rail. Louie sometimes has some stick candy on hand fer kids. Anyway it'll be warm up there."

Still the lad didn't say anything. Barney rubbed a big-knuckled hand uncomfortably up and down his thigh. He'd never seen such big eyes in a kid. And the kid was going to cry.

Barney said grimly, "Every man to his tastes. But if I see your paw, yonder, I'll hustle him down—pronto!"

He shook the gelding's reins and in his discomforture swore at folks who left their kids lying around in freeze weather for other folks to stub their toes on.

THE odor of whiskey and sawdust hit his nostrils as he pushed open the saloon door. He circled a group of cowboys jiggling around a man at the piano and, with

eyes drifting over the place, stopped at the rail. "Whiskey, Louie." He didn't see anyone who was a stranger, and might be the kid's old man.

Louie put out bottle and glass. He nodded toward a rear table. "Cordiss just rode in from the Fort."

Barney forgot the kid. His big hand paused in pouring the drink, shook a little. He didn't look around.

"Celebrating, I suppose?"

"Not yet, though I hear he's got the contract. How's that killer comin'? Got him tamed yet?"

Barney said, "That stallion ain't any killer. Cordiss spread the word because Big Red damn' near bit off his arm at Sheridan after Cordiss clubbed him."

"Sore because you got him, huh?"

Barney shrugged and tossed off his drink. The other said, "I figure there's something behind Cordiss. Hell, he ain't a rancher, he nor them two renegades of his—they're gun-slicks, plain as day."

"They delivered horses offa their spread," Barney said, and then lapsed into silence, for he saw Wade Keefe coming through the crowd toward him.

Keefe was his neighbor to the south. He'd always liked the big fellow, outside of his drinking. Some said Keefe made big money; some said his last years had been bad. Maybe that was why Keefe hit the bottle so hard, Barney thought.

Keefe now said loudly, "That offer of five thousand for the stallion is still good, Matts. How about it?"

Barney shook his head.

"What the hell! You've got your mares bred. You'll get nice-looking stud stuff." Keefe reached for the bottle. His hard, leathery face was flushed with anger.

Barney backed away a little. He didn't want trouble with Keefe. "Jackson will buy horses sired by the Morgan from me, if no others. I'm keepin' him."

Keefe patted his thick chest for the makings after downing the drink. "Humph. What'd you do with them old mares I sold you? You can't raise colts outa them; they won't catch."

Barney remained silent. Whatever was eating the man, he didn't want to anger Keefe further. He had learned crossing a jack with an old mare would produce mules whereas otherwise the old mares were good for nothing. The army needed mules for their freighters. But Barney remained silent.

Keefe took another drink and said he'd bring a dozen mares over next week and then started to turn away. A high-pitched curse down the room from the card tables brought both men around.

A ragged man in overalls was clutching a

pile of chips in the center of the rear table. And opposite him sat Joe Cordiss.

The kid's old man, Barney thought instantly.

The drifter was cursing in a high, drunken squeal. "Yuh cheated. Yuh palmed that last ace. I woulda beat you!"

The cowboys stopped their jiggling. The piano tinkled, stopped. Hands at the bar put down drinks; men turned.

"The sodbuster's drunk," Barney muttered. He started forward.

"Don't be a fool, Matts," Keefe grated, grabbing his arm. "Cordiss has his guns."

"Yuh busted me!" the ragged man was shrilling. "But by cheatin'. These are my chips!"

Cordiss took his hand off the pile. He had large black eyes, slightly popped. The lids batted continually over them, especially when he stared at a man. They were batting now, coldly. On each side of the hooked nose his creamy, coffee-brown cheeks showed a waxy appearance.

Barney took a swift look around the room; he couldn't see Cordiss' two hired hands. He heard Cordiss murmur, "No man says Joe Cordiss cheats—and lives. Eat crow, mister, an' put your tail between your legs."

Barney heard the purr; he knew what was coming. Every man in the room did—all but the drunken sod-buster. The man swelled with bravado; he was taken in by the softness of Cordiss' voice. And Barney went swiftly down the row the men at the bar had made as they'd turned from their drinks. He was thinking of the kid out in the wagon.

"You can't bluff me!" the drifter shrilled.

"I ain't bluffin'." Cordiss pushed back from the table. His right hand dropped out of sight. Barney sprang.

His right hit the unshaven drifter, his left grabbed the table. The green-covered table rammed savagely into Cordiss' draw, spilling the man, and the drifter slammed against the wall from the force of Barney's right fist.

Like a cat Cordiss kicked off the fallen table and went to fill his left hand. His right gun had exploded flying through the air. Barney's long right foot whipped up, caught the pearl-handled .45 across the instep, mashing the gunman's fingers. The gun crashed into the piano and fell, tinkling the keys. Silence again clamped after the sudden flurry.

Barney said finally. "I hate to see a man gutshot, Cordiss. Especially when he's got a kid waitin' fer him outside in his wagon."

Cordiss' lids batted. He stared at Barney. Then his black eyes flitted around the room. His two hired hands were not to be seen. Cordiss said nothing, then. He got to his slim six feet of height, smoothed the fine calfskin vest down over his chest and walked out the rear door. Men breathed audibly.

"You shouldn't'a done it, Matts," Keefe growled. "Guess there's nobody Cordiss would like to git more'n you—or me."

The old fellow's got a kid out in his wagon," Barney repeated. He turned for the bar.

Then somebody said across the room, "This old codger's dead!"

Barney wheeled; his heart struck his ribs. He'd hit the man hard, knocked him against the wall—

In two strides he was across the saloon, kneeling beside the crumpled, ragged form. The dirty, whiskered face was the color of ashes, and Barney grabbed for the man's stringy wrist.

His heart began living once more. He felt pulse. "Just knocked out," he said, and stood up.

Nobody made a move to do anything. Barney looked around. Keefe growled, "Somebody ought to tote him outside to his wagon, anyway."

Barney hesitated, then bent swiftly. He flung the man on his back and walked out.

The cold air knifed through him. He was surprised to find himself sweating after his brush with Cordiss. He shifted the limp, sodden man and walked grimly down the empty street.

He came to the wagon, dumped his burden over the tail-gate. The boy on the spring seat came erect again.

"He'll be all right by morning," Barney said. "Take him to your camp."

He wheeled and started back for his horse, tethered before the Brass Rail. But the boy's silence halted him. He turned.

The lad sat humped there, miserable, and then Barney knew they had no camp.

"You got any money to go to the Stockman's Hotel?" Barney asked.

"He had it all," the boy said.

Barney swore softly. A damned, troublesome drifter—just the mouthy ornery kind who's no good anywhere. And he was broke too. On impulse he stepped up over the wheel and grabbed up the slack ribbons.

"I'm going to give you a bed for the night, folks." He said it wearily trying to keep the anger from his voice. After all it wasn't the youngster's fault.

He tooled the skeleton team up the street, tied his horse to the tail-gate, and headed out of town for the Running R.

CHAPTER TWO

Devil a Month—and Found

DAWN crept from the sky down into the the Running R pocket. In its grassy parks little bands of mares and foals moved through the chill day, cropping at the

sweet, mountain grass. They moved like brown and black shadows, blowing softly through velvety nostrils with deep contentment.

Barney Matts stirred his big frame. The cornhusk tick beneath his body crackled—then he sat up, awake at once. He had heard something.

The scream of the stallion in the barn came again, but it was not that which had awakened him, he knew, for he heard Big Red every morning.

He heard it again—somebody moving in another part of the house—and came to his bare feet noiselessly and stood on the cold, planked floor, listening intently in the dim light from the crimsoning window. Then he saw the miserable hulk of a wagon taking form out in the ranch yard, and remembered. He'd dumped the drunken sodbuster in the lean-to.

He took down his .45, slipped into his levis. He had grain money put away in the kitchen cupboard.

He opened his door. The smell of frying bacon hit him.

His gun hand slackened and he strode to the kitchen door and stopped.

A figure was before the ruddy wood stove—a figure wearing a red and white-checked dress, with two long, thick, black braids hanging down her back almost to her waist.

He said, "Uh—where the devil did you come from?"

She turned. Her eyes were large; they didn't smile, and then Barney knew. He'd met that silent regard last night.

"H-hello," she said.

Suddenly Barney Matts was aware he was shirtless and shoeless, and that he had a gun in his hand. He wheeled and dived back into his bedroom.

When he came out a minute later, clothed, she had the table set with freshly washed dishes and a new checkered cloth Barney used on special occasions. The bacon and eggs and wheatcakes steamed as she put them before his place.

He washed quickly at the stand in the corner, thinking fast. He hadn't said a lot on the way back from town, last night, and of that he was glad.

He turned and sat down. "I—didn't know you were a girl last night."

"I guessed that."

He bit into the hard brown toast she brought from the oven, drank the fragrant, black coffee.

She was eighteen, he judged. In daylight he'd never have mistaken her for a boy.

She went to the window seat and watched the sunrise. He waited.

Finally she said, without turning her head. "I'm Sally Weller. He—" indicating the closed door of the lean-to—"is my uncle.

My parents and he started for Oregon from Indiana but mother and dad took sick with a fever and died at Fort Bridger." She faltered at the mention of her parents, and suddenly for the first time Barney noticed that she had been talking with no expression.

She recovered swiftly and the dull mask fell over her features again. "I had no other place to go, so just came along with him."

Barney stared at her averted face. He read a hundred meanings in those short words and those dull eyes. He was just beginning to corral his impressions when a noise came from the lean-to and her uncle came out.

He looked around the clean kitchen and pulled at his straggly, hay-cluttered beard. "Well, Sally," he cackled. "I reckon we got a home."

She said nothing, but looked at Barney.

"He brung us, didn't he?" He cackled again, then turned to Barney, thrusting out a stringy, dirty paw. "My name's Weller—Dan Weller, from Sarsota, Indiana. Had a little tough luck back yonder—"

"Sit down and eat," Barney said curtly. "Better wash first."

The curtness didn't affect Weller. He grinned, showing broken teeth. "Thanks fer hittin' that dude. If I'da had more time—"

"Your luck could have been tougher," Barney said.

The girl turned to Barney as Weller sloshed in the tin basin. "He was playing cards?"

"Yes."

Her pretty lips tightened. She looked at Weller. "Where is mother's money?"

Weller started to bluster, then saw Barney's cold eyes. "I—I loaned it to a man."

"Lost it." Bitterness edged the girl's voice. Her chest lifted with quick anger, then subsided. Hopelessly she turned again to the sunrise and the wooden look came again into her eyes.

Barney swore under his breath. Finished with his breakfast, he stood up. "Weller," he said, "come down to the barn when you've finished." He went out.

Barney whistled as he approached the barn and the big red horse came to the corral gate thrusting its soft nose between the peeled logs. Barney chuckled.

"Once you'd damned near knock out the opposite walls to get away from a human, wouldn't you, Rusty boy? Learnin' manners, ain't you, mister?"

He pulled the silky ears then forked hay into the feed rack and reached for the water bucket.

A snort of the horse, and Barney turned to see Dan Weller in the doorway. At the appearance of the strange human, the Morgan stood quivering, magnificent. The animal was fully seventeen hands high—a glistening red statue, eyes fierce, nostrils flaring.

Weller walked into the barn. The horse let out a scream and lunged at the strong poles with its hooves pawing.

Barney said, "Get out, Weller. And don't come in until he gets to know you. He was clubbed once. And never sneak up on me like that again, either."

"I wasn't sneaking," Weller said. "Jest don't make much noise when I go around. Found out how—long ago." He smirked, and Barney felt his distaste for the man increase.

He said, curtly, "Stay away from this animal. He cost me five thousand and I don't want him to hurt himself tryin' to climb them poles."

"Five thousand?" Weller whistled.

Barney said, "I've thought it over about you, Weller. You can work for me, handling the mares. Pay will have to be grub until I sell again or until Jackson over at the fort accepts five horses I sent down there on trial a couple of weeks ago. Your niece can have the front room; you the lean-to."

He walked away.

IN THE afternoon Barney saddled his gelding, ordered Weller to take the old pinto, and together they rode up to the mule-canyon, a boxed-off draw with barn and fenced hay-stacks at one end.

Barney dismounted. He took out hammer and nails from his saddle bag. "Get off, Weller. We got a lot of fixin' to do on these sheds."

Grumbling, Weller swung stiffly off the pinto. He didn't like riding; he hated work worse. Barney put him to work in the hot sun on the roof nailing down loose shingles.

That evening Weller was too exhausted even to finish the hot supper of beans, steak and potatoes the girl had prepared for them when they rode back in the dusk. He crawled off to his lean-to and in a minute they could hear him snoring.

Barney kicked the door shut and returned to his meal. The girl had already eaten. Afterward, Barney worked on the cleared table with his accounts while the girl washed the dishes, then sat down opposite the kerosene lamp sewing in the yellow light.

A peaceful contentment crept into Barney's heart as the kettle sang on the stove and the pine wood cracked as it burned brightly. His pencil slowed, stopped. He sat and looked at the girl. She was pretty. He was big and homely and hated to think that of himself—he was glad when she changed his subject.

She looked up, suddenly. "Don't trust him."

"Whom?"

"Weller."

He frowned. "You say that about your uncle?"

"He's not my real uncle. My mother was

married twice. Dan Weller is a brother to my step-father."

"Why shouldn't I trust him?"

"I'm telling you that much. It's enough."

She went on sewing and Barney could get nothing more from her.

He was watering Big Red the next morning when again the animal leaped away, quivering, nostrils dilated, toward the door. Barney spun, angry at Weller, but it wasn't the man. It was the girl. She had on a fresh, pink outfit; her black braids were wound about her head. She looked like a little girl.

"Where do you keep the chicken feed?"

"Don't ever come into the barn like that," Barney said angrily. "Whistle or hum or something. If this horse tries to climb these walls he might bust a leg."

She ignored his tone. "Your horse?"

"Whose do you think?" He was still angry with her.

She surveyed the glistening, high-strung animal a long moment then said, "He'll kill somebody some day."

"That's what everybody says," Barney said testily, "but he's harmless if handled right. I told Weller to stay away from him. I don't want anything to happen—to Weller or to the horse. Joe Cordiss would like nothing better than for me to lose the animal."

"Who is Joe Cordiss?"

Barney told her. He told her a little more—about his hopes of success through the big stallion.

When he was through, she said slowly, "Then you'd better get rid of us—Dan Weller and myself. I've never see anything successful come from what he had a part in—never."

She turned swiftly and walked away and Barney could swear he saw tears welling up behind that tired, hopeless look in her eyes.

BIG RED grew somewhat accustomed to Weller. Barney let the other feed and water him when he was busy elsewhere on the ranch. They got the mule barn repaired. They put up hay in the north meadow. Wade Keefe brought the herd of mares over one morning and even with the help of the Bar M punchers it was a hard job handling the strange horses on the Running R. Barney directed it.

Keefe, a bachelor, saw Sally Weller for the first time when the men had noon chow, and the next day Keefe came over alone to help with the work, which was unusual. Barney knew the answer—Sally Weller. The hard-drinking rancher had fallen for her.

Barney said nothing. He'd kept quite aloof from the girl since that first day and she had cooked and baked and kept the ranch house, which Barney had fixed over from its tumbled-down condition, in spotless shape. There was

always fresh bread. The fed chickens began to lay. Cool butter was in the cistern, freshly churned. But she kept to herself.

Barney saw Keefe look around with wonder, then eye the girl. But not once did he see her look at the bluff, loud-laughing Bar M owner. And Keefe, seeing it, had a hard time hiding his disappointment behind his brittle, sharp eyes.

When at last he left, after three days at the Running R, he said, "She's a peculiar one, Matts. Pretty an' sweet, but locked up inside. It'll take something big to bust it out. You know what I mean."

Barney didn't, but he grinned. "Maybe you should have told her how many hundred head o' horses you got, Keefe." He laughed when he said it, and was surprised when Keefe didn't join in. The hard-jawed man scowled and looked away quickly, over the well-filled pastures of the Running R. He grunted.

"Maybe I will, some day." He spurred away.

Barney scowled. The satisfaction he'd felt that Sally Weller hadn't looked at Wade Keefe was replaced with a feeling of uncertainty.

But the next day the ominous feeling was gone and when Dan Weller approached him asking for money to go to town, Barney said, "I reckon you've earned it, Weller."

"Danged right. An' I know you've got it, 'cause I saw Keefe pay you some fees in advance."

Barney looked at the man. The fellow had gotten on his easy-going nerves more as time had passed. He said slowly, "I don't like the way you ask for it, Weller, but we'll let it pass this time. Get yourself some clean duds." He handed the man some bills, then watched the other saddle the pinto and ride jauntily out the wagon gate.

The girl's voice spoke at his side. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Why not? He's in rags. And he's been working."

"He won't buy clothes. He'll get drunk. He'll get into trouble—and pull in anybody he's connected with. I know!"

She had raised her voice. Color stained her cheeks and her lashes were damp. It was the first time he'd seen her show deep emotion. She caught his puzzled surprise.

"Can't you see?" she asked abruptly. "I've never had a home before—even with mother! These Wellers—" She turned and ran to the house and Barney had the miserable feeling she was crying at last—the way she'd meant to that night at the wagon.

He started to follow her, then changed his mind. He went down to the barn and began to do the chores. After a while a broken whistle sounded and he turned to see the girl.

He looked at her. All trace of the outburst

of awhile ago was gone. Her eyes were expressionless again.

"What do you want?" he asked, wondering at this quick return.

She brought two white whiskey bottles from behind her. They were empty. "Did you know he was drinking again?"

Barney covered his surprise. "No."

"I found them in the lean-to. I was clearing it out, now since he's gone. There are two more, both empty."

"Where did he get them?"

She shrugged. "I thought maybe you knew."

Barney was puzzled. He certainly didn't know; to his knowledge Weller hadn't been off the ranch except to go to the mule canyon. But he now did recall that Weller had gained in boldness the past days. On impulse Barney saddled the gelding and headed for the mule canyon. Something had gone on here under his eyes and he hadn't been aware of it.

In the barn at the mule canyon Barney found more whiskey bottles, some cigarette stubs. Weller had had company. He stood in the doorway, frowning, and his first thought was Joe Cordiss. And as he looked he saw a match lying in the powdered dust before the doorway. The match was broken off neatly at the burned head, as if the smoker had done it mechanically after he'd gotten his light.

On impulse Barney turned back to the barn stall in which the bottles were lying. He saw two more matches just like that one, each broken in two.

He searched the place further. He found nothing more, and mounting his gelding he turned back.

APPROACHING the ranch he saw three Army officers in the yard and touched spurs to the gelding.

Colonel Jackson turned from the porch where he was talking to Sally, his dusty campaign hat in hand. "Matts," he said, twisting on his yellow moustaches and his flinty eyes twinkling in appreciation. "You've a pretty wife. I never know you were married."

"I'm not," Barney said gruffly. Color swept the girl's cheeks. Barney said quickly, "She's Miss Weller, my hired hand's niece. What's on your mind, Colonel?" He was glad to change the subject, and also wanted to get to the head of Colonel Jackson's visit, for uneasiness had crept into him. Colonel Jackson hadn't come to this out-of-the-way corner without special reason.

The pleased light left Jackson's eyes. He said, "Four of the bunch you left with us for trial went lame, Matts. I hate to mention it but our contracts call for sound animals, and although you didn't get this last bid—"

"They were sound of limb and wind when I delivered," Barney stated. "All young

geldings that were up to the specifications."

Jackson brushed dust meticulously from the gold braid at his sleeve. "If you'd care to take a look at them—remember, there are more contracts coming up."

"And if these aren't replaced my bids are thrown out?"

The officer nodded. "Sorry, Matts."

Barney bit his lip hard. Four young well-blooded animals would be hard to replace right now—he shrugged.

"All right, Colonel. I'll have them replaced. But I want to take a look at those horses."

"Certainly."

At that moment Big Red screamed from the barn and Colonel Jackson squinted with pleasure at the big stallion. "Matts, he's a beauty. If you get animals sired by him, in three years you'll have a fortune. I'll buy everything."

"That's what I'd hoped," Barney said grimly, "but there's a hell of a lot can go wrong on a horse ranch in less'n three years." He thought of the heavy payments on his ranch, of Joe Cordiss and the gunman's coming to the basin, producing horses miraculously, cheaply, of things more immediate like Weller's visitor.

He examined the horses in the Army stables and could find nothing obviously wrong with them. They were his horses he admitted. "Any of the bunch Cordiss' ranch sold you go lame?" he asked finally.

The stable attendant shook his head. The soldier leaned indolently against the barn wall, picking his teeth with a straw. Barney smelled whiskey strongly on him and felt a distaste. A man who hit drink heavily should never be left in charge of horses.

He picked up the forefoot of one of the lame animals and examined it minutely again. Finally he took out his pocket knife. The attendant watched him with lazy indifference. "Won't find anything in there. We all looked."

"No festerin'—as yet," Barney said grimly. The horse quivered under the point of the knife but in a second he'd withdrawn a pointed sliver of wood. It was deliberately pointed. It had been driven deep into the frog.

The attendant's jaw dropped. "Where'd yuh git that?"

Barney dropped the horse's hoof, then froze. Almost at his feet was a burned-out match, the head neatly broken at right angles!

"You care for these horses alone?"

"This stable. Yeah."

Barney reached for the makings. "Smoke?"

"Don't smoke. Besides, it's against the rules to smoke in the barn."

Barney said nothing. Quickly he went from horse to horse and with some probing and sweating to handle the injured animals he found a similar piece of wood in each hoof.

The attendant was sweating when Barney

had finished. "Say, Matts, you don't have to tell the colonel this, do you? They'll be all right now. I'll watch 'em." The man was shaking.

"Who's been in here with you?"

"Nobody—'xcept some of the soldiers from the barracks. We play a little game in the tack room there." His loose mouth twitched.

"Hell, man," Barney rasped. "The reputation of my ranch depends on this! I want contracts next year an' the next. I got a mortgage to lift an' a stallion to pay for an' some mares!"

"I swear nobody'll enter this stable again unless I'm with him an' he's gotta be a sojer. On my mother's Bible, Matts!"

"Who else was here?"

The man's eyes shifted. He said finally, "Some strange rider, called himself Mac. We had a few drinks with him."

Barney frowned. He said, "All right, soldier, we'll let it slide this time. When's this stranger coming again?"

The attendant's eyes shifted. "He generally comes Saturday nights."

Barney nodded and walked out to his roan. "Maybe I'll feel like a little game by Saturday myself." He swung on and took the trail north out of the Fort.

CHAPTER THREE

Fire Watch

HE SKIRTED the town and was home as the sun touched the western peaks. As usual he checked to see if Big Red was all right then went into the ranch house. "Weller home yet?"

The girl was divesting herself of a ragged pair of overalls. "No, I forked hay to the mares in the north corral and took care of that hurt colt in the shed."

He said, "You don't have to do the chorin' around here." He went out, but felt kindly toward her. The kid was homesick, badly. She wanted to stay. She was afraid her uncle wouldn't do enough to earn their keep. Barney smiled.

Weller came home in the night. Barney heard the pinto's hoofs down the canyon long before Weller managed to get into the yard. Barney was waiting for him. The older man was gloriously drunk.

Barney got him into the house. He was dressed like a range dandy—creamy Stetson, black shirt, new levis and burnished cowskin boots with long spurs. A second Joe Cordiss.

"Where'd you get these?" Barney demanded.

"Got in a li'l game. I won 'er. I won a helluva lot more. I bought fer the crowd, fer the whole damn town." His milk-blue eyes

brightened at the remembrance. For once he'd been top dog. He'd been in his glory.

Barney scowled. It was hard to believe the man had been that lucky on ten bucks. He pulled off the boots and started dragging the little man to his lean-to. "C'mon."

"Hold on! That's my new shirt. But—I didn't pay for it so guess it's all right if yuh tear it."

"You didn't pay for it?"

"Nope. Charged it to you at Raine's store. The hull outfit. Joe tole me to. Tole me you was a tight so-an'-so for not givin' me regular wages and tole me to charge it—"

Barney's fingers tightened. "Joe who?"

"Joe Cordiss, o'course! Who'd yuh think? We was drinkin' an' playin' cards—"

A sound came from across the room. He looked up and saw the girl there, in some kind of wrap-around gown.

Barney dropped his hands. He took Weller by the neck and tossed him into the lean-to.

Turning to the girl he said, "Tomorrow he goes."

"If he goes, I have to." Her voice came slowly.

He looked at her. He knew what she meant. She couldn't stay here alone with him.

He shrugged savagely and went out to stable the pinto.

He didn't order Weller out the next morning. He sent him to mule canyon to finish putting slacks on the log barn where it was leaking, and then, without a glance toward the grateful girl, he saddled the roan and followed the man, keeping to the pines and out of sight.

But no rider showed at the mule canyon.

Barney returned to the ranch, disturbed.

He watched Weller for three days, while he toyed with the thought of forcing out of him who his visitor had been. He grew restless and uneasy—and did nothing. He kept a tight watch on his spread and on Big Red.

On Saturday, it was growing twilight in the valley when Barney went to the north barn to saddle the gelding. A shadow came across the doorway. He turned. It was the girl.

"Where are you going?"

"To Colter. On business."

She came close to him. "Don't go tonight."

"What's the matter?"

"Last night I got up for a drink of water and heard someone talking. It was him talking in his sleep as he often does. I listened and he was saying something about five thousand dollars. He was going to get half of it."

"What did he mean?"

"I wouldn't know, but he said something about Saturday night."

She had come closer. Without thinking she had taken hold of his vest, shaken him. And he realized there was a small crying

terror in her voice, not fear for herself, he suddenly knew, but fear for him! For his ranch!

Then he wanted to take her in his arms. But he fought down the feeling.

He had a job to do tonight. Gently he disengaged her clinging fingers and stepped up into the saddle. He patted the gun at his holster. "I'll be home early tonight." He ducked his head for the barn door, rode out.

HE WAS almost at the ridge trail, head bowed with thought of his strange attitude toward the girl, when he stiffened in the saddle. In plain sight in the middle of the trail lay a match. It was burned out—and broken at right angles!

For sixty long seconds Barney sat his gelding and stared at that match. Then his eyes left it, looked at the hoof marks on the gravel trail. Four horses had passed that way from town. The sign was fresh.

He wheeled the gelding and back-tracked the four horses, hand on gun. He remembered a hidden promontory, called Crow Beak, down the right trail. It overlooked the entire valley holding the Running R.

He rode swiftly down the right branch, but found no one.

He crossed the creek bridge silently and the ranch yard spread into view. It was dusky—and empty. He began to feel a let-down of his tension and pulled the winded gelding to a halt before the kitchen door, but before he could call out to the girl, a heavy thud sounded from Big Red's paddock.

He twisted the gelding and rammed the spurs home. The barn door was closed but a crack of lantern light showed under it. He drew his .45 and hit the ground running. He pulled open the door.

It came noiselessly. Four men were in the barn, Joe Cordiss, Dan Weller, and the two ranch hands who'd been with Cordiss that night in the Brass Rail.

None saw Barney; none had heard him. They had their hands full—or rather three did. Cordiss had a nose twist on the stallion and had his head pulled into a stanchion. The two hard-faced rannies had a hold on Dan Weller and for an instant Barney didn't get the import. They were struggling to bring Weller up behind the furiously fighting stallion. Big Red was kicking and screaming and the air was thick with hay dust.

Then Barney got it—and he felt himself go a little sick. They were trying to bring Weller up behind those flying hoofs.

Weller was moaning. "Don't! My gawd, I did as I said I would. I got rid of her. I let you onto the place with no ruckus. Joe, can't you hear me? Joe! Joe!"

Joe Cordiss grinned and held Big Red in

the stanchion. "Hurry it up there, boys."

The other men were sweating, white-faced, but continued the struggle. Weller fought with the desperation of the doomed, gasping out his words.

"Joe! I wuz promised half what yuh got fer the horse. I'll give it all to you. I don't want any of it. Joe! D'ya hear me? Joe!"

Cordiss jerked his head. "Up closer. One crack on the dome should do it."

Barney said, "Reach! All of you!"

He expected Cordiss to go for his guns. He shot and Cordiss spun to the floor.

Weller had fallen in a half-faint. The far gunman had forgotten the stallion in going for his gun and the great hoofs whistled over Weller and caught the gunman. There was a sickening thud. The man's face suddenly was a blur of mashed bone and red flesh, and his body catapulted across a feed box to hang limply, legs swinging. He hung there grotesquely. His neck was broken.

The second gunnie was yelling and shooting and Barney felt a searing iron take him in the side, spin and throw him. . . .

He fought against the waves of blackness. He heard somebody shouting, "I got him, Cordiss! I got him!"

Another voice said, "Yeah, an' he got me. Damn him!" It was Cordiss.

Barney struggled. He got his gunhand up on the tack box. Cordiss was fighting to his feet, blood pouring from a hole low in his calfskin vest. The other gunman came toward him and Barney fired.

A look of incredulity came into the hard-faced man's eyes. Barney's shot had taken him in the neck and his Colt spilled from his fingers. He kept right on walking, unseeing. He walked past Barney, out into the night, and fell on his face.

At Barney's shot Cordiss fell back into an unused stall. Barney could hear Big Red still kicking, trying to get out of the stanchion. He heard a cry, then saw Weller stagger into the hay alley. He was blinded. A great gash had laid open his scraggly head. He walked across the lantern straight into a stall and fell down and lay still.

Barney saw the tiny flame in the coal oil lantern come out, lick at a wisp of hay that had fallen through the broken lantern chimney, grow big. He wanted to get up and rush forward, stamp out that wicked tiny flame. He knew what that meant. But he didn't have the strength.

H E SAID above the growing crackle. "Come out, Cordiss. I've got you cornered." He held his gun on the tack box.

Cordiss laughed, the sound ugly. "You'll die in here with me."

The strength was going from Barney's hand. His gun was falling. He saw Cordiss looking around the stall partition and Cordiss laughed again. He began crawling around the edge of the flames.

He got around to where he had a clear shot at Barney and lay there panting, gun extended. "You've meddled in my business for the last time," he whispered. His finger closed on the trigger of his pearl-handled Colt—

A great flashing red body sprang out of the shadows of the paddock. Big Red had fought free of the stanchion; he'd flung off the nose squeeze. His eyes were little with fury and his teeth were bared in hate and fear. The intelligent stallion knew the man who had injured him and beat him and forced on that nose-squeeze.

Cordiss looked up once, gave a cry. He tried to swing his gun muzzle upward—too late. The forehoofs came down, once! twice! With neck arched Big Red pummeled the body to a shapeless mass and Barney watched with glazed eyes.

Barney called then and fought his way to a sitting position. The horse came and Barney fastened his fingers in the red mane as Big Red bent to nuzzle him.

"Out, boy—outside," he commanded.

The horse snorted and was uneasy. He trusted his master and instinct told him to bolt. And then somebody was in there beside them—a girl with a coat wrapped about her head. She grasped Barney by the shoulders and tugged. She pulled him to the door and into the cool, black night. And the horse followed.

The night air was cold. Barney sat on the banked dirt of the chicken house. Big Red, the girl had put into the north pasture. The pinto in the barn was screaming and plunging and at every sound Barney winced. Strangely he didn't think of the bodies of the men who were consumed in the holocaust.

The girl knelt beside him and Barney took another pull at the bottle she'd brought from Weller's lean-to. Strength came to him slowly. She bandaged his side and told him what had happened, after he left for town, in her curiously even voice.

She and Weller had been in the kitchen and she'd gotten on the stool to wind the clock. The stool slipped and she knew no more—until the sound of shooting.

Barney nodded. He thought of Weller's cat-like tread—of Weller's telling Cordiss he'd gotten rid of the girl.

The drum of hoofs came across the creek bridge and a knot of cowboys boiled over the rise into the yard. They were Bar M boys from the north line camp.

The drum of more horses sounded across the bridge and Wade Keefe rode up. He

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

panted, "On my way to town by the ridge trail an' saw her, Barney. How in hell did it begin?"

Barney took another pull at the bottle. He didn't want to talk about it—not now. The punchers, some of whom he'd ridden with for years, came around and, with eyes to the fire, squatted and began rolling smokes.

Suddenly Barney stiffened. A bent match lay on the ground before him. It was burned out and broken at right angles! He slowly raised his eyes up the man's boots who had lighted his cigarette and his eyes fastened on Wade Keefe's bold, hard face.

KEEFE was talking, ears cocked to the diminishing screams of the pinto. "Too bad. Too damn' bad, Barney."

Barney said to Chuck Bedloe, "Chuck, lend me your gun a minute."

"Sure, Barney."

Barney took it.

Keefe's voice went on, "A helluva jolt to lose a horse like that. Five thousand simoleons! Damn. You shoulda sold him to me, Barney."

"You wouldn't buy him, Keefe," Barney murmured, "because you never intended to buy him. You planned to destroy him—like that." He flicked his eyes to the burning barn.

Then a wide smile came over Wade Keefe's ruddy face. "Matts, this thing has gone to your head." But Barney saw the change come into the eyes.

He said quietly, "You got on the good side of Weller, buying him liquor, letting him in on some easy money gambling with Cordiss in town so you'd have an in here at the Running R. It began after I started the Running R, wasn't that it? I pressed and took your better markets. You boozed, lost money, started going in the red. You set Cordiss up, backing him."

Keefe said, "Chuck, take your gun back. Get this man to a doctor."

"Sit still, Chuck," Barney said, not taking his eyes off Keefe. "I want all you boys to hear this. Wade Keefe couldn't pull dirt on me outright because you fellows are my friends and you wouldn't stand for it. But he had to get rid of the Running R because he was going broke, mostly through his drinkin'. He couldn't quit that, so he hired a gunman and two rannies. He didn't want to get involved personally."

"Matts, you're knocked batty—"

"That's where Cordiss came in. Keefe, it was your stock Cordiss under-bid me with. That's where Cordiss got his horses. Boys, remember any of your stock moved south to Cordiss' spread some time ago?"

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A puncher said slowly, "Yeah, Gilly and I—"

"Shut up, Foster!" Keefe's voice was like a rasp.

Barney kept his eyes on the whiskey-smelling rancher. When the other didn't speak, he went on, "You told Weller you'd steal Big Red, sell him for five thousand, an' he'd get half. But you didn't tell him that Cordiss and his gunnies were going to pull a double-cross, kill him and let him burn with Big Red so as to make it look like an accident—horse kicks man, knocks over lantern and that's that. Funny about the thing that gave you away.

"It all would have worked, Keefe, but for this little habit you have—breaking your matches after lighting your cigarettes. A man who's careful of fires does that, to make sure the match is out before he drops it. Cordiss wasn't—Cordiss was the type to play with fire. I found your broken matches all over the place. There is one right there where you dropped it."

"You lie, Matts. Your horse is dead and your mind is off-center!" Keefe's mottled face had grown rocky.

Barney said softly, "Big Red isn't dead. Sally put him in the north pasture just before you breezed in here. That horse squealing is an old pinto. If we need more proof, that whiskey-drinking stable attendant at the Fort can be made to talk plenty."

Keefe's draw was fast. His gun exploded almost in Barney's face, but Barney's forefinger had closed on curved steel just an instant before. Barney's slug found its mark and Keefe's shot burrowed into the banked earth of the chicken house.

Keefe put one hand to his throat, went back on his tree-thick legs, turned, took two steps and fell to the ground.

Barney said thickly, "Here's your gun, Chuck. Better call the sheriff."

"I reckon there's no hurry. His draw cinched your story." The foreman arched his cigarette into the darkness and glanced down at the broken match. Barney followed his eyes and his thoughts flowed into the future—this would clear him and his horses with Colonel Jackson; there would be no need of replacements. Cordiss was gone; there would be another contract coming up soon.

He felt the girl move in his arm. He tightened it and looked down into her fire-lighted eyes. He searched for that haunted stare.

The look was gone. Her eyes were easy, questioning but unafraid. He suddenly wondered how a guy asked a girl to marry him.

And then, in their question, he read his answer.

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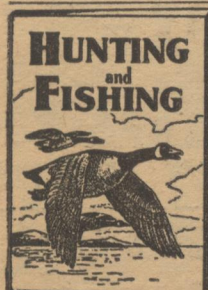
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 75)

"All right, Doc," Ernshaw called. "You can come in now. The first customer's ready."

Doc Marble, who had apparently been brought here by the sheriff and who had been waiting outside, stepped into the saloon.

"Over in that corner, Doc," Ernshaw ordered. "You, too, Jellico, if you don't want to bleed to death."

"You would have to butt in," Dan Cozad growled, scowling at Ernshaw. "Whatever gave you the strength to make it this far?"

"I didn't want to see you killed," Ernshaw snapped. "That's a pleasure I want to save for myself."

Dan started a sharp answer, then broke it off. His row with Ernshaw would have to wait until this other matter was settled. "Come over here, Ed," he called.

Ed Harman left the bar.

"You ready to buy this place?" Dan asked. Harman nodded.

"For how much?"

"For what Paulson paid for it."

Dan turned to face Frank Paulson. "Is that all right?"

Paulson stood up, his face flushed with anger. "It's not all right. You can't get by with this. The Plata Concha isn't for sale."

Dan's gun tilted toward the man and exploded. Paulson caught his breath. He lifted his hand to the side of his face then drew it away and stared at his fingers. They were bloody. The tip of his ear was gone.

"Sorry," Dan grumbled. "I came a little closer than I meant to. I guess I'm gettin' old. Hey, Ernie, it would be a shame for Paulson to have to go through life with one ear shorter than the other. Do you think you could even things up?"

"His ear an' yours both," Ernshaw snapped. "Count to three an' watch me."

Frank Paulson's mouth had dropped open.

"One," said Dan Cozad, An' when you get my ear on the second shot, I'll take the top of yours, Ernie."

"Make him stop shaking," growled the sheriff. "It ain't a fair chance if he shakes so he gets his face in front of my bullet."

"Two," said Dan Cozad.

Paulson shook his head. "No!" he cried hoarsely. "No, I'll sell the damned place."

He dropped down in his chair and covered his face with his hands.

THE special stage furnished by Wes Lockridge was drawn up in front of the Plata Concha. Bill Jellico had climbed aboard, nursing his bandaged hand. Manny McNab, who had had a chance at his gun but hadn't taken it, was aboard. Fats Travers

OWLHOOT DEPUTY

boarded the stage with Sam Ott, who had a nice lump on his head from the bottle Peg-leg Davis had swung.

Paulson was the last man to get on. He had in his pocket the money he had paid for the Plata Concha and which Ed Harman had returned to him.

Up at Peg-leg Davis' stable, where Dan had gone for his horse and where Ernschaw had followed him, the latter growled, "You get out of town. An' if you ever come back again, come back soft-like an' keep out of my sight. As long as I live I'll be sorry Paulson caved in before I had a chance at his ears and then yours."

"You can have a chance at mine any time you want," Dan snapped.

"Like right now?"

Ernschaw's hand dropped down to his gun. He half drew it, then shoved it back and shook his head. "The light ain't good," he complained. "I might smash that ugly face of yours. Why don't you take it out of town?"

"I'll take it out of town," Dan answered, "when I get ready."

Al Ernschaw sighed. "I saved your life again tonight. It'll be worth it, though, not to do it next time."

"An' once more I saved your job by doing something you should have done on your own."

"So it's even," said Peg-leg Davis. "Why don't you gents take your row somewhere else, so I can close up an' go to bed."

Dan Cozad climbed into the saddle. He looked down at Ernschaw. "I'll be back," he promised. "Keep outa my way."

"You keep out of mine," Ernschaw answered.

Dan Cozad headed for the ranch. He was scowling, but after a time the scowl vanished and a grin came to his face. He had a notion that by this time Ernschaw would be grinning, too.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 91)

Roby grinned tightly. "You're sure of this Halcom hombre."

"After you et that pie," Joe said softly, "I'd put my last nickel on Halcom."

Roby's face began to turn color. "Did you poison me? You sneakin'—"

Joe said slowly, "Not rightly poison, Buck. It's an old Apache secret. Makes your hands paralyzed. You don't notice it much right off. Just slows you up at first, but by tomorrow night—"

"You're lying, runt."

Joe shrugged. "When you have to go for your gun this afternoon, you'll find out." He glanced at the clock on a shelf behind him. "The stage gets in about five."

Roby whirled to face Vernon. "Doc, you heard what this son said. Can you do anything for me?"

"Not a thing," Vernon said quickly.

"There are a lot of Indian drugs and remedies that medical science knows nothing about."

Roby looked at his hands. Then he raised his eyes to Joe. "I think you're lying, runt. When I finish with Halcom, you'd better be out of town." He tromped out.

It was the longest afternoon Doc Vernon ever spent. He absentmindedly cared for the few patients who came in, his eyes constantly turning to the batwings of O'Malley's Bar. About four-thirty Roby left the saloon and came directly to Vernon's office.

Vernon sat back in his chair.

Roby strode in and slammed his star down on the desk. "You can have your marshal's job, sawbones. I'm riding the stage out."

"Is that Apache drug working on you?"

"Hell, no." Roby fisted his hands and opened them. "Just a sandy Joe was trying to run. It ain't that, Doc. I just got to thinking about what you said. Ain't no use of risking my life where I ain't 'preciated. If I'm gonna pack a star, I'm gonna do it in a town that wants law an' is willin' to pay for it."

Roby wheeled out. He didn't go back to the saloon. Stepping to the door, Vernon watched him stride along the boardwalk to the hotel. When the stage pulled in he was waiting with a suitcase in his hand.

A single passenger stepped down, a lanky, black-garbed man who wore two guns thonged down low on his thighs. He cuffed back his Stetson, bold eyes raking the street. Then, bringing his gaze to Roby, he asked, "Where do you reckon I'll find the killer marshal who's rodding this town? Hombre named Buck Roby. I'm running him out of town."

A man can only stand so much, and Buck Roby was past that point. He slammed down his suitcase. "I'm Roby, and I reckon you're

GUN CURE

Duke Halcom. I'm leaving town, but you ain't running me out."

Roby fisted his hands, opened them, and grabbed his gun. He was fast, faster than Duke Halcom ever would be. He had two clear shots at the lanky man, both wild. One kicked up dust ten feet to Halcom's right. The other sang distantly over his head. Then Halcom's gun was talking. He fired twice, coolly and deliberately. The first bullet smashed Roby's right wrist, the second ripped through his left. Then he holstered his gun, and went directly into Joe Smith's restaurant.

IT WAS a touchy job patching up Buck Roby's wrists, and when Doc Vernon was done, he said, "I think you'll have the use of your hands, Buck, but you won't be making any more fast draws. Now get to bed."

Duke Halcom was still in the restaurant when Vernon came in. Joe introduced them, and Halcom said, "If you're needing a marshal, I'll stay around a few days, Doc. Sometimes when word gets out that a man like Roby is laid up, every tough in the country tries to work the town over."

"We'd appreciate it, Halcom." Vernon scratched his nose, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "How come you didn't kill Roby?"

"I never kill a man unless I have to," Halcom said. He nodded at Joe. "See you about supper time, dad."

"Dad?" Vernon pinned his eyes on Joe. "Then you used to be Fancy Pants Halcom?"

"That's right," Joe said, "but I ain't proud of it."

"That pie—"

"No sugar and a little salt. That's all. You see, Doc, I just made Buck feel like the men he's forced to face him felt—scared."

Joe pulled his sleeve back and pointed to the scar on his right wrist. "I learned this gun cure myself, Doc. The hard way."



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 109)

Wheeler looked across the street, and his face grew grim as he saw the two of them.

Joe shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. They had reached the door of the Golden Bower, and Will was pushing the doors open when Joe grabbed him. He got hold of his shoulder and jerked him backwards. Will lost his footing and sat down on the sidewalk. Joe kicked the doors open and stepped inside.

Greg Bower looked up.

"I'm done with you, Greg," Joe said. "Don't seem as if I'd want you in this town, after all."

"I'll never learn," Greg Bower said softly, "not to trust a man in his own home town."

Joe Cress laughed. "I'm just as surprised as you are, Greg," he said. "Hell, it don't make sense, does it?"

"Take 'im, boys!" Greg snapped

He dropped to a low crouch, his hand snaking for his gun. But Joe Cress knew Greg Bower and knew his ways. And he knew that Bower would drop in that crouch. His first two bullets were low, and they ripped into Greg Bower's body.

Then the Golden Bower was rocking and thundering to the roar of guns. Joe Cress felt lead burn him. He felt it knock him backwards toward the batwing doors, but it didn't seem to hurt. The sting of the lead seemed to take some of the bitterness out of him; it seemed to sweeten the rancid hatred that had been his so long.

He kept pumping lead at the men inside. Vaguely, he was aware that Will's gun was blasting out slow, careful shots. Will never was much of a hand with a gun, but he was trying like hell. . . .

JOE CRESS reached up and took hold of the saddle horn. Waves of dizziness assailed him as he climbed into the saddle.

"Steady, Joe," Doc Moore said worriedly. "Dammit—you ain't fit to ride!"

A flurry of light footsteps came round the house and Judy Marlin ran up.

Joe gripped the saddle horn to steady his vision. He looked down at Judy and grinned. But it was a new grin; it was wide and happy.

"I'll be sending for you pretty soon, Judy."

"You sent for me—the morning you walked into the Golden Bower, Joe," Judy said. "And I'm not leaving you from now on. I've got my horse already saddled. We'll get right along, doc."

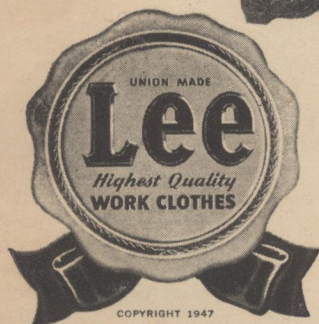
Doc Moore looked at Joe Cress, and then at Matt Wheeler, who had just walked up.

"Yes, I think you will," the doc said softly.

"I know they will," Matt added slowly.

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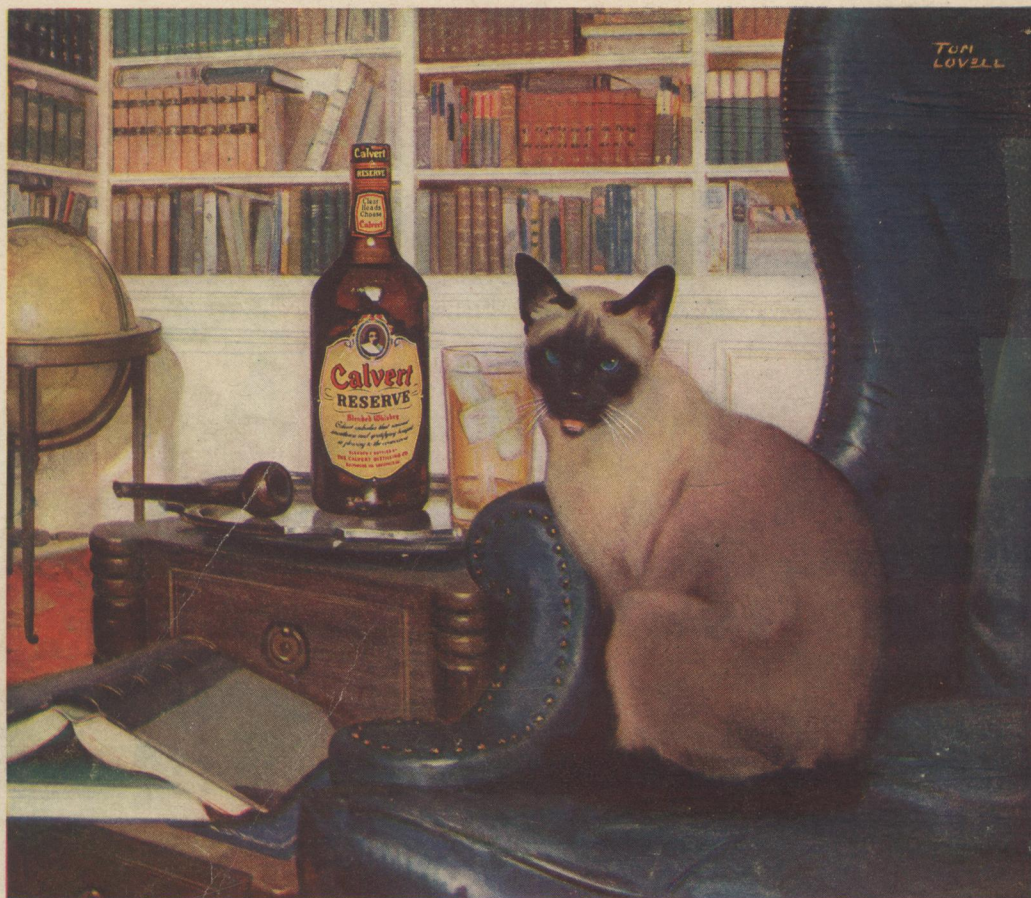
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