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TALES

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HELL-TRAIL HOMBRE

*A NOVEL OF
GUNSMOKE VENGEANCE*

by WM. HEUMAN

BRAND OF THE WILD ONES

by T.C. McCLARY

**BLACKBURN
CHADWICK
MANY
OTHERS**





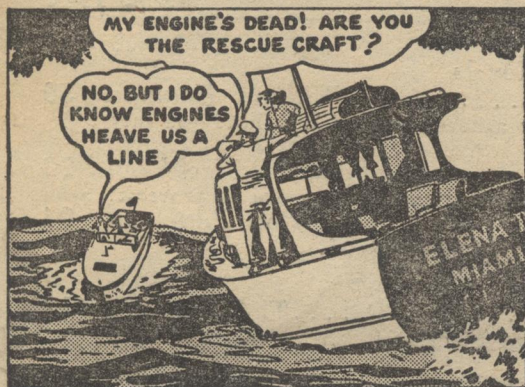
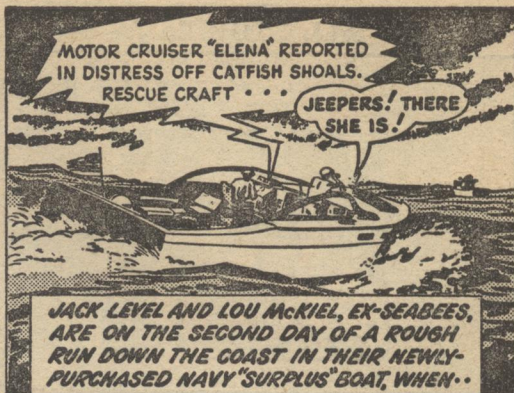
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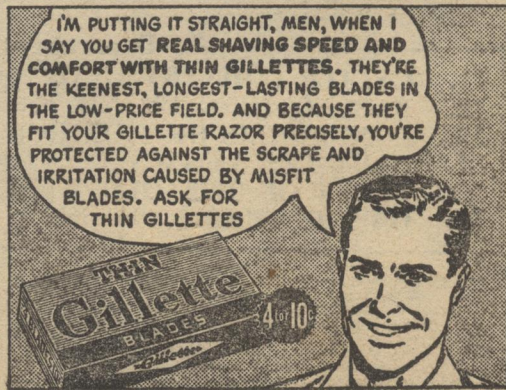
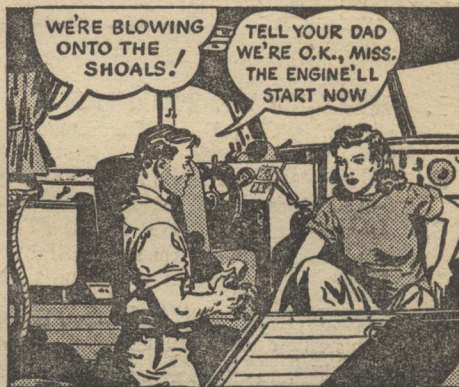
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THE PEN THAT WRITES LIKE A PENCIL

JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 12, No. 4



MAY, 1947

Three Big Novels

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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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● ON THE TRAIL ●



*The Rangers won their invitation to the last
Apache scalp dance the hard way—by doing
a little hair-raising of their own!*

AFTER the death of their leader, Old Victorio, notorious Indian chief, in 1881, a band of twenty Apaches broke away from their comrades and began a series of pillages and murders that has no parallel in border history.

The Apaches first appeared at Paso Viejo, a gap in the mountains that line the Rio Grande. Texas Rangers and United States Army troops were immediately alerted.

A tribe of Pueblo Indians had lived in the old town of Ysleta for over three hundred years. From the time border settlements first appeared in the Rio Grande Valley near El Paso, these Indians had been friends with the Americans and inveterate enemies of the Apaches.

It became customary for the troops at Fort Davis to employ the Pueblos as guides during Indian disturbances. In 1881 Bernardo and Simon Olgin, brothers, were the principal chiefs of this tribe. In the present crisis Simon, the younger, and four of his nephews, were detailed to go down the Rio Grande with Lieutenant T. K. Mills, commander of the Tenth United States Cavalry. Simon Olgin advised the lieutenant to move out on the open plains, three or four miles north of Paso Viejo Pass, as a matter of safety.

Paso Viejo, Olgin said, was a favorite

camping place for the Indians because of fine water and good grass. If the redskins should appear at the pass during the night and find it occupied by soldiers, they would attack at daylight. Lieutenant Mills, fresh from West Point, replied that he was not afraid of Indians and did not intend to move.

During the night the Apaches reached the Pass, just as Olgin had anticipated, and hid themselves among the rocks. The next morning the soldiers packed their mules and were standing by their horses, awaiting the order to mount, when a sudden fusillade of bullets crashed into their midst from short range. Other volleys followed in quick succession.

Simon Olgin and several troopers were killed. Mills and the remainder of the company thereupon fled, but Olgin's nephews remained, took to the rocks and fought until they had routed the Apaches, thus keeping the bodies of their uncle and the soldiers from falling into the hands of the attackers.

The marauding Apaches next appeared at Bass Canyon, on the overland stage road, some fourteen miles west of Van Horn, where they waylaid an immigrant train on its way to New Mexico, killing two and wounding several others. They swung off to the south, skirted the eastern end of the Eagle Moun-

(Continued on page 8)



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(Continued from page 6)

tains and entered Old Mexico, where for a time they were lost to view.

The Texas Rangers, in camp at Ysleta, next heard of the raiders at Ojo Caliente, on the river. A captain of cavalry near old Fort Quitman detailed seven men and instructed the sergeant in charge to scout down the river, keep a sharp outlook for Indian sign and report within a week.

On their return journey these troopers camped for the night at Ojo Caliente. At daybreak, as they were preparing to cook breakfast, the Apaches fell upon them and killed all but one. This single survivor made his escape on foot and, after two days in the mountains without food, reached the headquarters of his troop and reported to his captain.

On this raid the Apaches captured all the soldiers' equipment and baggage, including seven horses and two pack mules. The captured stock was killed and eaten, for the Army animals were fat, while those of the Indians were worn out.

It was two months before the Apaches were heard of again. Then they appeared suddenly in Quitman Canyon, set upon the stage, killed the driver, Morgan, and his passenger, a gambler named Crenshaw. The reports of this robbery and murder were conflicting. There was a suspicion in certain quarters that the driver and his passenger had themselves robbed the stage and made Indian signs to avert suspicion.

CAPTAIN BAYLOR of the Rangers decided to investigate. With fourteen privates and a corporal he left Ysleta on January 16, 1882. At Quitman Canyon the captain found that the trail bore southwest toward Ojo Caliente. About twenty-five miles below the canyon he found the tracks of a freshly-shod mule, two unshod ponies and two unshod mules, and within fifty yards of the trail picked up a kid glove thought to be Crenshaw's.

The trail led down the river and crossed into Mexico, where the Indians made their first camp. Captain Baylor kept doggedly on the trail and the next day found the Apaches' second camp near the foothills of the Los Pinos Mountains. Here he made certain that the stage robbery and murder were the work of the Indians, as the Rangers found a boot-top belonging to Morgan.

They followed the Apache trail through rough, deep canyons and camped on the south side of the Rio Grande, this being their second night in Mexico. Next morning the trail crossed back into Texas, and the Rangers came upon a camp where the Indians had evidently made a cache.

Continuing down the river a few miles, they found where the Apaches had struck out on a beeline for the Eagle Mountains. Baylor felt some hesitation about crossing the plains between the mountains and the Rio Grande in daylight, but as the trail was several days old, he decided to take the risk. Nothing happened and the Rangers camped within four miles of the hills.

Taking the trail up a canyon at daybreak, the Rangers came upon an Apache camp which had been hastily deserted that morning. Apparently the Indians had discovered the approach of the Rangers and had fled in haste, leaving blankets, quilts, buckskins and other useful articles. Here they found the mate to Morgan's boot top and a bag made from the legs of Crenshaw's trousers, besides express receipts, postal cards and other things taken from the stage.

Here the Rangers had difficulty in picking up the trail. The night before had been bitterly cold. The ground had frozen hard. Three Pueblo scouts, Bernardo and Domingo Olgin and Aniceto Duran, scrutinized every foot of the turf. Baffled in their quest here, the Rangers turned toward Mexico to scout on the west side of the Eagle Mountains.

At Eagle Springs Captain Baylor learned that Ranger Lieutenant B. J. Nevill and nine men had just gone toward Quitman to look for him. When he returned Nevill told Baylor that he had seen the Apache trail six miles to the east and that it led toward Carrizo Springs or the Diablo Mountains.

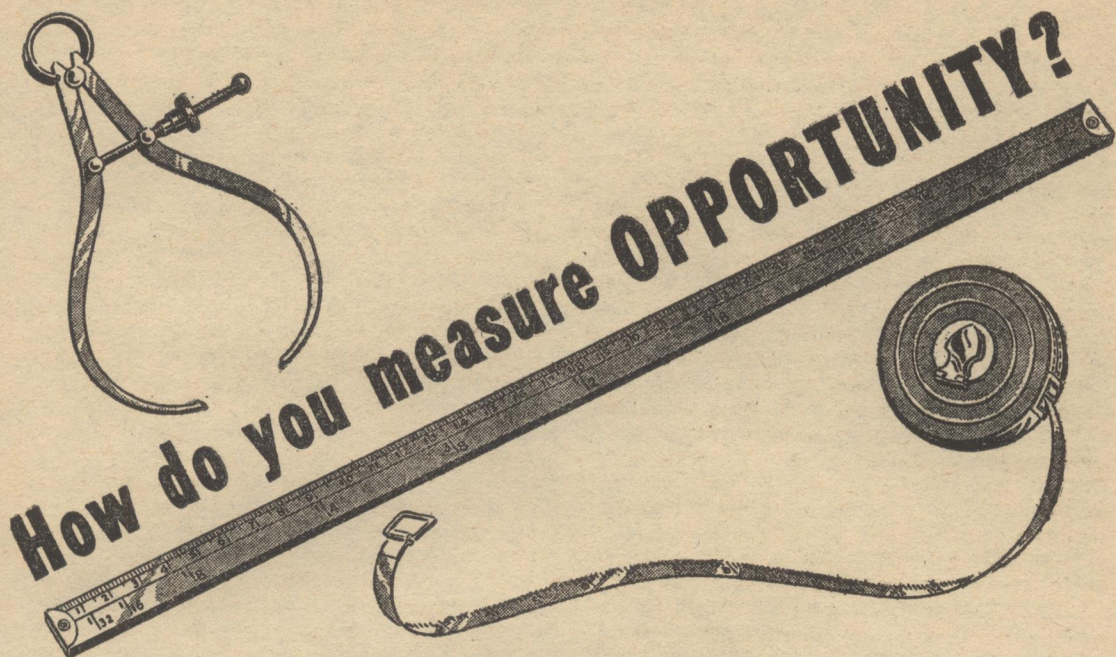
Baylor's rations were exhausted and Nevill had only enough to supply their combined forces for five days. But the two commanders decided to take the chance of either catching the Indians or finding food in some of the Pecos settlements.

The Apaches, now thoroughly frightened, had traveled fast across the plain in front of Eagle Springs and did not seem to recover from their scare until they reached the Diablo Mountains. Here they paused long enough to kill one horse and cook the meat, and to obtain water by melting snow with hot rocks.

The trail swung northward by Chili Peak, where the Rangers quit the trail and went into the Diablo Mountains to camp at Apache Tanks. The trail led to the edge of the Sierra Diablo, where the Indians slept for the first time in many days.

At the Indian camp, some ten miles farther on, the Rangers came upon another dead horse. The trail branched off and entered the Sierrro Diablo. In a narrow gorge the Rangers found where the Indians had eaten, using snow to quench their thirst. Their horses, however, had no water. Baylor was sure the Apaches were not far away—and afoot. Signs

(Continued on page 127)



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Wild's arm lifted
against the star-
washed sky and
fell. . . .

BRAND OF THE WILD ONES

CHAPTER ONE

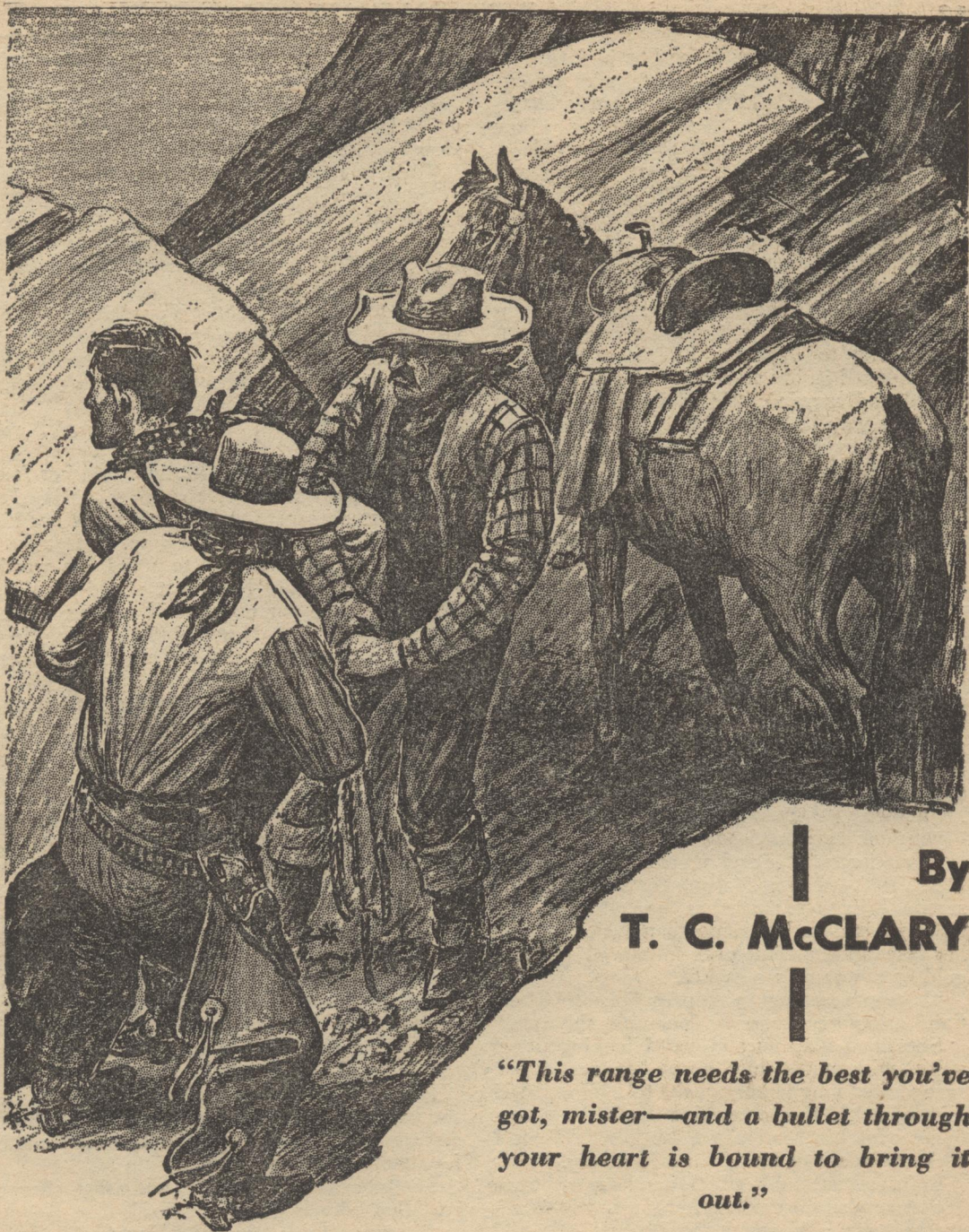
Boss of Gun-Wild Range

MIDWAY of morning, Luke Ringo jogged his horse alongside the purple footrock that bordered Feather Valley and, fording the copper-bottomed river below the bend, came onto the thick ribbon of gray dust that marked the main trail, and followed it to Riordon's. He found Bat Riordon at the corral and said, "Howdy, Bat," and snagged the makings from his vest to build a cigarette.

Bat moved his big, rangy body across the tanbark colored dirt and, pushing his hat back, let rivulets of sweat dump down across his rough face, while he leaned upon the corral bar. "What is new?" he asked.

"Nothin' much," Luke answered casually. "I am headed for High Pasture. You don't mind my cutting across yore grass?"

"If I minded, that sister of mine would scratch my eyes out!" Bat grinned. "I take



By
T. C. McCLARY

"This range needs the best you've got, mister—and a bullet through your heart is bound to bring it out."

it you aim to go in to say hello to Maggie?"

Color moved slowly beneath the black burn of Ringo's face, but his grin was not spontaneous—it had to crack through the barrier of his self containment and, watching him, Bat Riordon thought, *He has a front like ice, and that is good in a range boss. But I don't think the toughness is under it—he'll never stand up under Wild Fitzroy's violence. And because he has tried to breast him, he will be*

licked to a pulp and kicked from the range. . . .

"Why, yeah," Luke drawled and struck a match with his thumbnail. "I reckon I'll pay my respects while I'm here."

"You could of ridden yore own grass and saved nine miles," Bat pointed out and, filling his barrel chest, bellowed a call for his sister.

Luke swung out of leather with the stiffness of a modest man's confusion and, with an effortless motion, tossed his weighted tie rein

so that it swung around the bar and tied its own knot. Riordon noted that without expression and watched Luke move with a horse-man's stiff gait through the streaming yellow light and disappear inside the kitchen door. Ringo was a small man for that country and a quiet one against its roughness and its violence. It was only the fine lines that ran out from the sharp corners of his eyes, and the cool gray of their containment, that gave him character. And things like this. . .

Riordon climbed through the bars and unlatched Luke's knot, and stood a full ten minutes trying to duplicate Luke's easy throw. He managed it, but with a lot of effort and he cursed and scowled. "It is the damned quiet and easy way he does things," he growled to himself, "that throws a man off just when he has reached judgment!"

Luke stepped into the deep shadows of the kitchen and, taking his hat off, paused a moment on the threshold to catch his vision from the glare. He heard the girl before he saw her clearly. "Luke Ringo, you come prowling around this way on my baking day again and I am going to have you shot off the place for trespassing!"

He grinned and, in her presence, the hard containment of his face relaxed and stripped him of his bleakness and a few years. He moved to the table and sat down and, soaking in her capable movements and the compact curves that showed clearly in her house dress, he allowed, "Dunno what yo're fretting on—you look real handsome!"

"You'll get coffee and pie and nothing else," she sniffed. "I'm not falling for soft soap this season." But she paused at the watery mirror to tidy her hair and smooth a wrinkle from her face, and her blue eyes splintered with the gold of a woman's pleasure.

"I been meaning to stop by," he told her, "and ask yore favor for Yokum's shivaree."

She filled his cup and stood looking down at him with mixed emotions on her face. "You sure waited long enough," she told him. "And Fitzroy asked the same thing, Luke."

He bent his head above his pie. "Then I reckon I'm out of luck," he said finally.

Softness touched her face, and deeper things, but there was mischief in her eyes. "Mebbe," she suggested, "I could go with both of you."

His gaze snapped up as if he'd heard a rattler. He said on a tight, affronted note, "Obliged, but I don't reckon I will go!"

Her temper sparked and then subsided and she sat down across from him. She searched him directly and forthrightly, the look of a woman who was raised by men and knows them. Indecision and uncertainty ran through her, filling her with disturbance. "Aw, gee, Luke," she murmured finally. "I'd have gone with you. But you don't ever speak out quick

and plain—you're the same way about who's boss of this range."

He made a gesture, half of apology, half of warning that she was off her grass. "I wasn't sure I could go," he told her.

"But you sure aim to be range boss?" she asked.

The mask of cold containment dropped back across his face; his eyes told no more of what was behind them than a mirror. "Do I have to be?" he grunted.

She gave a gesture. "You have reached for it and you can't stop now, Luke. When a man reaches for the top he gets there, or he tumbles in the dust. There is no halfway after you have tossed yore hat."

"Mebbe," he said on a gritty note, "I will tumble in the dust then, Maggie."

They were at the old deadlock and her face dropped; he would not commit himself. He would not even give the boast that let her kid herself if she wished it that way.

He said, as if he had to force the words with all his will, "I am not afraid of Wild Fitzroy, but I am not sure I am the better man. I have to wait and find out, Maggie—I have to know that before I am sure of what is in me."

He ended abruptly, reached for his hat and came erect. "I would not say that to another living soul," he added.

She lifted a smile of appreciation at his confidence in her. "It is safe with me, Luke! But sometimes there are things a woman doesn't want to be told about a man."

"Those are the things she should hear," he said and, nodding, left.

SHE watched him go, thinking that there was no shading, no compromise, in any part of him. Everything in him was either black or white, scorching hot or ice cold. Other men might automatically think themselves the best man on the range. But not Luke—Luke had to know.

His horse drummed out of the yard and the sounds dimmed and then sank into the thickening sea of glaring heat. Her brother came in for lunch, glancing at her curiously.

She turned from the stove and asked abruptly, "Bat, who is going to win?"

"I have got a bet on Wild Fitzroy," he said. "But every time I'm sure of it, that damned Ringo does something to make me wish I hadn't."

"What will happen when the showdown comes?" she asked.

He made a gesture. "If there is anybody left, he'll run the range. If it don't come to killing, the loser will ride off."

"He couldn't stay and eat humble pie?" she asked.

"No," he told her. "Not when the fight is

at the very top. No desert squatter is as low as the man who has reached for the whip and failed to grab it, Maggie. Not a school kid but would hoot at him with contempt."

Luke Ringo put his horse across the up tilt of a shelf and left the beating heat of the valley as he moved into the cool gray shadows of the pass. Far up the walls, sun put its oblique gold light in a strip across the rock; beneath that, the walls darkened with clearly defined, darker layers. The floor of the pass held the chill of shadows never touched by sunlight. He felt cold strike through his lean, small frame and wondered why he hadn't worn a brush jacket, and then was struck with the harsh thought that, even up in the high rock country, Wild Fitzroy seldom wore a coat.

For a moment his eyes narrowed and his lips pulled tight against his teeth with a man's instinctive dislike of an unfavorable comparison. Not since the day Fitzroy licked his time bronc riding at the roundup had he been able to shake entirely free of the corroding fear that Fitzroy was his superior. Yet mind and instinct drove him on; somewhere, every man had a weakness in his mettle. How great the weakness was you were never sure of, until you caught the metal's ring.

He came through the pass and reined up to blow his horse upon a ledge, and, for a space, was filled with a man's simple satisfaction at coming from damp chill into solid warmth. Heat formed a dusty, running sea of hot haze that closed out the country beneath him, but he could see movement shimmering beneath the near slope that shouldered down just beyond the next pass, which gave onto Fitzroy's grass.

He took the narrow trail hanging precariously to the side of the high, steep hills. An hour later he came out upon the wider trail leading from the upper pass and, lifting his head, sniffed deeply of the airs and thought, *Fresh dust smell.* . . . None of his men would use that pass, and everything this side of the hills was his grass, and he rode on, pondering who had ridden through there.

He followed dust smell clean down the trail as he dropped into the depths of the heat. Bunches of Ring Brand cattle were grazing through the sun cured grass without disturbance, but dust smell was still strong and in a solid thread, which meant it had been raised by horses and not cattle. The main herd formed vaguely out of the metallic glare, fanned out properly across a strip of slope. He drew out his gun and fired two shots and shortly fired two more and, reloading, heard Tim Grey's yodelling call. He sent the Ringo trail call back, and cut off trail around a hump, and saw smoke rising like a pencil smudge above shimmering airs.

Grey had been his father's foreman and

stayed on. Luke found him afoot down by the trickle of a creek, veins black with rage upon his neck and temples, a grim anvil set to his jaw. He flung a rope-gnarled hand out at the charred remains of their chuck and bunk wagons. "Wild Fitzroy in person," he growled, along with an opinion of Fitzroy's ancestry. "He gave us his yell as we come up."

"He was leading his crew, all right," Charley Samper nodded.

Anger put a thickness into Luke Ringo's blood, but with it came a sense of risk and uncertainty; not a fear, but a wish that he did not have to face the facts confronting him. He cut sign on what had been done and asked Tim Grey, "Any other damage?"

"Ran off the wagon hosses," Gray muttered. "But just scattered 'em in the brush, I reckon." He spat and walked to a log and held up a .30-30 carbine. "They took the trouble to leave this out of the burning."

Ringo took it and saw nothing wrong, and trying to fathom the drift of Fitzroy's intentions, suggested, "Mebbe just a little insulting hell raising?"

"Look down that barrel," Grey gritted angrily.

He looked and saw the dirt plug carefully reamed half way down. "That's why he sent his trail call back," the foreman rasped. "Figuring we'd come up by then and one of us would grab ahold of that and send a shot after them."

"And blow the front off yore face, or mebbe worse," Luke said. His eyes were narrowed and the light struck off them in a thin, bleak color. "How do you figure Tim?" he asked.

"This has been Ringo grass for forty years," the foreman said. "But you don't own it, Luke. It is open range and open to dispute, and Fitzroy has had his eye on this pasture. It is hot here now, but it is cold as blue blazes after sundown, and there is all our grub and blankets burned, and it appears they took the axe and threw it in the firewood."

"You'd have called in the crew and ridden down for fresh supplies," Luke grunted. "That would leave the range and herd unguarded most of tomorrow."

"He ain't a rustler—I don't think." Tim spat. "But he is a sidewinder, and he could damned well drive his herd down through the pass if it weren't turned back, and there ain't water for more cattle than are here, so you can figure it."

He stopped and scowled up at the pass with sunbleached sharp eyes, and muscles rippled with anger beneath his leathery skin. "He is building this to a showdown, Luke. And he has a rough outfit and a heap of brass. But three men could pile up enough FR dogies in that pass to fill it, and raise a stench that

would even turn Wild Fitzroy's stomach! With a herd pushing so you couldn't fan 'em back, you'd be within yore rights and make that blowing galoot pay heavy for yore chuck wagon."

"And then what?" Luke asked tonelessly.

Tim snapped him a look of surprise, and then tugged at his gray handlebar mustaches. "Well," he admitted, "I dunno as anything would be settled, but it would snap that wildcat up fast."

"And drag every ranch on the range into a war," Luke murmured dryly. He drifted his gaze along the sunburned brow of the sloping hills. "That's no answer, Tim."

"Gol damn it, you've said that every time something happened!" Tim laced him. "Luke, I done raised you practically, but I didn't put all this care and thinking in yore head! You've got to smash Wild Fitzroy and smash him hard and fast before he gets you! He has got a bigger outfit and paid gunslicks, and once he's on this side the hills, yore licked!"

"Mebbe I can settle this without dragging the other ranches in," Luke said. "Mebbe I can settle it between Wild Fitzroy and me personal."

Grey's eyes sprang open wide, and the tirade washed off his thin slat lips. "Now wait a minute, Luke!" he grunted on a different tone. "You can't go breasting Wild Fitzroy that way! You ain't no match for him with guns or fists."

Bleak humor threaded Luke's grey eyes. "I thought this was a showdown, Tim?"

"Well, yeah," the foreman scowled. "But you don't need to make it a funeral!"

"That's what I been thinking too long," Luke grunted. "But you can't play chess with cattle—sooner or later it boils down to who is the better man."

CHAPTER TWO

"I'll Ride Alone. . . ."

LUKE jerked his head down range. "Send Charley down for vittles and a new outfit and at sundown put a roaring bonfire in that pass. That will hold anything short of a stampede back until I've had a chance to breast Fitzroy." He gave a long, inscrutable look at the break that ran through the mountains. "I'm riding to town across FR grass."

"Yore loco!" Tim Grey exploded. "Lemme ride with you, leastwise!"

"I'll ride alone," Luke said grimly, and turned his horse back uptrail.

Evening's light slanted crimson and yellow across his back as he came through the pass; beneath him, day's heat and haze were beating off into the horizon like an outgoing tide. The

country stood out plain and clear and, wherever he looked, he saw cattle in movement and crews working, gathering a herd that formed a wedge toward the pass.

At a distance, a rider reined up hard and studied him, and then sent a call slamming across range. Others stopped and cattle milled and went back to grazing, and dust plumes mushroomed and caught evening's tinted light and then slowly settled. A big man on a big gray came racing out between two hills, hat flattened back and chaps fluting in the wind, standing in his stirrups.

Presently, looking up, he slowed pace and called up three riders, and Luke caught the puzzlement in his voice, as if he did not believe Luke would ride down alone and were looking for a trick. Luke knew the man, Bull Tampuson, Fitzroy's ramrod, but his attention was beyond Tampuson, sizing up the crew. There were at least eight more men in sight than Fitzroy was supposed to have, and some of them had been doing damned little work and had the smell of a fast hired crew.

One of the latter angled across to intercept Tampuson, who spoke briefly with him and then sent him off to a distance from the trail with a jerk of his head. The man moved away slowly, as if he were not used to taking orders from a foreman and didn't like it. He raised his arm and wigwagged, and five of the eight extra riders drifted toward him.

Tampuson gathered his three men and put his horse into a steady canter uptrail and, coming abreast of Luke, reined in. He grunted with dust-raw harshness, "I had an idea yore grass was across the mountains, Ringo."

Luke laid his bleak flat gaze upon him. "When Fitzroy's foreman gets an idea of his own, it will be a day," he allowed with the contempt of the cattle country's feudal caste. He watched the man's face darken, and the viciousness that swept it, but after a moment, Tampuson's gaze dropped. "I'll have to turn you back, Ringo," he growled, and there was anger in him, but there was the instinctive apology of a hired man to an owner, too.

Luke's gaze narrowed and struck off silver lights. "So Fitzroy knew I'd follow and didn't have the guts to wait?" he asked.

Tampuson's bull head snapped up with affronted loyalty. "Wild don't even know yo're on range!" he rasped.

"Then I'll wait for Wild to tell me himself to get off his grass," Luke told him, and touched his horse and shouldered past, while Tampuson was lost in indecision. The harsh muttering of voices came against his back, but not clear, and after a space the drum of a fast moving horse beat upon the air, and a rider galloped off at an angle.

Bypassing me to get word to Fitzroy, Luke thought and, knowing his man, changed his

mind about heading for the ranch. A face to face showdown or anything like it was too good a thing for Wild Fitzroy to pass up in his black arrogance and vanity. He would head for town and wait for Luke there, where he'd have an audience for his play.

The mountain turned blue and the western clouds flushed gold-edged purple, and the sun moved downward in a path of flame. Luke rode on, conscious that at no time was he without eyes upon him—three times he cut sign on riders paralleling him through the hills.

Uncertainty of what he meant to say and do was in him, but deeper and scraping across his manhood was uncertainty of what he could do when he got there. But riding alone had gotten him through where Tim Grey's company might have given the excuse for a fight and, as he rode, the cool, detached part of his mind soaked up the surprising signs.

He had expected Wild Fitzroy would put cattle moving across the mountains during the night, figuring to gobble a few of Ring brand's fattening beef in the process, but mostly to drive Ring brand off the graze beyond the pass. What he saw now was that it was no casual crowding, but a carefully planned maneuver; Fitzroy had put on a gather of at least half of all his cattle and was drifting them toward the pass, and the number was way over what High Pasture could graze or water. He hadn't meant to stop with High Pasture then, but ran right on through, taking over all of the graze along the west side of the mountains, down to where the desert cut a spur in. He had meant to strike fast and hard and violently, and drive Ring brand back by the very pressure of cattle weight, and if Ringo wanted to fight about it, he had professional gunslicks there, and would outnumber Ringo's outfit three to one. It was not only going to be a showdown, but a massacre.

Luke's face set hard and for the first time he caught the full impact of Wild's ruthless violence. He had always thought of him as a big, blustery, hair trigger galoot, wild and arrogant as hell, but decently human under it. Now he was conscious that under Wild's breezy, bellowing exterior was a shrewd, conscienceless brain, unhindered by any decency or respect for the harsh but honest code of the range. What he was up against was not just an ambitious rancher, but the man who had ordered the dirt plug put into that carbine so that a man using it hurriedly would stand a good chance of blowing off his face.

HE REACHED prairie with evening's cool shadows racing after him like hounds, and watched his shadow lengthen across the darkening grasses, taking on a crimson edge. Sundown's breeze was chill upon his neck and raised his hackles and,

conscious of it, he noted the colored edging to his shadow and asked himself bluntly, "I wonder if the colors are mixed and that tinting should be yellow?"

He had no fear, but he had no desire for a fight, and his mind was racing, trying to find a decent way out of things. He knew there was no way and he rode ahead with his jaws hard beneath the inscrutable mask of his cool, quiet face, but he could feel the uncertainty under the force of his will and it secretly shamed him. *Worse, he thought, than a man unsure of himself is a man who shoots wild or freezes or just melts like butter when he's called. I would be better off if I was too dumb to know what I am feeling.*

Dusk rose around him in a solid tide and night's sage smell wove its sharp scent into the breeze. Far across the black roll of the ground, lights at Riordon's cut yellow windows in the darkness, and he thought of the girl and for the first time was bitterly satisfied that he had never come out point blank clear and popped the question. *A corpse would be no good to her, and neither would a crawling husband, he thought. I should not have forced myself into her life and I should not have played my cards to boss this range.*

The fine lines at the corners of his eyes grew deep and sharp and doubts pulled taut at the hollow of his nape. But it did not occur to him to turn aside or delay. The lights of the town put their glow upon the dust cloud hanging over the main drag and, topping a long grade, he looked down into the town and rode on in.

He saw Fitzroy's heavy-shouldered range horse and close by it a faster looking pinto with a blurred brand, a horse too slight for rough cattle work, but with the lean trim cut of a pony used to fast running over long, rough trails. The man who had intercepted Tampson back on range and ridden a pinto, and he thought, *This is the one—this is the leader of the gunslicks and he has ridden in either to side Fitzroy if there is trouble, or to take his orders direct from the man who pays him.*

He moved on past, wanting time to cut for sign, and racked his horse in front of the Denver House. Men looked at him with a curious brightness in their eyes, and he knew they had sensed trouble when Fitzroy rode in, or else Fitzroy had made some boast, and they were waiting to see him back it.

He swung out of leather and limbered up and spur-dragged slowly through the town. The only white light in town streamed out from the full windows of the barber shop; beyond it, Reed's Feeds and Supplies was dark, with its awnings throwing a deep shadow, Hack Meyers wigwagged at him from the barber's and he stopped for a moment to look

in. A rider was coming in town at a canter, off the trail he ordinarily used to ride from town to Riordon's or his place.

He passed a word with Hack and turned just as Bat Riordon saw him and swung in to a hard stop from the street. Bat grinned at him and grunted, "You have got the luck of the devil, Luke! My sister said, if I saw you, to say she hadn't promised Wild for the shivaree, and she would go with you."

A big figure stiffened in the deep shadows of Reed's stoop, and as Luke moved over to the rail to talk with Bat, Wild Fitzroy moved from where he had been lounging and turned into the thick blue smoke and racket of the Silver Dollar.

Luke parted with Bat and drifted on around town, cutting no sign of importance and still undecided what to do. He stopped on the corner and stood blowing against his lips and, suddenly feeling the futility of his position, sucked a deep breath, and gave a man's tight grin, and moved across to the Silver Dollar.

Wild Fitzroy was standing midway of the bar, drinking alone, his color high and anger in his eye, and pressing abruptness in his motions. A few paces away stood a cold-eyed, hawk-nosed stranger, one foot on the rail, but his right hip back and sidewise, in balance and position for quick gunplay. Luke's attention went past Fitzroy and lingered on this man, and he reached the conclusion this was Fitzroy's top gunslick and that he stood that way from habit, and not for just that moment.

He swung his attention back on Fitzroy and the man had never looked so big and black and fiery. Uncertainty of himself put a dry luster behind into Luke's eyes, and a tightness into his throat, but he moved grimly onward.

Five feet from Wild Fitzroy he rooted his feet and said levelly, "Fitzroy, I rode in to tell you yore west pass is fired and will stay that way all night, and you owe me a chuck and bunk outfit for the ones yore bunch burned up today on high pasture."

FITZROY put down his glass with a solid sound and turned, and mayhem was a wild light in his angry eyes. Silence spread through the room like a tidal wave, and men edged back against the walls. Fitzroy looked at Luke and some deep inward fury jerked at his thick, scarred lips. But his voice came flat and carefully controlled. He said, "None of my riders have been on yore graze, Ringo, but some rustlers have been working from yore graze though that pass!"

It was not what Luke expected and it put perplexity into him. He saw surprise flick the stranger's face beyond Wild Fitzroy, and then

lightning calculation put its shrewd sharpness into his eyes.

"Ringo," Fitzroy rasped, "I don't like anything about you. I don't like the way you look or the way you smell or the way you try to use yore wits for fists. You were a puny moping pup in school, and you ain't changed any, and I am going to pull out yore guts with my bare hands one of these days."

"You talking yore way out of a showdown on this burning?" Luke demanded leadenly.

Fitzroy gave a toss of his big head and let out a snort of contempt that wavered the flames of the ceiling lamps. "Talk out of a showdown with you? Why, you scared little mistake for a man, I could make mincemeat of you with guns or knives or whips or fists—anyway you want to call it, I am ten times as much man as you! But I don't aim for a showdown until I find out what yore connection with this rustling business is. Understand?"

He jutted his head forward and there was an ugly smile upon his lips and he heard the wave of sucked in breaths that filled the room. But there was no humor and no satisfaction in his eyes; they were damned near berserk and savage violence was a bright, crazed light deep in their depths, and what was happening did not make sense. Then Luke knew as clear as being told that Fitzroy had somehow heard or had reported what Bat Riordon called in to him, and that his crossed pride and vanity had changed his plan. He had something in mind, but what it was, Luke couldn't fathom. In the meantime, he was not accepting the showdown he had asked for, and he was planting some ugly suspicions about Luke.

Relief went through Luke like a moist wind upon a sunburned skin. But with it came a sense of shame and kindled anger; he was ashamed of his relief. He had ridden in to get this over, and at the same time he was glad for anything that stalled it.

He said again, "It was yore outfit burned my wagons, Wild."

Mockery floated upon the surfaces of Wild's eyes. "Who saw 'em?" he demanded.

"Tim Grey heard yore trail call," Luke stated. "Yore trail call and yore voice, Fitzroy."

Fitzroy's eyes thinned and gave off a vindictive light. "Then Tim Grey will hear it another time and wish he hadn't." He jerked his head at the hard customer beyond him. "This stranger will bear me out. He rode my dust all the way in from where my north pass goes into the broken canyon country. That is half a day's ride one way. Ringo, yore trumped-up story smells—I ain't been near yore grass."

The stranger gave a short nod and grunted, "That's right, I was cussing his dust all day."

That left him nowhere, and Luke looked

down at the sawdust and growled, "Tim Grey don't lie and he don't take chances on being wrong. I'll get to the bottom of this."

"When I get to the bottom of this rustling business you're real liable to get to the bottom of boothill!" Fitzroy warned gruffly, and turned back to the bar.

There was a moment's silence while men tried to figure the queer turn of this, and then talk picked up jerkily, in the way that follows a situation that has left everybody guessing. Luke moved into the bar and had a few drinks, making figures with the wetness of his glass. Hate and rage had been driving through Fitzroy, and yet he had turned down the opportunity for a fight. And the stranger with him had been surprised at the turn of things himself—it looked as if Fitzroy had originally planned to take the showdown if it came, or if not, to build one or drive Luke crawling from the bar with insults. The rustling part might mean something or nothing, or simply be a seed of suspicion that would give him excuse later for gunning his way onto Luke's graze.

Luke stood there, thinking these things out, but they were like distant rolls of thunder, barely audible upon the solid roar of a stampede; his real thoughts were recognition of the relief he could not cast out of him, and shame that it was in him. Friends came and spoke to him but he shucked them off and drank alone, bitterly reliving that moment at the roundup when sky had shown between him and the bronco, and Fitzroy had walked off with the glory. It was not the losing that had mattered, it was the black and bitter feeling it had given him that, no matter when or at what, when he bucked Wild Fitzroy, he was bested.

His thoughts went back beyond that to the secret inferiority that had come down the years. He had been tricked out of the trained horse prize when some of Wild's friends let off a giant firecracker. But he lost just the same when his horse spooked out of training—that was the point. The year before it had been bulldogging; Wild had stopped his maverick in record time because of his weight and strength—but he had won, and Luke had wound up with a broken rib. At school, Wild had been the bully, bigger and tougher and glorying in his strength—but winning, even if he was a bully.

Luke's head lifted and vague memories tugged at him. He thought suddenly of the last time he had really and full-heartedly tried to buck Wild Fitzroy. He had gone half berserk with anger that day and exploded at Wild's hazing, and he had gone after Wild with something close to murder in his heart.

Wild had fought him, but it was in a different way; the bully had wanted to end that

particular fight damned fast, but the school was watching, and his rough cruelty was still in him, and he couldn't forget that. So he had backed off with that wickedness and fear intertwined, and then when he had Luke into position above a rocky erosion, he had bolted his full weight at him and sent Luke crashing twelve feet upon those boulders.

He had won and the lust of his cruelty had ripped out in his taunting laugh, but he had been afraid to fight straight out. This thought came suddenly clear and sharp and sure to Luke, and out of it he saw the crack in Wild Fitzroy's mettle. He was tough and wild and physically able to take any punishment there was, but he couldn't face the terrible thought of a licking.

For an instant, realization put a warm self-assurance through Luke, and then came the chill draft of reaction. Even if Wild couldn't face a licking—he still won.

THE stranger had enough and went out, and rode from town, and a half hour later, two of Wild's toughest waddies came in and had a drink and left with Wild. Luke stayed on, not getting drunk, but lost in thoughts and feelings. Men kept trying to probe the containment he put upon himself, but failed; and once it crossed Luke with ironic humor that he failed to probe himself.

The air grew heavy with waving layers of blue smoke, and sour sawdust and whiskey and tobacco juice put their strong smell through the bar. Men's voices grew loud and thick and argumentative. Luke tired of the place abruptly and, paying his tab, moved out into night's clean air.

He got his horse and jogged out for home, wondering what the next play was. Night lay black upon the hills and rocks, but the sky was starwashed, and the trail was a thin thread of silver-blue reflection running through the deep blue shadows. He was coming through the boulder field beyond his home coulee when the rope dropped over him and a man's weight struck him from above, and he smashed hard onto the ground with the rope tight and the man atop of him.

Horses moved and low, raw laughter ripped out of darkness, and Wild Fitzroy rasped from above him, "So you thought you'd go to the shivaree in purty company, Luke?"

Luke rolled and spat blood and thick dust from his mouth and felt ragged humor. In the middle of building a range war and a big push he had planned, it had been Maggie's decision of whom she would favor that had turned Wild crazy. He was jerked erect and the rope was knotted hard behind him. The stranger's sharp profile and Wild's solid face cut black silhouettes against the lesser shadows of the night.

"So you couldn't take that, Wild?" Luke asked coolly. "She was one thing you couldn't whip with yore fists, and you couldn't take a decision that looked like you were losing."

For a moment, the big man's eyes burned into him and there was no sound except the rasp of his heavy breathing. Then he chuckled again viciously. "I'm not losing, Luke," he pointed out. "I coulda ripped you to pieces or shot you dead for what you said back yonder, but now I want to see you crawling to yore glory and thinking of the girl who could see you dying from a near hill."

"Dryguleh?" Luke breathed, but his cold containment never left him. "It is what I should have expected of you, Wild."

Wild's arm lifted against the starwashed sky and fell, and his quirt slashed wickedly across Luke's face. He growled, "All right, throw him on that hoss and let's get moving."

Arms lifted Luke and put him in the saddle, and the party headed south of his property and through a pass. They rode in silence out across a high table with the chill of the altitude biting into Luke's bound body, and dropped down through a series of long gulches and picked their way carefully down Twenty Mile Footrock.

First dawn was a feel upon the air and the stars were blotting out, but it was still hot here; the trapped, burned-out heat of a dead desert that had not grown cold in a hundred thousand years.

They stopped and Wild Fitzroy came abreast of him to peer. "You know where you are, Luke? I want to be sure you ain't lost out here!"

"I know," Luke grunted. "We're just six miles out from the Footrock."

"And you know there ain't even a toehold up that old lava the whole length of here?" Wild breathed thickly.

Luke said, "I ought to. I carved out that trail."

"Well I been figuring it is where these rustlers are coming through," Wild grunted with vicious satisfaction. "So I just aim to dynamite it when we go out, Luke."

Luke sat stiff and numb with his jaws set and felt full impact of what that would mean. A man could damned near send his voice up to the tabletop, and he could stand down here and see a waterfall, but he could bake to death on that desert and fight himself raw against that footrock and never scale its fifty feet.

Wild's eyes filled with a crazed light and his mouth jerked. "Mebbe I am scared of losing, Luke," he rasped with his vicious chuckle. "Mebbe that's why I never lose when I can win!"

"You'll lose the girl," Luke told him with contempt. "And the range on top of that."

"What makes you think that?" Fitzroy growled.

"Because I am coming back from here," Luke told him.

Humor flamed in Fitzroy's eyes. "You don't think we aim to leave you water and yore hoss, Luke?" he chuckled. "I don't want to drag yore misery out."

He jerked his head at his two waddies. "Cut him loose and put him afoot."

The men moved forward, sawed at the rope at his back, and swung Luke off to the ground.

Wild sat gloating for a space and then rasped, "It is too bad you won't be around to see me married and boss of this range with my vent on all yore cows, Luke!"

CHAPTER THREE

Desert Payoff

TWO shots rolled against the paling night, and the waddies flung out their arms and pitched heavily. The stranger's metallic voice drawled, "Sit right there, Fitzroy!"

The rancher cursed, with amazement in his tone. "You can't double-cross me like this, Hart!"

"Nobody could double-cross a snake like you," Hart grunted. He moved forward and snaked out Fitzroy's gun. "But I reckon you might as well stay out here with yore friend and settle it betwixt you who has most guts. It would make you feel bad, Fitzroy, to see my outfit running off yore prime cattle."

His voice turned hard as granite. "Get down and walk over yonder."

Wild hesitated and the man prodded him and he got down. "You," Hart snapped at Luke, "come here and take yore last drink of water."

The outlaw gave him time for a full drink and then motioned him beside Fitzroy with his gun. He got down and took both guns from the waddies and made sure that they were dead. He gathered the horses and got back into his saddle. He said, "Fitzroy, murder is my business, but I'd eat live rattlesnakes before I'd be like you."

"God help you when I set out after you," Fitzroy grated. "I will cut yore liver out and hang it on yore tongue, mister!"

The outlaw gave a low, flinty laugh. "One thing yore forgetting," he pointed out. "I've got the dynamite and there ain't no way out of here afoot except that trail."

Wild Fitzroy sucked in a great lungful of air and took a crazed lunge forward. The outlaw touched his horse and simply rode him down. He reined up, but he didn't bother to look twice at the thrashing Fitzroy. He studied Luke's cool and contained expression

for a space and grunted, "I got an idea, friend, you'll get out of here."

He nodded and put the horses into motion, sinking slowly into the paling shadows that filled the desert. Fitzroy stopped thrashing, and then bolted to his feet and ran after the outlaw, calling hoarsely.

Luke rubbed circulation back into his rope-stiffened muscles and sat down on a boulder while dawn flushed up. Hart's parting remark still rang through him—but it was a grim compliment, if Hart meant it as much. He knew the desert like a book and with that trail over the footrock blown, there was literally no way out of here for a man afoot.

First there would be the heat and then the thirst and then crippling due to torn boots. This was the middle of a big basin, sharp cutting shale all the way up on every side. Toward the footrock there was a half mile strip of salt needles, a frozen sea of close set ridges, sharp as razors and hard as rock. Beyond that was a stretch of small loose rocks, heaped like matched gravel, and a man's foot would slide the round stones apart at every step he took. Then there was a sea of fine powdered sand dunes that would slide and gobble at his feet, and then two miles of cracked and checkered hardpan that picked up day's heat and grew hot as a stove, and then there was the lava footrock—scorching, rough as sandpaper, with ancient creases, but with the angle of the bluff reaching out overhead. It was fifteen miles down in one direction to get around that footrock, and the upper end dropped off into five hundred feet of perpendicular canyon.

No man could make it, he thought, but his emotions were cool and calm. He could still hear Fitzroy yelling, and from his voice knew that the man had floundered and hurt himself more than once, and was eating his strength with fear and croaking.

Dawn flushed yellowly and the lingering heat soaked up in the desert seemed to fill with fresh life and malice. They had left him his clasp knife and he took it out, and, carefully considering what he had to do, cut down his high cowboy heels.

A dull boom floated out from the footrock as the last shadows began to flush across the desert. A thick, hoarse yell followed, as if that sound had broken Fitzroy and left him spent. Luke listened with bleak grimness for a space, and then pulled on his boots and sat down to rest against a boulder, considering carefully that there was one chance in a million that a man might find a crease he could claw up in that footrock—if he reached it while he had the strength.

He had everything except his gun, and he snagged the makings and took a full, leisurely smoke, and then systematically threw every

item except his clothes, knife and tobacco away. The last shadows had scudded off the floor, and he looked out for a time across the bleak barrenness of the desert, clear now for a brief hour. Fitzroy was part way up the bowl, blubbering and cursing and fighting the dead rock. There was no sign of Hart, but he could tell from the line of the trail that it had been blown from the top.

HE FINISHED his smoke and from habit snubbed it out, and then, sucking a deep breath, flexed his muscles until they were relaxed, and set his trail. He moved zigzag back and forth across the bowl sides, moving at a careful steady pace to hold his blood pressure down and save strength. Shale slipped and he skidded from time to time, and each time slashed his hands. But his attention was riveted upon the bowl and he did not hurt himself badly.

The sun climbed up and its heat broke across the desert, and the bowl caught and reflected it back and forth and turned hot and airless as a pot. He sat down and rested and wedged a pinch of his smoking tobacco between his lip and teeth. He could not chew the shredded stuff, but it kept moisture in his mouth.

Glare formed early, before he was three quarters of the way up. He looked up through it and saw Fitzroy floundering with alternate seiges of anger and despair. His face was beet red with exertion and he was trying to fight a trail straight up, and on his next switchback, Luke cut sign on heavy hand-marks in blood.

He kept his attention on his own trail and felt morning's heat rising hot and dry and wearing. He cut down his pace, but shortened his switchbacks, thinking that a man worn with nerves and heat and thirst could clamber clear around that basin in a circle, once the haze was up.

The light thickened from clear gold to heating yellow, and he paused for rest again, and squinting up, saw Fitzroy heave over the rim of the bowl with outflung arms. His figure looked watery and shimmered in the forming glare. For a moment, Luke felt the intense and ageless quiet that held the desert, and caught a morbid reaction, and then put this feeling from him and moved on. It was, he judged, going past ten o'clock when he got free of the bowl; close to five hours climbing a grade the horses had dropped down in ten minutes.

Sweat was a constant dampness around his midsection and he loosened his belt. Spitfire was a thick foam in his mouth, and he searched for two round pebbles, white and smooth, and dropped them in his pocket. The glare was burning and bleaching out color, and he could

see movement shimmering ahead, but could not make Fitzroy's figure out.

He set his hat so the band did not bind his forehead, and pulled his collar upright, and put his bandanna high upon his nose. He took another pinch of tobacco and felt a faint but definite refreshment. He got to his feet and moved on into the needles, regretting that he could not have crossed this patch at sunup.

Glare turned solid white and blazing all around him; on every side, above him and underfoot. The heat was so intense he felt it in his lungs, but it was the glare that bothered him mostly. He could not set a trail and hold it; the sharp cutting ridging kept throwing his direction off. The ridges were cutting his boot soles and he moved carefully, trying to place his steps so that his instep bridged the rippling crests. Once he sprawled and his whole body felt mangled. Salt stung his cuts and thirst began to pull at his throat muscles.

Twice he heard Fitzroy's gasping roar and knew he had tumbled, and Fitzroy was a heavy man to fall. The last raw and gasping curse sounded to his side instead of ahead, and Luke stopped to try and sense his bearings. In that glare, a man could walk forever in a circle. No sun showed through the molten sky and in any case the glare was solid and blinding overhead, but the sweat at his middle was dryer on one side and from this he set his course again.

The harsh white light thinned out into a colorless metallic glare and the going turned abruptly level, so that he stumbled and fell from not being used to it. He was on hardpan and it was hot and burning as a stove, but he adjusted his position and lay where he had fallen, resting for a spell. When he sat up, he realized thirst and heat were beginning to get him added.

His hand touched something faintly damp and sticky, and he realized it was blood, probably from Fitzroy's footprints, but the light bleached color even from the blood. He used the last of his tobacco and took careful stock of himself. His throat was soring, his mouth was dry, his body was one throbbing ache, and glare was burning at his eyes. A buzzing was beginning in his head, and he felt the nearness of a moment's panic. He put it from him with effort, and gave a grim smile.

It would be, he judged, about one o'clock, but it might be even two hours later than that. He got to his feet and plowed ahead. He came into the gravel field and had to force his hazing senses back; each slide changed a man's position, and in a hundred yards, he could be back on his own tracks. He moved in short and careful stretches, stopping to make little piles of blistering rock, a terrific effort now, but giving him a line for some direction.

Occasionally he heard Fitzroy raving, his voice turning cracked and crazy, but the heat gobbled the sound. The gravel swamped out underfoot and gave onto burning sand, and he stopped for an eternity of pain in a shallow cup of the hot surface sands, where he could curl without roasting for a rest.

He felt stronger when he sat up again, but thought came slow and hard and his brain was surrounded with little flames, and he was beginning to see strange forms in the twisting glare. His tongue was thickening and he took out the two pebbles and put them in his mouth to suck. When he had been frozen once in a blizzard, his muscles had refused to move—getting out the pebbles made him think of that.

Getting to his feet required enormous energy and concentration, and he moved on, lurching through the sand dunes with wide, stiffening motions, telling himself repeatedly that he must not sit down again to rest, or he might not get up.

He stumbled in the cracked hardpan and fell flat, and lay there hurt and strengthless for a long time before he realized he had passed out of the sand. Heat was a pale scorching fire within him, searing the inside of his lungs. The glare was thinning out, he knew, but he could see now only in intermittent periods; streaks and explosions of wild color filled his vision, broken by periods when he could only see dead white light.

He fought concentration back into his head, and turned slowly this way and that until he got a dim sense of reaction to the sun's direct heat, and found he had turned around in getting to his feet and was headed back. He turned carefully, thought he was moving like a tightrope walker, due ahead. Actually he was staggering and lurching like a drunk; the cracked hardpan threw him many times he did not even know about. His mouth was filled with balled cotton and the sound of a river was rushing in his ears.

The desert came clear of haze and turned into a sea of violent pagan hues, and he stared through red-rimmed eyes a half mile ahead at the footrock. But he was a mile from the jagged dark streak that marked the trail, and thirst was crazing him, and he found he was crawling wildly on all fours.

He could not find the strength to rise, and in a moment of cold, calm thought, realized his strength was gone. He was done in and there would be no moon tonight—he was finished. He had a passing wonder of how Fitzroy had come out, and then peered with his intermittent sight around for the other, and suddenly saw the man's big figure lurching and running and halting, and falling and scrabbling like a crab, in his direction. Fitzroy came up and fell, clawing hardpan with hands worn

down to bone and, through the violence of his thirst craze, broke off and cried in a child's shrill, cracked voice, "Luke—don't go and leave me here to die alone!"

The broken cry was like water to Luke's body, and strength flowed back into him and he staggered up.

FIRE and noise filled Luke's head; his body was spent, his eyes were nearly blinded, and he had to fight off the wild mania growing from the ripping thirst within his throat. He had to concentrate a long time to bring his mind to Wild.

Then the man came fully upon his consciousness; ripped and gouged and bloody and battered from his falls, eyes wild with fear and stark from glare, in swollen, ugly eyelids. His lips were black and cracked and when he opened his mouth, his tongue showed thickened nearly to the roof. He was alternately whimpering with fatigue and raging with thirst, his voice deep in his chest, but rusty and cracked and coming from his dust-filled throat like the tear of an old saw.

Luke leaned on an arm and crackled at the big man, "Shut up! We're dying and that is bad enough!"

The speech cost him and he fell back upon his face. His senses were reeling off into space. Nothing seemed to matter now. The thought of dying took the place of thirst; it held his thoughts entirely.

The sun dropped, sliding behind a saddle, and put its fiery glow straight into his eyes. *Sundown*, he thought, and was vaguely conscious of Wild's racking cry. He thought, *Snakes die at sundown. . . .*

He looked across at Wild, and the idea struck half crazed humor from him. Out of the humor, pride and truculence and arrogance reared up. *Snakes*, he thought, *like Wild Fitzroy. This is no time for me to die!*

Hatred gripped him. Every thought and feeling in him flowed molten with a grim determination to outlast Wild. He staggered to

his feet and floundered on along the footrock. The sun dropped, but the desert's flame-yellow twilight lingered; it was not dark when he reached the trail. He steadied himself and stood sucking the still hot air into his lungs until he had the strength to lift his head.

The outlaw had planted his charge of dynamite and dropped a hole precisely the way he wanted it into the top of the trail. A perfect hole, with a narrow but serviceable ledge angling beyond the pile of rubble to the top!

Luke tried to run up the trail, and sprawled, and it was darkening when his senses gathered again. He could hear Wild's rasping rusty breath ripping the life slowly out of his big body; Wild had fallen behind him, but lay there, watching with red eyes aflame with thirst—but with a flame of something even deeper, the terror of being left alone.

The better man! Luke thought with crazed contempt, and began to crawl.

How long it took to reach the dynamite slide he could not guess. It took an incredible time feeling and fighting his way over the pile of rubble. Instinct alone guided him now. His mind was seldom conscious; effort had drained the last shred of his strength. He moved solely upon a grim determination to reach the top and, with his death, prove to the world he had been the better man of the two and had died ahead.

He clawed another yard and lay still, gutted of strength. From behind him came a slide of dirt, and a wild, half strangled sound, and then a berserk laugh that ran high and cracked into a rusty sob. After a space, Wild's voice rasped, "There's water right ahead!"

"There ain't no water we'll ever see!" Luke crackled.

"There's water," Wild repeated, his voice torn and inhuman, but with some quality of a small child's. "Right ahead, but I can't get to it, Luke. I can't get over this slide. Don't leave me here to die alone, Luke!"

Something wild and ferocious and savage ripped through Luke. His cracked lips peeled



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



back in a hideous grin. That big boasting bully couldn't get over the pile of rubble—but he, Luke, the little runt, had made it. And he would make the top of the footrock. . . .

He began crawling again, driven by the knowledge that he was literally dying, that his time was running out.

He came over the top and pitched forward with his arm flung out.

After a long space, he realized it was touching something familiar, and then he recognized the feel of a canteen cover.

The line was very thin between reality and fancy. The heat was drifting off the footrock and he had let his third drink trickle down his throat before he could feel sure this was real and not a hallucination.

Something moved not far away, and he identified a horse. He gave a wild lurch and pulled himself across the ground; it was his own horse, tethered to a rock.

His only thought was to pull himself into the saddle and let the horse take him home to die. But then he heard that rattling yell once more. He stopped and a great clarity came upon him.

He had proved he was the better man—but it still needed proving to the world.

HE FOUGHT his lasso loose and looped it to the pommel and, staggering against the horse, led it to the rim. Movement was slow and difficult, but he got a fixed noose around himself, and then he took another drink and shouldered the canteen, and crawled back down that narrow sliver of trail.

Twice he slipped and felt himself hang over that sheer drop onto the desert; it took an eternity to crawl back across the pile of rubble. He could just make out Wild Fitzroy's solid blackness, flaying the air and clawing the earth feebly in the pitch shadows.

He thought about the strength left in the man's body, and yet it was clear from Wild's torn breathing that he was dying. Then the reason struck Luke, and he cursed. Wild's immense vitality wasn't gone—he was dying from plain lack of courage.

"Why, you yellow pup!" Luke rasped, but the knowledge sang through him like a brook. He gave the man a drink, and cursed his sobbing, and managed somehow to get him looped in the rope. Then he called to his horse, fearful that she would not know his cracked voice, but she understood. She backed off from the rim, slowly, steadily, judging and meeting the pull without slack, but without violence, a perfectly trained cow pony.

In mid morning the whole range had gathered in town to discuss the big gun fight and raiding of Wild Fitzroy's cattle. Tampson had been killed, and the raiders had gotten away with most of Wild's best stock, it having

been graded and gathered right there for them, below the pass onto Luke's graze. Nobody knew what had happened to Luke, but Wild's charges were remembered, and there were speculations of whether Luke was with the raiders. Or, maybe, their chief.

Out of the morning's yellow heat a rider formed, and the town looked, and then somebody swore. "It's Luke's ghost riding back from hell!" and friends surged down the street to take him.

Luke threw off their help with a gesture, and did not stop until he got to the Silver Dollar. He reined up then and glared at them with eyes like fire.

He rasped at them, "Here is the man who brought the rustlers onto the range, and tried to drygulch me out upon the desert! His friends can take him until he gets well—but if he hangs around after that, I will shoot his top off!"

Out of his quiet and modest self containment, a violence he himself had never suspected came like a thunderbolt. He gave a movement and flung Wild's big body smashing down into the dust. He looked at the crowd again, and there was no longer need in him for wondering and planning—there was nothing he was uncertain of, nothing he had to hide.

"The outlaw gave us our test and I proved up," he said. "Any man who doesn't like what I say can step forward now. Wild is going to ride off this range and never come back again."

No man moved to help Wild, no man moved or spoke at all. It was Maggie who drove her horse forward to catch Luke's teetering figure and clutch him to her breast. Maggie, taking that dust-coated, blood-soaked spectre of a man like that in public, and calling out, "Anybody want to dispute my man?"

"Hell," Bat grunted, and moved forward from the crowd to help his future clansman. "There ain't anybody's going to dispute Luke ever again about anything, nohow!"

Then he had Luke in his big arms and was toting him in to Doc Crowder's. The crowd came suddenly out of its freeze and, reading much of the story from an intimate knowledge of the two men and the country, one man spoke for them all.

"When you can't scare 'em and can't lick 'em and can't kill 'em, then you gotta make 'em boss the range."

Tim Grey came in before sundown and, after a visit to Doc Crowder's, came out upon the balcony and called out, "The doc's just given that mustang boss of mine his orders. Two weeks soaking in a mudhole." He stopped and his sun-bleached sharp eyes sparkled with humor. "And the cooking of a certain lady in this crowd!"

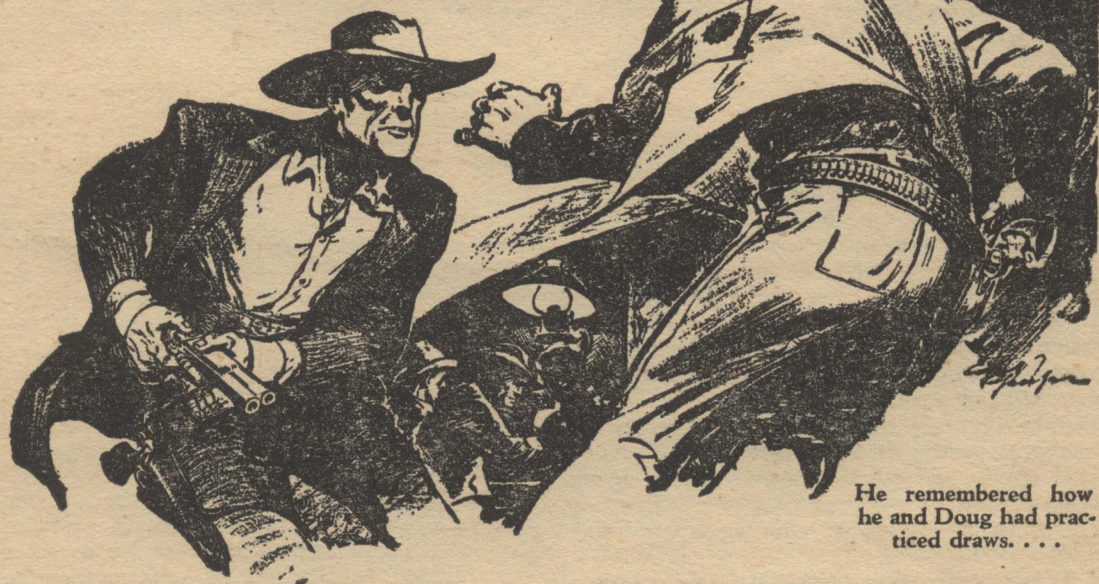
Hungry Guns

I

Little Town's gun marshal was always dressed fit to kill—so somebody was bound to attend to it!

By

REX WHITECHURCH



He remembered how he and Doug had practiced draws. . . .

THE sun was hotter than a red horse-shoe when Jimmy Malone tethered his piebald at the rail. Main Street was aflame it seemed, with the sun firing the windows of the stores. A man sat on a bale of hay, fanning himself with a flat-crowned black hat, fingering a heavy gold chain across an open black vest with the other hand. Jimmy saw a lawman's badge on the marshal's boiled shirt collar. The shirt was so white and clean, the young shepherd marveled at it. Dust swirled like a cloud from the rolling wheels of a buckboard.

The somberly clad officer eyed Jimmy sus-

piciously and pulled jerkily at his gunbelt. The man's boots shone like a mirror and his spurs were made of gold. His face was thin, with longish black sideburns, and his mouth was contemptuously thin. Jimmy ignored him. But he knew the lawman's agate eyes followed him, that the other was not pleased to see him in Little Town.

He batted open the swing doors of a saloon. Ten minutes later found him in an interesting poker game. He'd changed a hundred dollar bill at the bar. Gold coins, twenties. Gold was lucky for him in the jackpot. In less than an hour the gamblers at the round table had lost

two hundred to the quiet youngster in the sweaty plaid green-and-black shirt.

Betting money was the only way he could find to relax and get the bitterness out of his mind. Long John Kennedy, the marshal sitting outside, on the bale of hay, had killed Jimmy's brother in a gun fight a week ago. They said it was a fair fight, that Kennedy had bested the kid in the speed of their draws. To Jimmy Malone that was so much fishbait. There wasn't a man alive who could have beaten Doug Malone to his gun in a fair fight, with the odds even. What Jimmy suspected was that the lawman had packed a sawed-off shotgun under his coat, strapped down in a holster and had blasted Doug down without giving him a break, maybe when Doug wasn't looking.

"Bruises on his head showed he fell off his hoss," said Jimmy's informer. "I was at the undertaker's and saw them bruises and they looked purty bad to me. I asked some questions, but the shroud-dealer was scairt to talk, leastwise that's the way he impressed me. Long John Kennedy's got everybody scairt of him in Little Town."

"Did you see the gunshot wound?" Jimmy had asked.

"Nope," said the informer. "This here undertaker wouldn't undress him till everybody was out of the establishment. I had to git out of there, too. But Doug's shirt was too bloody to be just one hole in his chest."

Yes, there was acrimony and bitterness in Jimmy Malone's mind. Riding the lonesome trail from the sheep camp had given him time to dope out his pending actions. He knew what he was going to do. They said the reason Long John had shot the kid was because Doug resembled an owlhooter who had held up the Red Top stage. When the marshal approached him, those same witnesses said, Doug had jumped down off his cayuse and grabbed for his six-shooter. Kennedy had been the quickest, winning by a hair's width.

What rankled was the kid had never done a wrong thing in his life. He'd been lovesick over a painted woman in Butte, but he hadn't done anything about it. Jimmy remembered how he'd tried to get Doug to see the light, telling him a woman who wore paint like that one did, and spangled skirts, wasn't the right gal to tie to, that she wasn't meant to be anyone's wife. Doug had lifted an argument there. He'd clenched his fists, leaned forward over their campfire and said hotly, "A woman like that can be just as good as one who sings in a church choir, when she wants to. You're not fooling me on Phoebe. She's got character, personality; she's a fair dealer. I don't give a damn what you think of her, I love Phoebe and if she'll have me, I'll marry her."

But Jimmy figured what he'd said to Doug was soaking in. He let it go and didn't bring the subject up again. Jimmy wasn't talking through his hat; he believed what he said. A panited woman! He scoffed at any possibility of a painted woman's being worth a damn for anything—except making suckers out of men.

ALWAYS Jimmy had looked after Doug, ever since their mother died. They had worked together as sheepherders for a sheepman named Parker, and Doug had been paid a month's wages and given a week off by Parker to get drunk and have himself a good time.

The boss had informed Jimmy he thought being alone wasn't the thing for Doug. Jimmy thought then he understood. They had worked together, but there had been nights—long nights—when they were several miles apart and met only at breakfast, sometimes not then. The reason Jimmy knew his kid brother hadn't robbed the Red Top stage was because Doug had spent that same night at Parker's house, where the rich sheepman had entertained him.

It was a grave injustice. Jimmy Malone hadn't been able to sleep since learning of his brother's death, but he hadn't gone off half-cocked. He spent some time making up his mind. Now he got up from the poker table, took two drinks of whiskey and, with his winnings, walked out to boothill to see his brother's grave. There was a pine marker at the head of the mound under the lonely cottonwood tree. On the paddle was printed in scarlet paint:

KILLED BY JOHN KENNEDY, marshal,
IN A FAIR GUNFIGHT, July 9, 1871.
DOUGLAS MALONE

Jimmy reached down, seized the marker and yanked it out of the soft sod. He put the paddle in his coat pocket. Then he rolled a cigarette and squatted on his hunkers over the grave, hearing the birds in the trees, the forlorn turtle doves, the hungry sigh of the wind across the open places, the fragrance of green-ting things, the peace of the cemetery, the only peaceful place in the world safe from the strident actions of men.

He was glad his mother wasn't here to suffer; that hurt in her heart, her long nursed fear, had not been without justification. Doug, young and reckless, had hurt his mother and built a grave fear in her mind; but she hadn't known of Doug's valiant effort to straighten up, his vow never to commit a crime, his swearing off drinking—Doug had never told her.

Jimmy saw the shadows lengthen and fash-

ioned another cigarette. It was a good mile back to Little Town and he figured he'd better be heading back. He had a job awaiting him that had to be done. Something dragged at his heart as he got up and leaned against the friendly tree.

It surely must be awful lonely here when the sun went down and night got thick and black, when the owl sentries came on duty. But Doug probably didn't know anything about it.

"Well, Doug," he said, standing there with his hat in his hand, "I'm going to take care of everything for you. Daggone it, I'm shore missin' you, fella. Don't reckon that dancer in Butte's goin' to miss you, though. I tried to tell you, boy. She's—"

Jimmy heard someone walking but he didn't look around. No doubt the lawman had followed him out from Little Town, just suspicious-like. Maybe he was lookin' for trouble, trying to hurry the matter along. Jimmy thought maybe Kennedy was trying to keep him from finding out the truth.

A shadow passed him, and he heard the faint rustle of skirts. He didn't look up, even then, but he knew the woman was peering at him from the other side of Doug's grave. She bent down and placed a little wreath quietly on the grave. The flowers were red, and her cheeks were the same color. The sun made the crimson seem brighter because suddenly it had worked its way through the cottonwood's branches. Now Jimmy Malone took his hat off again, and he felt something go quivering through him.

"Poor Doug."

The girl's voice reached Jimmy, and their eyes met. He could tell her eyes were blue. He was startled, yet he wasn't. *I guess she ain't got nobody else to grieve about, he thought, with disdain rising in his chest. Or maybe she just wanted to get away from Butte, away from the boots and spurs of the drunks she had to wrestle with on the dance floor.*

He walked disgustedly away, aware of the pine paddle in his pocket. Yes, Jimmy Malone was surprised.

He got back to town, dirty, with the warm dust covering his boots. He stomped down the board sidewalk, past the Wells Fargo Express office. When he glanced, coyote-like, over his left shoulder, he saw Long John Kennedy come out of the office, and heard the grim tattoo of the lawman's boot heels all the way to the saloon. But Jimmy went in and sat down at the same poker table, with a handful of gold twenties.

He sat facing the street window, and he could see those who passed along the walk. He wasn't surprised when he saw the marshal stop and stand, staring at his piebald. Then

he saw the lawman step down off the sidewalk and walk around to the far side of the horse. The man's slim pale hands hefted the saddle bag, and Jimmy grinned to himself. But when Long John Kennedy removed the carbine from the saddle boot, Jimmy Malone felt his nerves tauten. A moment later the marshal vanished beyond the window.

"You'll have to excuse me, gents," he said to the poker players. "I got important business to attend to now. What I put in th' pot goes to the winner."

Without looking back, he stomped out of the saloon. As the batwing doors swung shut behind him he paused, sent searching glances up and down the street. The black-clad lawman had vanished.

JIMMY stalked toward the express office. He opened the door cautiously and went in. Several men were waiting there for the Red Top stage, which was due now any minute. But there was no star-polisher.

Wheeling, Jimmy stalked back to the door. He let his fingers touch the varnished butt of his Colt. He kept his head up, looking straight ahead. He saw the stage coming; the scarlet roof shimmered in the sun, horses rolled up the dust in sheets. Jimmy stood and slowly rolled a cigarette.

With a stomping of well-shod hoofs, the horses were reined in, the wheels stopped rattling in front of the express office. The steel-trimmed box was dropped into the road. Two passengers got out. Four were waiting to get in. The bearded driver of the coach swung down off the red seat and, as he passed Jimmy Malone, he stopped, scratched his chin, then went on doggedly into the building. A stern smile touched Jimmy's lips.

Stalking off up the street, Jimmy heard the fiddles playing in the dance hall just off the saloon. A thin partition separated the two rooms, but a wide Spanish arch communicated with both. As Jimmy paused inside the batwings he heard a voice say furtively, "Reckon so. Long John's gunning for him!"

Jimmy Malone scanned the large room, but saw nothing of the marshal. Someone came in behind him. He recognized the grizzled driver of the stage. The other elbowed past him, hesitated, scrutinized the faces at the bar and those at the gaming tables; then he spun, about to leave. He spied Jimmy.

For a moment they stared at each other. Again the whiskered driver scratched his chin. He tipped his slouch hat closer to his eyes. He swelled out his chest and spat a wad of tobacco out the door, holding one of the wings back.

"Seed Long John?" he asked. "Where in tarnation does that ornery star-polisher keep hisself when his services air needed?"

"Maybe he's out at the cemetery," Jimmy said slowly. "Maybe so he's lookin' at the graves of his innocent victims. Or maybe so he's pickin' out a right purty site for his own bed. Who knows?"

The aged driver studied him curiously, with rheumy eyes. But there was still a shine of shrewdness in them. They were deep-set eyes but they were bright as candles burning in a dark cave with the wind flickering the flames. "You c'n be right, son," the old man said so softly Jimmy could barely distinguish his words. "Long John has been known to get the wrong hog by the snout. Wal, I reckon I'll give him up. I had a little message fur him. I 'low it'll keep, though, till I come back through here in th' mawnin'."

He went on his way. Jimmy Malone felt something groping for him. It was like an octopus with its many arms reaching out. He wondered vaguely if one of those slimy tentacles would secure a good enough hold to keep him fast.

Still stalking, waiting for a drop of information, or proof, Jimmy made several saloons without finding the lawman. Sundown turned the heavens to violent tints, and with deeper dusk came the insects to torment sweaty faces. The dim lamps that lighted the wide main street painted yellow roses on the windows of the falsefronts. Jimmy walked through the poor light to the hitch-rail, mounted his piebald and rode around to the town's only livery stable.

He saw a black hearse standing in the yard, and a flunky was scrubbing the windowed walls. It was a rough affair that long since had worn out its vigor. The wheels were warped, one of the glass walls had a long crack in it; paint had been chipped from the scrollwork and the bare hard wood showed like battle scars. Jimmy built a cigarette and watched the flunky.

"Gettin' ready for a funeral?" he asked casually, holding a match to his smoke. "A big one?"

"We treat 'em all alike," said the youth, red-headed, squint-eyed and freckled. "We don't make no differences. Come big, come little, when they're corpses they're all th' same."

Jimmy grinned, and found that standing beside the black hearse didn't bother him. He could think of a lot of things harder to do than to die. It was about a man's easiest job.

"We don't have no funerals scheduled," the boy added, obviously liking to talk once he got started. "Usually we have one a week. Sometimes several in a row, on th' same day. In this hot weather corpses don't keep so well. Shucks—there's old Eagle Eye, th' undertaker. Maybe we'll have to go out sommers and fetch in a body."

"Could be." Jimmy Malone felt his pulses quicken at sight of the lean, angular young man in the black, long-tailed coat and tall silk hat. He was sandy red; he had heavy whitish eyebrows, a thin mouth, rapacious like the mouth of a big freshwater carp. He had a big gold watch chain strung across a white vest. In his pale right hand he carried white gloves. His gray, striped pants were in shiny boots.

"GETTING ready, Darbie?" asked Eagle Eye. He doffed his hat, wiped the inside with a handkerchief; stuck the hat back on his head, and the handkerchief into his breast pocket. He slapped his coat nervously with the white gloves, as if dislodging invisible dirt he knew was there.

"It pays to have Old Crow dressed up when we need her. How about the black mares, Darbie? You got them all ready to ramble?"

"Shore have, Doc Eagle," Darbie said. "I'll be right glad when I'm done with this hearse wagon, though. It shore makes me nervous. I keep thinkin' about how we haul them corpses. Like that young feller Long John shot when he mistook him for a owlhoot. I never saw a body so shot up in my life. . . ."

The undertaker's dry, insistent cough hushed the flunky, and when Jimmy moved forward out of the crepelike shadows he saw Doc Eagle's colorless whitish eyes scan his face hurriedly, as though he might be looking for something.

"Doc Eagle," Jimmy said, "whut about th' feller he was talkin' about? Was he riddled with buckshot th' way I been hearin' tell he was around Little Town, while I been here?"

"Who's been saying such ridiculous things?" Eagle was plainly distressed. "Why there's nothing to that spiteful gossip. The boy had just one bullet hole in him, in his chest under the heart. I think the marshal's gun is a .45. I don't know. But I can tell you one thing, stranger—it wasn't a shotgun he used. Long John simply beat the youngster to the draw."

"Well, it ain't necessary to go into details," Jimmy said laconically. "I'm not that much interested. I'm just passin' through here."

Doc Eagle's eyes seemed to bore and bore, like he figured if he kept at it he'd hit pay-dirt. Again he removed his tall silk hat, mopped the inside band, and Jimmy thought he was doing a tall job of sweating. Finally the undertaker swung around on his heels and took off. He walked like a mountain lion. Jimmy couldn't hear his heels thudding because evidently they didn't thud.

The flunky went on with his polishing rag. He listened, then peered sheepishly at Jimmy. "Keep it quiet, friend. That hombre may be still a-listenin', but he's a plumb liar about that corpse not bein' riddled with buckshot."

Jimmy Malone sauntered through the darkness toward the saloon. The stars peeped over shrouded, wooded mountains, curiously, like they were trying to see what was going on on the earth. The fiddlers were still at it, as were the dancers.

Jimmy thought he was closer than he'd ever been to the truth. It was only a little matter of time—then he'd go back out to Doug's grave and say, "Doug, everything's squared up now, and you can rest a whole lot better." Either that or he'd be lying out there with the lonesome sounding hoot owls guarding him. They didn't call it boothill. They had a fancy name for it. Laurel Cemetery, they had named it. Burial lots cost two hundred dollars.

Jimmy stopped at the express office. The undertaker was talking to the Wells Fargo agent. He said something about expecting a shipment of coffins. He looked at Jimmy and wet his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"What you think of Little Town?" he asked, slowly taking his elbow off the counter.

"You've got a beautiful cemetery," said Jimmy Malone. "Allow there ain't a nicer town for a feller to die in, Doc." He slued around and started to the door, his spurs jingling.

Doc Eagle said, "I'm going over to the Buckhorn, stranger, and if you'll accept my hospitality—"

"I'll be glad to, Doc," Jimmy said, making a quick decision. "Besides, I hear you sell them cemetery lots for two hundred dollars, and I'm a-wantin' one."

They walked over the board sidewalk to the saloon, Eagle saying, "I've got a deed to one in my pocket. We might as well do business while we enjoy a few drinks. Of course if you could see what you were buying—"

"I'll take any one of them you've got th' deed to, right now," Jimmy said. "I don't care where it's located. It'll suit me if it's in some far corner with none around it. I always was a good hand for stayin' away from crowds."

Doc Eagle laughed. They stomped across the deep room to the bar. Behind the black bar was a rebel flag, and above it a Yankee flag. Jimmy felt the warm whiskey toning up his stomach. After the second slug he felt better; he paid Eagle for a lot, number 16, location southeast corner,

"You've got a profitable business," Jimmy said. "You sell the burial lots, the shrouds, the coffins and conduct the funerals. Not bad."

"It's not a business to think about," Doc Eagle protested. He turned to the bar. "Give me a double shot of rye," he said to the bartender.

Jimmy stuffed the deed to the burial lot in his coat pocket, said, "Thanks for th' drinks, Doc. I enjoyed your hospitality." Then he walked off across the room, rolling with the rhythm of the fiddles which suddenly stopped. The dancing was over. A crowd poured under the Spanish arch and lined the bar. Jimmy stood undecided. He was after Long John Kennedy now, and there would be no stopping until one or both of them were dead. *It might be me, Jimmy Malone said to himself. But it won't do to let matters run along as they are. What's makin' it so tough for me is th' promise I made Doug and maw. I'd never stain my hands with blood. It shore looks like I ain't got much choice now.*

Funny his promise, given when he was far from thoughts of killing anyone, now burned his brain like a red hot branding iron and made every nerve in him quiver like a violin string that had been struck too hard and not struck again.

AND then he saw Long John Kennedy come through the arched door. Beyond him a woman's heels clacked hard on the pine boards. The lawman held himself stiffly erect, as though he might be wearing a corset with steel staves in it under his buttoned black coat.

They eyed each other. Kennedy had stopped, with his thin, waxen hands clasped upon his stomach, the white cuffs of his shirt covering them to the knuckles. The nearest gaming table in the big room was at least ten feet away. Jimmy could see nobody paying any attention to them.

"Kennedy," he said coldly, "I'm lookin' for you. You've got a little explainin' to do, feller—about murdering my kid brother."

"You talk big, owlhooter," the lawman snapped. "I guess you and me better step outside. I been watchin' you, Malone. You're either goin' to jail or to the cemetery."

Jimmy patted the deed to the graveyard lot in his pocket and his grin was generous. "Where you want to go to settle this?"

"Suits me to step into th' dance hall," the marshal said. "It's empty right now. You see, mister, I'd rather have you dead than alive. I guess you knew I was after you. I took your saddle carbine because I didn't want to be shot in th' back. If you want to go to jail peacefully, we'll call it off. If not I can put you in jail, feet fust."

Jimmy Malone shrugged, bolted through the door, and strode on across the big room that seemed to be haunted with the specters of those who'd been planted in Laurel Cemetery. But there was nobody in the dance hall that could lay claim to flesh and blood. There was a gallery around the top of the room, but when he glanced quickly up he didn't see anyone

peering down at them, and Jimmy naturally figured it was another of those ghosts he was thinking about that had made the sneaking sound.

Long John Kennedy had gone swiftly into action, and a button flew from his black coat because he'd jerked at it. He had the sawed-off shotgun about half out of its hidden sheath, and was moving pretty fast. There was no longer any doubt in Jimmy's mind about how Doug had met his death.

He remembered how he and Doug had practiced drawing their guns before mirrors at home, and how his mother had scolded them for it. A man does a lot of thinking when he's facing his Maker and years crowded through Jimmy Malone's brain in a fractional moment. He felt his hand close on the varnished handle of the six-gun and sweat filmed on his face. He was leaning slightly forward when he saw the flash of the shotgun before he'd cleared leather. But he could clear it before Kennedy could lift the shotgun into line.

Through the ghostly radiance of those flickering kerosene lamps Jimmy beheld the black-clad lawman cradling the gun to his side. His teeth flashed, his face was white as death and those black sideburns were like soot marks made by nervous fingers in front of his ears. His chest was wider than Jimmy had thought, and the white spotless front of his shirt was Jimmy's target.

And then a gun sounded, crashing against the spooky stillness of the dancehall. It was a shot that could be heard out in the saloon. It had about it a certain deadly emphasis. And Jimmy, craning forward, in his gunfighter's crouch, felt the impact of the bullet, as the lawman shoved against him. Long John Kennedy threw the shotgun and it crashed against the wall. When he hit the floor he knocked one of the lamps down and it fell on his back. He was down, face pressed to boards, till he twisted over and flailed with his feet as death became a thing quite definite.

Jimmy still stood there, his gun clear of leather, clenched in his fist at his right side, a look of surprise on his white, strained face.

"Up here, Jimmy Malone." A voice reached Jimmy which sounded like a wind whisper but of course it was louder than that. He ran crazily toward a staircase. He bounded up the gallery steps, gun in hand.

A girl stood waiting for him, in a white ruffled dress, with a red flower in her black hair. Her high cheeks were the color of the roses she had placed on Doug's grave that afternoon. In her hand was an ancient single-action revolver, which still reeked with gun smoke. She pushed Jimmy through a swinging door, down a long hall, down some more steps into a black alley. Insects hummed against Jimmy's sweating face.

"The stage driver said they got the real bandit in Butte," she stated. "The one Doug was supposed to look like and the one you resemble, too, according to what the driver told me. He saw you, knew you were Doug's brother, but that you were all right. You must leave Little Town, though, at once, and never come back."

"Why?" Jimmy wanted to know.

"I'm going to make them believe you killed Kennedy. They won't suspect me. You see, Jimmy, your hands aren't red, but mine are. You never wanted your hands red. Doug told me. And now—as long as you stay away from here, I'll be safe. If they catch you—I'll have to tell them the truth."

"Why?"

"I loved Doug," she said. "Do you think I could let you kill Kennedy or be killed by him? I had to shoot Kennedy, but he tried to get me to shoot you from the gallery. He was a glory hunter, with nothing with which to back up his ambition to be a great gunfighter. He murdered Doug, sure, over me. And because Doug resembled the owlhooter that held up the stage he had a good excuse for killing him. For a long time Kennedy had tried to get me to marry him. He found out about Doug and he would've killed him anyway. Then he tried to get me to shoot you in the back from the gallery, and I pretended I'd do it. He believed me because he had some big diamonds he'd taken off men he'd killed and I pretended to want them. I was trying to save you, Jimmy. As long as you stay away from here I'll be safe. But—if they catch you, I'll have to tell them the truth."

"Why?"

"It's about all I can do for Doug," she whispered. "Get going, and don't let them catch you."

Jimmy said, "What's your name?"

"Phoebe Malone," she said simply. "Doug and I were married the day Kennedy shot him off his horse when Doug wasn't looking."

Their hands lingered, and hers was very cold.

QUICKLY the flunky, Darbie, saddled Jimmy's piebald. Jimmy Malone rode past the hearse. He stopped, removed the grave marker from his pocket and patiently printed on the pine slab in pencil:

LONG JOHN KENNEDY, MARSHAL,
KILLED IN A FAIR GUNFIGHT BY
THE BROTHER OF THE BOY WHOSE
NAME IS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF
THIS GRAVE MARKER.

Jimmy stuck the slab in the hearse, put the deed to burial lot 16 on top of it, shut the hearse door and spurred gently his piebald.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 57)

DO YOU really know your West? Then take a look at the twenty questions listed below and see how many correct answers you can smoke out. Peg down and hogtie eighteen or more of them and you're top rider in our outfit. Call the turn on sixteen or seventeen and you're still good. A score of fifteen keeps you out of the lenty class. So good luck, amigo—and no yamping the answers in advance!

1. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you that some nearby cattle were "standing on their heads," you would know he meant: The cattle were grazing? The cattle had their heads pointed away from a storm? The cattle were attempting to bury their heads in the sand?

2. When a Westerner is "on the *cuidado*," he is: Living off the community because he is unable to support himself? Lying on the ground after being thrown from a horse? Dodging the law?

3. In the slanguage of the old-time trapper, what is the meaning of the expression "made wolf meat out of him?" How did the expression originate?

4. What is a "mail-order cowboy?"

5. What is the cowboy slang expression "gut-warmer" used in reference to?

6. If a cowpuncher told you he had just had "his pony plated," you would know he meant that: He had just had his horse shod? He had just bought a new silver-mounted saddle? He had just finished combing his horse? He had just sold his horse to a tenderfoot for a good deal more than the animal was really worth?

7. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "cut the deck deeper?"

8. True or false? When a cowboy says he has "cut his suspenders," he means he has left one part of the country for another.

9. The Western phrase, "chucking the Rio," is used of: A Northerner who affects the dress and ways of the Southwestern cow-

puncher? A cowhand who tires of working in Mexico and returns to the United States? A rustler who drives stolen cattle across the *Rio Grande*? Any ranch hand who has a special liking for Mexican food?

10. True or false? The term "chouse" means to handle cattle roughly and thus to upset or annoy them unnecessarily.

11. True or false? In cowpuncher terminology, a "cradle" is a rawhide sling or cradle which hangs under a wagon and is used for carrying fuel.

12. If the ranch boss told you to obtain some California buckskin for him, you would immediately hunt up: The hide of a bobcat? Some baling wire? A pair of very fancy chaps? Some ordinary buckskin?

13. To the Westerner, what is the meaning of the word, "butte?"

14. True or false? To the cowpuncher, a "bull nurse" is a rangeland doctor.

15. What is meant when a cowboy is said to have "taken the big jump?"

16. True or false? A "biddy bridle" is an old fashioned bridle of the type having blinders.

17. What is a "bag pannier?"

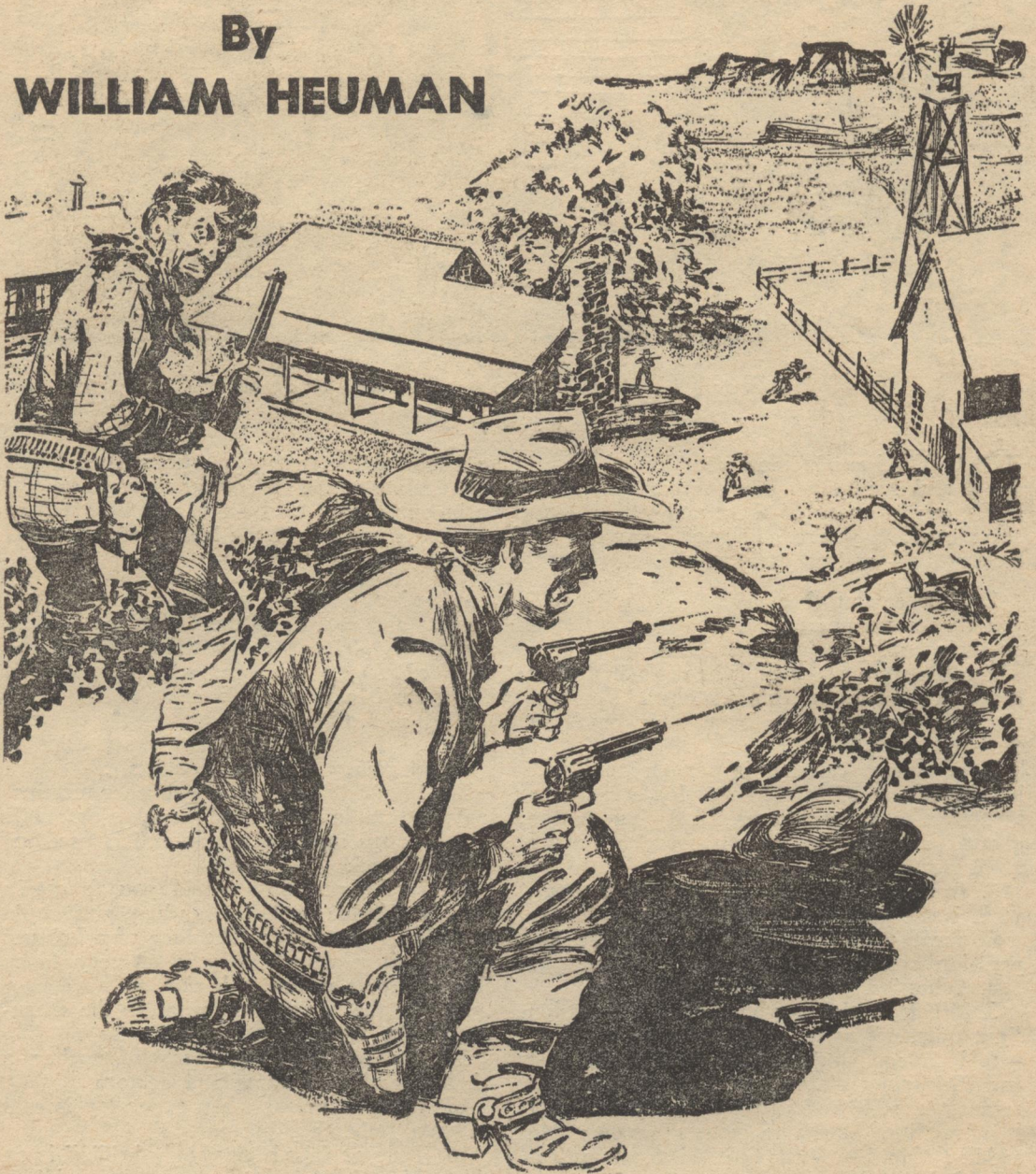
18. If a cowboy said he was "going after some bait," you would know he was intending: To eat some food? To hunt up a gambling hall? To buy some ammunition for his gun?

19. True or false? The Spanish word "*aparejo*" means packsaddle.

20. What is an "apple horn?"

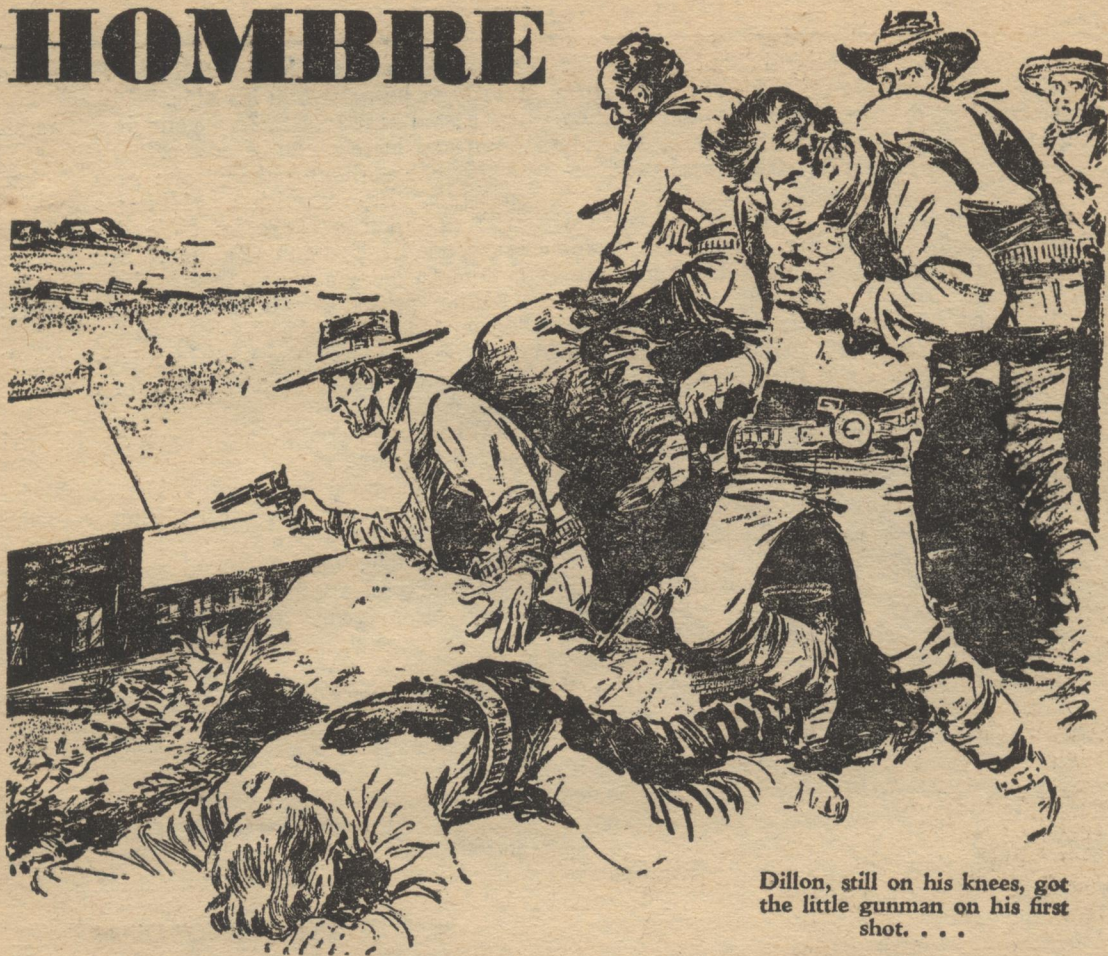
HELL-TRAIL

By
WILLIAM HEUMAN



*In Travis City, Dillon found, they shot
you for a howdy—and if they liked you
they didn't miss!*

HOMBRE



Dillon, still on his knees, got the little gunman on his first shot. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Bullets for Breakfast

DILLON came down on the other side of the pass after dusk, a chill rain, mixed with snow, driving into his face as he let the big gray pick its way down through the aspens. He had his slicker buttoned up tight around his neck, and his black, flat-crowned hat pulled low over his face, the brim floppy with water.

The rain trickled down his long-jawed face, dripping from his chin. Wet snow settled down in the hollow of his hat, and occasionally penetrated the slicker collar. As he rode through the gloom, his dust-colored eyes moved from right to left, searching for a likely camping spot. He heard water moving through the trees to his right and turned the gray in that direction, dismounting when he saw the stream racing down the mountain side.

It was a dreary, bedraggled camp that he made, but he went about it methodically, selecting his site on a level piece of ground a

short distance from the stream. It took fully a half hour to find enough pieces of dry wood to get his fire going. He had to hack dry, dusty chips from one end of a rotted log as tinder, and then he had to dry out dead sticks and boughs before he could use them on the fire.

It was another half hour before he had sufficient light to set up a crude lean-to in front of the fire. With his axe he hacked off balsam boughs and draped them across the roof, spreading his slicker over the top of the boughs for further protection from the rain.

He had his coffee water boiling on a stone next to the fire, and was filling his pipe, enjoying the heat from the fire in the lean-to, when the rifle cracked from a point off to his right.

The slug smashed through the fire, knocking several burning sticks away from it, sending up a shower of sparks. He'd taken off his gunbelt, and it was lying on the balsam boughs

forming a bed just behind him. He didn't reach for the gun. He finished filling his pipe, and then put it into his mouth and reached inside his shirt pocket for a match. He adjusted the coffee pot a little, so that it received more benefit from the heat.

Then he puffed on the pipe and stared into the flames, the soggy hat still on his head, pulled low over his eyes, a tall, rangy man, whose lean, brown face showed no emotion.

He heard a twig crackle out in the brush, but didn't look that way. Someone was coming through the trees. Then the sounds stopped.

A boyish voice, filled with bitterness, snapped, "Throw that gun over here, mister."

Ed Dillon looked that way for the first time. He took the pipe from his mouth and then looked at the rain sizzling into the fire.

He said, "Hell with you. I'm not getting it wet."

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then the boy in the brush just beyond the firelight started to curse him bitterly, intensely, a note of hysteria in the words.

"If you don't throw that gun out, mister," he finished, "I'll blow your damned head off where you sit."

Another voice came in, calm, deliberate, a woman's voice, and Dillon's gray eyes widened. The girl said, "Wait, Sam. We don't know who he is."

"We know damned well who he is," the boy snapped. He started to come forward then into the firelight. He had a slim, almost delicate face, the corners of his mouth drawn down in despair. His lips were parted and he was breathing heavily, gripping a rifle, his finger on the trigger.

He repeated tensely, "We know who he is, Karen."

Ed Dillon watched Karen come through the dripping trees a few feet behind the boy. She wore a slicker and a slouch hat. Wet chestnut curls straggled out from beneath the hat. She was thin in the face, and bitterness showed in her eyes also, although she seemed able to control herself more than the boy. Dillon saw the likeness between the two.

Dillon said softly, "Who am I, kid?"

He figured the boy to be about seventeen; the girl could be in her early twenties—brother and sister riding around on the eastern slope of this pass in the night, taking potshots at passing strangers. He did not know the setup as yet in this country, but he was sure that this had something to do with the reason for his coming to Stoneman County.

The boy said tersely, "You're one of the dogs shot my brother in the back yesterday and left him lying in the creek mud."

Karen spoke again. She held a six-gun, and Dillon looked at it curiously. The weapon

bulked enormous in her small hand. He smiled faintly as he puffed on his pipe.

He said quietly, "Put up your guns and sit down and have a cup of coffee."

"I'd eat with a snake in the grass," Sam spat out. "I'd eat with a stinking sow—"

"Sam," Karen broke in. "We don't know every one of Drummond's men." She said to Dillon. "Where are you from, mister?"

Dillon jerked his head back at the pass. "Other side," he said.

"Who'd go over the pass in this weather," the boy snarled, "but a hired killer after his blood money?"

"Where are you going, mister?" the girl wanted to know.

Dillon looked at her steadily. He shifted the pipe in his mouth. He said, "Where I come from, miss a question like that could get a man in trouble. Or a woman."

"Where you are," Karen told him grimly, "you'll be in twice as much trouble if you don't answer me. We have a dozen men back in the brush there, waiting to string up fellows who carry big guns and won't answer questions."

Dillon nodded. He said, "I think I'll like this country."

"Where are you going?" Karen snapped at him. He could see that she had been under terrific strain, and the murder of her brother yesterday, had brought her near the snapping point.

"Thought I'd pick up work," Dillon stated.

"There's work at the Bar G," the girl said grimly.

"Your place?" Dillon wanted to know.

"Mine," Karen said.

"Figure I'll look around a bit," Dillon said. He saw the anger flare up in the girl's face, turning it brick red.

"You'll remember this"—young Sam was almost howling—"if we catch you ridin' for Jack Drummond we'll string you up the first time we catch you alone!"

Karen took his arm and almost dragged him away from the fire. Dillon watched them go without getting up. He listened to them going through the brush and then he heard two horses moving away. He picked up the coffee pot and poured himself a cup.

He sat there for an hour after eating, listening to the crackle of the fire. The rain stopped after a while and he went out to search for more wood. He'd tied the gray a short distance back in the thicket, and looked in on it to see that everything was all right.

IN THE morning the sun was bright on this eastern slope, although it was still cold up here in the mountains. He figured the distance to Travis City to be about twenty-five miles.

Coming down from the slopes he rode across high, rolling hills spotted with clumps of trees. He noticed the thickness of the grass and the condition of the cattle scattered across these hills. All of them were branded on the flank with the Bar G brand.

At high noon he skirted a group of buildings off to his right which he took to be the Bar G spread, and gave them plenty of room. He noticed their size—the big bunkhouse, the barns, the corrals—and smiled, thinking of the girl and her brother. And then the smile fled away when he remembered the other brother who had been drygulched.

He fell into the road which angled off from the Bar G, and followed this for several miles, crossing a small wooden bridge over a fifty foot wide sand creek.

Scattered along the east bank of the creek he saw the nesters' shacks, with their small plots of enclosed farm. He had to go past some of these shacks, and in the doorway of one of them stood a man with a Winchester rifle, his face pale. Two tow-headed children peered out between his legs, their eyes round on Dillon.

Dillon saw the nester look at the brand on the horse, and then, not recognizing it, he put the rifle behind the door again, spat and walked into the house. Gravely, Ed Dillon lit a cigarette. The gray carried the 77 brand, but he didn't think the brand was known on this side of the pass. It meant that the nesters were not afraid of strangers, but they were afraid of men who rode animals carrying a familiar brand, and Ed Dillon suspected that brand to be Bar G.

He passed a rider coming out from Travis City, and this man stared at him for some time as they approached each other. Ed saw his eyes move to the brand on the gray's hip as they drew abreast of each other. The man was thin-faced, with smoky blue eyes and a mole on his left cheek. He had the tight lips and the colorless expression of the man who lives by the gun.

By way of greeting, he said, "Lookin' for Jack Drummond?"

Dillon pulled up and started to roll a cigarette. "Might be," he admitted.

There was a silence.

The man with the mole studied him carefully for several moments, his smoky eyes taking in the big Navy Colt on Dillon's right hip, the Winchester in the saddle holster. He said, "Look fer him in the back room o' the Silver Dollar." He added then, thoughtfully, "An' you better *be* lookin' fer him."

Dillon smiled at the last. He let his tongue slide across the paper, and then he put the cigarette in his mouth. He said softly, "What if I'm not, friend?"

The rider scowled at him and Dillon could read his thoughts. There was doubt in his mind, as if he'd spoken too soon and now regretted it.

"You might find," the man said grimly, "that you're ridin' a trail to hell, buck." He touched spurs to his sorrel and started down the road again.

Dillon entered Travis City at four o'clock in the afternoon. Riding down the center of the street, the gray's hoofs kicking up small clouds of white dust, he saw a girl getting out of a buckboard in front of the big general store. As she was tying the horses to the hitch-post, she turned her face and Dillon recognized her as the girl he'd met on the mountainside the previous night. He touched his hat as he went by. She had seen him and had straightened up, a high flush coming into her cheeks.

Ed Dillon flipped away the cigarette as he rode past the Silver Dollar saloon, noting carelessly the three horses at the rack. They carried a brand new to him—a hatchet with a slash across the handle. He had spotted the hotel on the next corner, occupying the main corner of the town, and he rode that way, turning into an alley over which a sign read: STABLES.

Travis City had one hotel, and he knew

PRICED THE SAME AS BEFORE THE WAR!



◀ IMPORTED BRIAR ✓
BOWL (vita-fused for sweetness)

▲ ALUMINUM MOISTURE TRAP ✓

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that he could not be mistaken in registering here. The town was no larger and no smaller than a hundred others he'd seen. The main street was dusty, sun-baked, quiet at this afternoon hour. There were few horses in front of the saloons. The afternoon sun shone red on the windows along the street facing west.

Dillon entered the hotel lobby a few minutes later, noting the worn carpeting, the rough pine-board finish of the interior, and the fat-faced man with the star on his vest, lounging in a wicker chair near the doorway which opened on the hotel bar. The lawman had flaxen hair and a yellow mustache. His eyes were blue, and his face was chubby, clean-shaven except for the mustache. He had his head back against the head-rest on the chair, and his faded gray sombrero pulled over the top portions of his face.

His small hands were folded across his stomach and his legs stretched out in front of him. He seemed completely relaxed, but Dillon could see his eyes, half-shaded, taking in every detail of the man at the desk.

Dillon watched the clerk go through his book. He took a silver dollar from his pocket and tossed it into the air, catching it deftly, and then he did it again, at the same time watching the man in the chair across the room.

Lazily, the sheriff of Travis City disentangled his hands, stuck three fingers up, his hands still across his stomach, and then promptly lost interest in everything. His eyes were closed when Dillon went up the stairs, a key to his room in his hand. The clerk had given him number 6 at the far end of the corridor and, going down the hallway, he noticed that number 3 was on the other side of the corridor, two doors down from his own.

The door of room 6 was open and he went in, dropping his warbag on the floor near the bed. He saw the water pitcher and the basin, and as he was taking off his shirt an old man knocked and came in with a pitcher of hot water.

Dillon said, "Nice little town."

The old man had a seedy look and watery blue eyes. He shook his head and said grimly, "Three men killed in thirteen days. Depends on what you call nice."

Dillon nodded. "A middlin' good average," he said. "How many does that leave?"

The old man's leathery face cracked into a smile. "Plenty. Fact is, it ain't in the town we're havin' trouble," he admitted. "It's outside—along Sand Creek—on both sides o' the Creek."

Dillon poured the hot water into the basin and took out his razor. He lathered up, the old man watching him thoughtfully. Dillon

could see that he had a question—a big question, but he was hesitant about asking it. "You signin' up with Black Jack Drummond?" the old man blurted out finally.

Ed Dillon smiled at him in the cracked mirror on the wall. "Why?" he asked.

The old man stared at him, mouth working. He said, "Damn it all," and he went out.

CHAPTER TWO

Gun Proud

DILLON finished shaving, put on a clean shirt and then strapped on the gun-belt. He stood in front of the door for a few moments, listening for sounds along the corridor. Then he stepped out into the hall, walked quickly down to room 3, and knocked on the door. It was opened immediately by the flaxen-haired sheriff, and Dillon stepped inside without a word.

The door closed behind him, and he heard the bolt being slid across it. He saw the bottle and the two glasses on the table, and the ash-tray with three half-smoked cigarettes in it.

"Sit down," the sheriff said. "Talk low. These damned walls are like tissue paper."

Dillon sat down, well away from the single window. He said, "So you're Miles Freeman?"

The lawman smiled. He held out his hand and Dillon was surprised at the strength of the grip. Freeman had perfect white teeth, a rarity on the border. "How is George?" he asked.

"Sent his regards," Dillon said, "and me."

Miles Freeman grinned. "Right now," he chuckled, "it's you I'm interested in, Dillon. Have any trouble coming over the pass?"

"A pair of kids sent a shot through my campfire last night. They were kind of riled up about something."

Freeman sighed. "The Graysons," he nodded. "I give young Sam one week to live." He poured two drinks. "What do you think of the girl?" he wanted to know.

Ed Dillon picked up his glass, looked at it and then studied the sheriff of Travis City over the rim of it. He figured Freeman to be about thirty-two, four years older than himself, and a fine looking man.

"I'm married," Miles Freeman said softly, "and I have two children. I love my wife."

Dillon smiled faintly. "In that case," he said, "Karen Grayson is a very beautiful girl."

"She owns the Bar G," Freeman explained, "since her brother Jeff was shot—murdered. She has her worries with young Sam. He wants to go in and shoot it out with Jack Drummond's crowd."

"Start from the beginning," Dillon said.

Miles Freeman set his glass down on the table. "Jeff Grayson ran the Bar G for ten years after old man Grayson died. Jeff was the oldest of the three children. You came across Bar G range this morning, and you know what they have—grass, the best in the territory, and water. The trouble started five or six years ago when Jeff let these nesters settle down along the east bank of the Sand. He thought he had more rangeland than he could ever use, and he had a big heart."

"So he's dead," Dillon observed.

Freeman frowned. "Jack Drummond came in a couple months ago with two loose riders. They settled down on an old nester homestead up along the Sand. They did it without asking Grayson's permission, and Jeff never did like that. But he let it go because he didn't want any trouble. Pretty soon Bar G began to lose stock—just a few here and there, and then maybe fifty disappeared in a bunch. Young Sam wanted to go over and clean out the nesters because twice he found fresh beef hanging in one of their barns."

"The nesters do the rustling?" Dillon asked.

"I don't believe so," Freeman said, "but there's some hard feelings now. The nesters occasionally buy a beef steer and butcher it, and they could logically have fresh beef around their places, but Sam Grayson don't look at it that way. He gets the nesters down on him and down on Bar G, and then Drummond begins to talk things up. He's not a nester, but he's holed up on their side of the creek. They need a friend with a big gun, someone to organize them, because they think the Graysons are going to turn them out in the cold."

"This Drummond," Dillon said, "will be worth meeting."

Freeman said. "He's fast and knows all the tricks of a six-gun. He's a man who laughs when he has nothing to laugh about. Drummond has the nesters all hopped up on the idea that Bar G riders are coming across the Sand some day to clean them out. They have meetings—and Drummond has six new riders living out at his shack now."

"What does he want?" Dillon asked.

"He's not a rustler," Freeman said, "because a rustler would cut into the Bar G herd much deeper than he did. The Graysons haven't lost much cattle recently."

"But they lost Jeff Grayson," Dillon said softly.

Miles Freeman's jaw line tightened. "Two nesters were shot up in a draw a half mile on the west side of the creek. That was last week. Yesterday Jeff Grayson was murdered. This is only the beginning. The nesters think that Bar G had their men bushwhacked, and Bar G crew feels that the nesters killed their

boss in cold blood. There'll be hell to pay if it comes to a fight-out."

"How many nesters?" Dillon wanted to know.

"Jack Drummond has organized about thirty of them," Freeman said, "and he has six of his own men. Bar G carries probably eighteen or twenty men. If Karen Grayson gives the word they'll go across the sand and wipe the settlement out, or be wiped out themselves. I don't want that to happen."

"This Drummond," Dillon said, "is after the Bar G range."

Freeman shook his head. "I thought of that," he admitted, "but when you know the man you think differently. He's a loose rider, not a big rancher. There's someone else behind the business. That's why I wrote to George. I can't get inside anything because they know me. I need a man who can ride around unattached, maybe even sign up with Drummond's crew, and find out what they're up to."

Ed Dillon nodded. He looked down at his hands.

"George told me about you," Miles Freeman said. "He likes your style, and he thinks you're the man. He says you worked nicely with him in Red Buttes."

"Red Buttes," Dillon said, "was not as big as this." He went on thoughtfully. "You think Drummond's after the Bar G itself?"

The sheriff shrugged. "Maybe."

Ed Dillon stood up. He said, "I want to take a walk down to the Silver Dollar."

Miles Freeman went to the door with him.

"Walk easy," the lawman warned. "If any of Drummond's crew suspected that you were working with me they'd set you up in five minutes. Want me to make this official?"

Dillon nodded.

GOING out to the street he saw two riders loping past, heading toward the Silver Dollar. He recognized one of them as the man with the mole who had spoken to him on the road that afternoon. The other was small, dark-faced, shifty-eyed, —a man who wore his eyes at the back of his head and would not ride down the center of the street in any town.

Dusk was coming to Travis City, and lights were beginning to flare up in the buildings. Dillon walked under the awnings on his side of the street, making the wooden boards beneath his feet squeak. A bartender stood in one saloon doorway, a cigar in his fat face, watching him. Dillon paused while two men rolled a beer barrel across his path and up a back alley.

There was a coolness in the air; a faint breeze coming from the mountain range he'd passed over the day before brought life to

the town's hot streets. More riders came in. The hitch-racks began to fill up. Dillon read the brands on some of the horses. He spotted five Slash Hatchet, and three Bar G animals. He surmised that Slash Hatchet would be Black Jack Drummond's brand.

Ed Dillon entered the Silver Dollar just as a bartender was going around with a taper, lighting up the kerosene lamps in brackets along the wall, touching the light to the two big chandeliers overhead. The bar was not yet crowded, but a card game was going at one of the card tables, and Dillon could see from the overflowing ashtrays, and the bottles, that the game had been going on for some time.

A tall loose man sat with his back toward the wall, facing the front door. He had thick black hair, black eyes with the devil lurking deep down beneath the surface. His wide mouth was set in perpetual laughter.

The man with the mole on his cheek stood a short distance to the black-haired man's left, leaning against the wall, a cigarette dangling from his lips. From the manner in which the dark-haired man looked at him, Ed Dillon knew the man with the mole had already spoken to him, and that they had been waiting for him to come in. From Miles Freeman's description, Dillon recognized Black Jack Drummond immediately.

In the brief, casual glance he threw Drummond's way, he measured the man carefully, tabbing him for a "loose rider," his gun for hire to the highest bidder—a man who took great pleasure from life, but who was not afraid to leave it, and men like that, Dillon realized, could be very dangerous.

He walked to the bar and studied the bottles lined on the shelves between and above the big mirrors. He'd deliberately picked an empty spot along the bar and was not surprised when he saw Jack Drummond getting up lazily from his chair at the card table, moving in his direction.

Drummond hauled up alongside him, placed his elbows on the wood, grinned into the mirror and said jocularly, "Treat me, kid?"

Dillon pushed the bottle toward him without a word. He watched Jack Drummond fill his glass and said, "Nice town."

Black Jack Drummond chuckled. Dillon found the other's humor infectious. "We like it," Black Jack said. "Figure on stayin' here?" "Meanin'?"

Dillon saw Drummond turn slightly to give him a more thorough study. He knew Drummond's dark eyes were not oblivious of the big Navy Colt on his hip—they were oblivious of nothing.

"Reckon that depends," Drummond said softly, "on what a man's lookin' for in the world."

"A good price," Dillon said promptly.

Jack Drummond folded his hands together around the glass on the bar, and Ed Dillon studied those hands curiously. Drummond was a tall man, not heavily built, but with plenty of power in his lean frame. Men his size usually possessed big, powerful hands. Drummond's hands were small, almost fragile, out of proportion to the rest of him. There was no callous on them. They were brown, smooth, well-shaped.

Drummond had his back to the door for the first time since Dillon had come in. He didn't see young Sam Grayson push through the batwing doors, but Ed Dillon, who had been turned slightly, spotted him immediately. He heard one of the men at the card table where Drummond had been sitting, rap sharply on the wood with the bottom of a bottle.

Jack Drummond came around immediately, his right hand dropping toward his thigh, hanging very close to the butt of a Smith & Wesson .44. He was smiling as he looked into the red, bitter face of young Grayson.

Dillon immediately sensed that the boy had been drinking. He was not drunk and he walked steadily enough, but there was an unnatural flush to his cheeks and his eyes seemed to glitter in his head. Recognition came into them when they stopped on Dillon.

He said tersely, "Mister, you had orders to get the hell out of this country."

Ed Dillon regarded him coolly. He said, "Who gives orders in this town, kid?"

"You got yours," young Grayson spluttered. "You're not gettin' the chance to sign up with this damned killer."

Dillon saw a man poke his head over the batwing doors, study the situation, and then dart away. He saw Drummond's men at the table pushing their chairs back. The man with the mole had come away from the wall, and they were all looking in Drummond's direction, eagerness showing in their eyes.

Black Jack Drummond had edged away along the bar. He said softly, "Boy, that tongue will get you in trouble yet."

Sam Grayson turned on the tall man, the devil showing in his blue eyes. His voice shook as he spoke.

He said, "Drummond I'm expecting a bullet through the back from you one of these days. You have a chance to do it like a man now, while I'm looking."

Jack Drummond's soft laugh drifted across the room. "Boy," he chuckled, "crawl behind your sister's skirts before you get hurt."

Ed Dillon saw Grayson's face go white and knew what was going to happen. He'd already measured the distance between himself and young Sam. The boy's eyes were on Drummond when Dillon leaped toward him, cover-

ing the six feet in two strides. His right fist lashed out, catching the boy on the chin just below the mouth. He'd aimed for the boy's jaw, hoping to knock him unconscious with one punch, but Grayson had heard him coming and he was turning his head when Dillon's fist went home.

Sam Grayson spun across the room, crashed into an empty table, upsetting it, and lay stunned, blood dripping from his cut lower lip.

DILLON watched four men drive in through the batwing doors. The man in the lead was a stocky, curly-haired chap with a square chin and blazing brown eyes. He threw himself straight at Dillon, swinging from the hip with his right fist.

Ed Dillon ducked under the blow, smashed his left into the man's middle, and then tried to back away along the bar. The stocky man hammered at him with both fists, and one blow caught Dillon high on the head on the right side. It hurt.

He straightened out and held his ground now, giving punch for punch, hoping that no one would start with guns. He heard a man yelling, "Give it to the dirty killer, Tod."

A right hand shot to the jaw staggered Dillon, but he recovered and hit out twice, viciously, for the face. He dropped Tod, but the man bounced up like a rubber ball and plunged in, grasping for Dillon's waist, and at that moment Miles Freeman entered the Silver Dollar.

Freeman moved easily, almost lazily, and Dillon, grasping at Tod's head, trying to keep him off, was surprised at the speed with which the lawman brought his gun into the clear.

Miles Freeman fired one shot into the floor, and Tod relaxed in Dillon's grasp. It was then that Dillon saw Black Jack Drummond standing near one of the tables away from the bar. Drummond's slim, brown fingers were around the butt of his Smith & Wesson. The hand came away from the gun now.

Freeman said quietly, "Reckon that'll be all, boys."

Karen Grayson came through the door then, her face white, eyes darting around the room. She saw Dillon and then her brother still sitting on the floor, holding his chin, shaking his head dazedly.

"Who in hell started this?" Freeman wanted to know.

Ed Dillon rubbed his knuckles gently and grinned as he watched the girl drop down beside her brother and examine his face. She said something to two of the men who had come in with Tod, and they lifted Sam Grayson to his feet and helped him out into the street. She came over to where Dillon was standing then, and he saw scorn in her eyes.

She said bitterly, "I know why you came to Travis City, mister, but I wish you hadn't."

Ed Dillon shrugged. He watched Miles Freeman coming forward, gun in hand.

Freeman said, "Friend, I don't know you. Maybe you better come on down to see our jailhouse. We have the best one in the county."

Dillon said. "When you don't know a man, sheriff, be careful how you walk."

"I've walked over men before," Freeman grinned. "Now head for that door and keep your mouth shut."

Ed Dillon laughed at him, but he walked toward the door. He grinned at Black Jack Drummond as he went out. He went out on the porch, striding past the grim-faced Karen Grayson.

Tod, the Bar G ramrod, called after him tersely, "We'll finish this up some day."

"Any day," Dillon nodded. He walked on ahead of Miles Freeman until they came to the next intersection. Freeman was three feet behind him.

"Jailhouse is straight ahead. That was a good beginning, Dillon," the lawman said.

"That Tod fellow is pretty tough," Dillon said.

"Tod Bellew holds the Bar G men together,"

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Freeman stated, "and he's Bar G all the way through."

"That young Grayson won't live another week at the rate he's going," Dillon said quietly. "Any way of sitting on him?"

"He's crazy right now," Freeman muttered, "but a nice boy when he sees straight."

Dillon went up three wooden steps leading to the jailhouse, a solidly built wooden structure with barred windows. A lamp, turned down low, burned on the sheriff's desk. Freeman came in behind him, closed the door and bolted it.

He pulled down the shade and then turned up the lamp. Dillon sat down on a chair across the room, and Freeman eased his body into the big, roomy armchair behind the desk. He put his boots up on the desk, and said, "I'll have to keep you here till morning. What's next?"

"How do I get to Drummond's shack?" Dillon asked.

Miles Freeman regarded him steadily for several moments. "You make a false move down there," he stated, "and you're finished. It's a half dozen miles north of the bridge on the east bank of the Sand."

"I'll take a ride up in the morning," Dillon said. He watched Freeman light a cigar and puff on it thoughtfully. He slept in the prison cell that night, and in the morning walked back to the hotel and checked out.

SADDLING the gray, he rode out of town, heading back in the direction of the Sand.

He turned off the road near the bridge and went up along the nester shacks backed up against the creek. He saw several of the farmers in their barbed wire enclosures, hoeing potatoes and corn. They stared at him as he rode by, but none of them greeted him.

He found Jack Drummond's shack set back a short distance from the creek, a battered, rickety wooden structure with a sagging porch on the front of it. The barn had already fallen in and the horses were kept in a rude lean-to just behind it.

There were no evidences that any farming had been done in years. Traces of a fence appeared here and there around a weed-grown plot. But that was all.

The man with the mole sat on the porch step, a cigarette in his mouth, watching Dillon come up. He had his hat pulled low over his face, shading his eyes from the morning sunlight.

Dillon dismounted, tied the gray to the thick post at the far end of the porch and walked toward the steps. Another man came from the direction of the lean-to, and Dillon recognized him as one of the card players in the Silver Dollar.

The man with the mole put out his right

arm as Dillon started up the rickety steps.

He said quietly, "That's far enough, Mister."

Dillon looked down at the arm just across his knees, and then with a sweep of his right hand knocked the man's hat from his head, sending it into the dirt. The man with the mole had a bald head. He got up, eyes smoldering, and then Jack Drummond called out from the door.

"Sit down, Joe."

"This hombre's ridin' fer a fall," Joe said tersely.

Ed Dillon smiled at him. He looked at Jack Drummond standing in the doorway. The tall man had lather on his face and a razor in his hand.

He said, "Come in, kid."

Dillon walked into the room. Drummond had been shaving before a broken piece of mirror on the wall. He walked back to the mirror and said over his shoulder,

"How'd you find this hell-hole?"

"Everybody knows about it," Dillon said.

"What do you want?" Drummond asked him, poised the razor over his chin.

Dillon sat down on the edge of a chair, testing it first before putting his full weight on it. He said, "Taking on riders?"

Drummond turned to look at him, black eyes dancing mischievously. "This look like a cow outfit?" he asked. "You see any stock around here?"

Dillon moistened his lips. He took his hat from his head and turned it around in his hands.

"Taking on riders?" he asked again.

Jack Drummond went on with his shaving, turning his back full on Dillon. When he finished, he washed his face from a tin basin full of water, and dried it with a towel. He said to Dillon,

"So you don't like Bar G?"

"Why should I?" Dillon countered.

"I'm paying my boys a hundred a month," Drummond stated, "for not liking Bar G. That's not cowhand's pay."

"Who said I was a cowhand?" Dillon said softly.

Jack Drummond nodded. "Make yourself at home," he chuckled.

"I'll see your cash first," Dillon told him. He watched the smiling Drummond take a roll of bills from his pocket and peel off several of them. They were of ten dollar denomination. He handed Dillon five bills and put the roll back in his pocket.

"You get the rest at the end of the month," he said. "Come out and meet the boys."

Dillon met them. There were seven, including Joe, the baldheaded man with the mole. Dillon read the dislike in Joe Fenton's eyes. Fenton was prematurely bald, and it

was a matter of pride with him. He never took his hat off. Dillon's action in knocking his hat from his head had been an unpardonable offense.

Dillon looked at the circle of men, the brown, tight faces, the hard eyes, ruthlessness written clearly across every countenance.

He had a chance to talk with Drummond alone a few minutes later and said, "What happens if Bar G raids us without our knowing they're coming?"

Drummond grinned. "We have thirty watchdogs along the creek," he pointed out. "We've had meetings with the nesters and they're dead afraid of Bar G riders. They're watching the other side of the creek day and night. At the first sign of trouble everybody heads down here and we get together for the fight. It'll be a sweet one."

Dillon said casually, "We taking over the Bar G range?"

Drummond's smile disappeared abruptly. He said quietly, "You getting paid to ask questions, buck?"

"Why get riled?" Dillon grinned. "I'm just curious."

"Get too curious," Jack Drummond snapped, "and you'll be dead."

Dillon looked at the tall man steadily for several moments and then rolled a cigarette. He said softly, "You've not talking to a dumb cowpoke, Drummond. Go easy."

He walked away, leaving Drummond staring after him grimly. Like Joe Fenton, Drummond also had his pride, and his pride lay in the fact that men didn't usually stand up against him.

CHAPTER THREE

Devil's Trap

THE day passed slowly. Dillon sat in a card game with three of Drummond's riders, but the stakes were very small, and the game was intended only to pass time.

In the early afternoon Drummond rode off, coming back at four o'clock. Dillon saw him speaking with Joe Fenton at the end of the porch. The bald-headed man had his long fingers hooked in his gunbelt, and Dillon watched those fingers twisting and untwisting in the leather.

Drummond walked over then, and stood rocking gently on his heels.

He said, "We'll run the lard off some Bar G stock tonight, boys."

The man at Dillon's left, a squat, scar-faced chap with brutal black eyes, said, "They got half the Bar G riders watchin' their herds now, Drummond, an' there'll be a full moon tonight."

Black Jack Drummond smiled. He put a

cigarette into his mouth. "What's so bad about a full moon, Hagen?" he asked.

Hagen looked at him steadily, spat over the porch rail from his sitting position, and grinned. Dillon listened without comment as Drummond made his plans. The tall man divided them into two groups. Fenton was to lead four men across the Sand some distance north of where the Bar G herd lay, swing south, cut out half a hundred head, and start them across the creek.

The remaining men, under Drummond, were to stay on this side of the water, and Drummond didn't say why. Dillon was assigned to ride with Fenton.

For two hours, while the sun dropped toward the western hills, Dillon tried to figure this out. There were no questions in the eyes of the other men, and he realized that every one of them understood the plan, possibly because this was not the first time they had worked it.

At dusk Hagen, the squat man, walked his horse down to the creek to drink. Dillon had been sitting on the porch steps, enjoying the cool breeze just springing up. He threw away his cigarette, walked to the lean-to and untied the gray. Jack Drummond and Fenton were inside the house. Dillon glanced toward the door and walked down the path.

He watched the moon swinging up over the mountain tops to the west. Hagen stood a half dozen yards away, watching his horse drink.

Dillon said, "Fine time to rustle stock—with a full moon."

"Last time," Hagen chuckled, "it was too damned dark. We missed 'em when they came across the creek. Drummond don't figure on missin' tonight."

Dillon let this sink in. He risked one more query.

"Missed who?" he wanted to know.

Hagen spat. "Jack Drummond ain't runnin' off stock just for the fun of it. When them Bar G cows come across the creek, Bar G riders will be comin' after 'em—in the moonlight."

Ed Dillon's eyes hardened in the dusk. He visualized Jack Drummond and several of his riders crouching in the bushes on the east bank of the Sand waiting for Bar G men to splash across the shallow body of water in pursuit of the rustlers. These men would be outlined in the moonlight—the plan would work.

"That Tod Bellew is the gent Drummond wants," Hagen was saying. "Bar G will fold up when he's gone."

"Shouldn't miss tonight," Dillon stated. Once again he had the big problem in mind, the one which had puzzled Miles Freeman so long. Why was Drummond trying to break

the Bar G? What was his plan for taking over. . . .

Joe Fenton crossed the Sand a half dozen miles north of the shack, four men riding behind him, Dillon bringing up the rear. There was little talk. The moon was full and bright now, flooding the land with its silvery light. Dillon saw a fish jump in the water.

They had to work down through a pine woods which fringed the northern boundary of the Bar G range. They splashed through another smaller stream, a tributary of the Sand, and then Joe Fenton pulled up.

He lit a cigarette and said casually, "We're runnin' 'em across at the island. We'll try to keep 'em a little north—Jack will be there with the boys."

Dillon remembered seeing the little island approximately two miles north of their shack. There were low trees on the east bank, making it an ideal ambush. The island itself was heavily wooded and a dozen men and horses could be concealed there without any trouble.

Far out across the open plains they could see scattered groups of cattle. There were no guards at this point.

"Bellew's been puttin' eight men on the herd every night," Fenton said. "Most of 'em are on the other side an' in between the creek an' the herd."

"Let's ride," one man said impatiently.

Joe Fenton pointed to a large group of cattle about a half mile distant. "Reckon we kin swing in around that bunch," he said. "Run 'em fast an' make all the damn noise you want."

Dillon watched the man slip his gun from the holster and drive his horse out of the woods. The others followed, and again Dillon brought up the rear, swinging slightly north to get directly behind the bunch of cattle.

Stock which had been on the ground sprang up in surprise as Fenton opened up with his six-gun. The four men behind Fenton started to shout and fan at them with their hats as they came up. The group raced east, heading for the Sand.

Far to the west Dillon heard a gun crack, and a distant whoop. He stayed behind the semi-circle of riders driving the frightened cattle across the plains. There were about fifty in the bunch Fenton had selected, but many others scattered in the vicinity were drawn into the stampeded group, and their hoofs kicked up a thick cloud of dust, stifling the riders behind them.

Dillon saw Hagen yank up his neck handkerchief, and he did the same himself, slowly dropping back from his position. The men ahead of him were yelping and shooting their guns, keeping the cattle at a dead run. Dillon strained his ears, listening for the other riders coming up behind them, and then he heard it—

the muffled clump of horses' hoofs, moving up.

He spotted a small clump of trees. He had lost Hagen on his right now, and he swung out of the line, turning the gray directly toward the trees. He pulled in here and waited, yanking the handkerchief from his mouth and nose.

He saw the riders coming up very fast, and he counted nine men in a group, scattered across the plains as if they were just converging toward a definite point. The man up in front, riding a big black, was Tod Bellew. Dillon caught a glimpse of his face as he pounded past within fifteen yards of the oasis. Young Sam Grayson rode some distance to Bellew's left, moving after that cloud of dust kicked up by the Bar G cattle.

Touching his spurs to the gray's flank, Dillon shot out of the trees, bent low over the horse's head. He let the big animal run, but Bellew's black was very fast also and managed to keep twenty yards up ahead of him. Desperately, Dillon whipped out his Navy and sent a shot over Bellew's head.

The Bar G ramrod slowed down and looked back in astonishment. He had his gun out, and Dillon could see the square cut of the man's jaw. The gray horse pulled up very quickly now, Dillon waving an arm at the man. As he came up he called sharply.

"You're riding into an ambush, Bellew. Drummond has three men on the island in the creek. The others will be waiting for you among the trees on the other bank when you go across the water."

Bellew stared at him in amazement, recognition coming into his eyes.

"What in hell—" he started to say, but Dillon was already pushing past him, following the fleeing herd. He heard Bellew yelling something to Sam Grayson, and Grayson shouted back. He kept going, forging on ahead of the Bar G riders. Glancing back once he saw that they were slowing down, riding more in a bunch now. He picked up a half dozen steers which had broken away from the bunch ahead and he kept them moving toward the creek.

WHEN he reached the water only a few cows were still straggling across. Fenton and the other men were already across, concealed in the woods. Meticulously, Dillon worked his own bunch across the water, and then he saw Fenton standing up, gesticulating.

"Damn it!" the bald-headed man snarled. "Get in here."

Dillon left the beeves he'd brought and raced his horse in among the trees, throwing himself from the saddle. He whipped the Winfield from the saddle holster and dropped down behind a clump of low trees. He glanced

toward the island a short distance downstream, but all was quiet there.

Fenton was saying bitterly, "Why in hell'd you bother bringin' that extra bunch across?"

"Figured we were rustling stock," Dillon told him. "Nobody told me different."

"I don't hear 'em comin'," Hagen called from a point a little below them.

Joe Fenton got out and walked down to the water's edge. Dust still drifted across the creek, but they could hear no sounds. The bald-headed man came back, cursing under his breath.

"Could be," Hagen said, "they went back to git the rest of 'em."

Dillon was the first one to hear the horses coming down the east bank of Sand Creek. They were coming very fast, and he grinned in the darkness.

Fenton snapped, "What in hell is that?" He stood up, listening intently.

Then Hagen swore. "They crossed the damned creek farther down, Joe, an' they're movin' up this way. They'll be hittin' Drummond from behind, too."

Fenton lifted his gun and fired three times into the air. Out on the island Dillon saw a man come running out of the brush.

Fenton roared, "They're comin' down this side. Git out!"

The men in Dillon's group were already racing for their horses tied among the trees a short distance back from the river. Dillon reached the gray just as Tod Bellew's crew smashed in among them. He heard them coming through, Sam Grayson whooping like a madman. Looking out through the trees he saw three riders splashing through the water, crossing to the other bank and then heading upstream at a fast pace.

A man near Dillon whirled his horse around, gun in hand, the moonlight streaming down through the trees lighting up his hawk face. A bullet struck him in the neck and he uttered a piercing yell before he tumbled to the ground.

Dillon plunged through the trees, heading upstream also, following the direction Jack Drummond had taken, but on the opposite side of the creek. There was no order in this retreat. The bald-headed man's crew broke up, scattering in all different directions. Dillon saw Fenton racing away off to his left, and then he lost the man.

The Bar G crew kept after them in hot pursuit, but their horses were somewhat winded from the fast dash to the creek and then up along the east bank. Dillon kept ahead of the two men following him, and then lost them altogether when he spoke the word to the gray and the big animal leaped ahead.

As he rode he watched the other bank. He saw three small dust clouds in the light of

the moon, and then two of them pulled away, heading east in the general direction of Travis City. The third rider had kept moving north, and Dillon watched him curiously.

Stopping for a moment, he listened intently until he was sure that the Bar G men had given up the chase. He rode forward leisurely then, slowing down when the two men ahead of him re-crossed the creek and continued east. Dillon walked his horse over the creek, let it drink on the opposite shore, and then set out after the third man. He was positive he was trailing Jack Drummond, and that Drummond was not going to Travis City, nor was he heading back for the nester shack.

Dillon gave him time to get out of sight. Tracking was easy in the bright moonlight. He was riding into strange country, and he rode cautiously. They moved up into the hills, leaving the Bar G range behind them. The rider ahead had veered slightly toward the east, but the general direction was still north.

Dillon followed him into a deep draw, out of the draw, and then across a stretch of sandy desert. The desert fell away very suddenly, a deep canyon yawning before him. At the bottom of the canyon, a half mile down, he saw the lights twinkling and could make out a straggling line of buildings, a single street. Most of the structures seemed to be unoccupied, with the roofs caved in, but the larger buildings were lighted.

DISMOUNTING, Dillon smoked a cigarette through, watching those lights. He could make out several horses tied to the hitch-rack outside the largest building in the town. He didn't know the name of this town, and he was sure he would not find it on the map. It had the air of a transient settlement, more a hangout than a community. A stopping off place for the loose riders, the rustlers and men who fled from the law—a ghost town come back to brief, inglorious life.

Dillon saw his quarry go down a dimly defined trail, and followed. At the bottom of the canyon he was about a quarter of a mile from this weed-grown street of dead buildings. He went forward on foot, leading the gray, until he reached the first building which had once been a livery stable. Two of the wells had fallen in now, but a portion of one wall and the sagging roof provided shelter and concealment for the gray.

He led the horse in under the roof and tied it to a beam. He went out through the rear of the building, walking across the sand just behind the block of houses. He went down an alley between the large saloon building, and another abandoned structure and looked at the four horses at the rack. He recognized one of them as the chestnut Jack Drummond rode.

The batwing doors squeaked and a board on the porch groaned as a man came out of the saloon, stood near the steps lighting a cigarette, and then walked to one of the horses.

Dillon shrank back in the shadows until the man had ridden away. He lifted himself up on the porch then, and edged toward one of the windows. The window was dirty, fogged with spiderwebs, but he could see into the saloon.

The room was small, just a few tables, a rusted pot-belly stove which was not lighted now, a rough board bar, and three men at it. One man stood at the far end, drinking alone, looking at his whiskery face in the grimy bar mirror. He was already half drunk, and Dillon discounted him altogether.

The other two men were closer to the window, their backs toward him as he peered through. Jack Drummond stood half facing the other man, his tall, loose body draped over the bar. He was speaking earnestly, gesticulating.

The other man was shorter, dressed in black. He had a white face with a long chin, piercing black eyes that were flashing in anger as he spoke.

Dillon watched the bartender come in through a side door at the far end of the bar. He was fat, with a halo of brown hair around his bald dome. He looked at the two men at the end of the bar, slapped half-heartedly with a bar rag, said something to the drunk, and then went back inside.

Dillon dropped carefully to the ground and made his way to the rear of the building. He found a back door, entering on what might have been the kitchen. There was a ramshackle loading platform here, where beer had formerly been rolled into the back room.

Dillon stepped onto the platform, grasped the door knob, and stepped into the room very suddenly, gun in hand. The fat bartender had been having a late snack by himself in this rear room. A cup of coffee and a half empty plate lay on a side table. He had a big butcher knife in his hand and he was cutting a slice of bread when he heard the door swing open. He came around slowly with the knife, mouth working, watery eyes blinking at the big Navy.

Dillon said softly, "Hold in where it is, fatty." He noticed that the room was empty and the door leading to the bar closed.

The bartender muttered, "You won't get in trouble here, mister. Put down that damned gun."

Dillon held the door open again. He said in a half whisper, "Step outside, friend. We'll talk it over."

The fat man grimaced. "I got my trade in there," he protested.

"You won't sell beer," Dillon told him, "if you're dead. Step fast now."

The bartender walked past him out onto the loading platform. He growled, "If you're a lawman, mister, there ain't nobody hidin' out here. You can go over every inch o' the damned place."

Dillon nodded toward a small shed about twenty yards away. "Walk over there," he said. He jammed the Navy into the fat man's back, almost pushing him from the platform.

In the shed he stripped the bartender's belt from his waist, tied his hands behind his back, sat him on the floor, and tied his ankles with a piece of old rope he found on the shed floor. He began to gag the other with a neckerchief.

"If you can think of any other way to make noise, don't do it," he told the man, "or I'll come back and blow a hole through your head."

The bartender looked up at him and shook his head in disgust. He said, "You could get what you want without all this trouble, mister."

"Why take a chance?" Dillon grinned at him.

He went back into the rear room of the saloon, stepped to the door and listened. He could hear the hum of voices from the other end of the bar. Pushing the door in a little, he noticed that the drunk had gone over to one of the tables and was sprawled across it, snoring. Drummond and his companion were still at their places at the bar.

Sliding the Navy from the holster, Dillon dropped down on hands and knees, took a deep breath, pushed open the door wide enough so that he could crawl through, and then dragged himself in through the opening, the door closing without a sound behind him. He listened, crouching behind the bar, gun in hand. Drummond was still talking.

Very carefully, Dillon crawled forward behind the bar until he was abreast of the two men. He lay on the floor then, listening to the conversation. They were speaking in low tones, but he could hear every word clearly. Drummond's smooth, musical tones, and the other man's crisp, cryptic questions.

Drummond stopped once and called, "Bartender?"

Dillon tightened his grip on the Navy and waited. He heard Drummond curse, and then the two men walked over to one of the tables and sat down. He heard the chairs scrape and he could hear no more of the conversation.

Very slowly, he began to work his way back toward the door. Once his elbow struck an empty bottle on a shelf below the bar, and the bottle teetered. He snatched at it, holding it in place before it could fall. He went on again then, squeezing through the narrow crack of door into the back room.

He went outside, dropped from the loading platform, and walked rapidly toward the abandoned stable at the end of the town. He was stepping in around the fallen timbers when he saw a man's head and shoulders silhouetted against a portion of the stable wall.

Without thinking, he dropped to his knees, at the same time yanking the Navy from the holster. A gun roared less than a dozen feet away. Orange flame streaked at him, and he felt the sharp cut of the bullet as it zipped past his left cheek.

He sent two shots at the dim figure of a man crouching beside one of the bar uprights. He heard his man gasp and stagger forward into a patch of moonlight. His hat fell from his head, revealing a bald dome, shining in the bright light of the moon.

Joe Fenton pitched forward on his face, clutching his torn stomach with both hands. He was dead when he hit the livery stable floor.

Dillon ran to the gray which had started to buck. Untying the animal, he ran it out into the night, slid into the saddle, and headed up along the canyon floor. Glancing back once, he saw two men standing out in the center of the weed-grown road, watching him. There were shadows here from the high walls, and he knew that Drummond couldn't identify him from that distance. There were no sounds of pursuit.

Riding along the canyon floor, he wondered vaguely about Fenton. The bull-headed man had undoubtedly suspected him when he came across the creek some time after the others. That suspicion had crystallized into certainty when the Bar G men, instead of crossing at the island and riding into Drummond's death trap, made a circuit and came up on their rear.

Fenton had followed him after Bar G dispersed the crew and, seeing him take up Jack Drummond's trail, had known he was spying on Drummond. The baldhead had set a trap of his own.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood-Trail Showdown

DILLON came up out of the canyon when the walls dropped sufficiently for him to scale them. He got his bearings and headed straight for Travis City, reaching the town at three o'clock in the morning. Instead of going down the main street, he cut down behind the line of buildings, coming up in the vicinity of the hotel. He entered the building through a side door, went up the stairway without the dozing clerk's seeing him, and rapped gently on Miles Freeman's door.

The sheriff called, "Come in, Dillon."

With the door bolted behind him, Dillon dropped into a chair and watched Miles Freeman take down a bottle of wine. Freeman looked at him closely as he poured the drinks. "You had a busy day, my friend," he said shrewdly.

Dillon lifted a hand to the red scratch on his cheek, the mark of Joe Fenton's bullet. He said, "You know a man named Lamonte?"

"Lamonte?" Freeman said softly. "Lamonte is a sheep man from Yersavas County, the other side of the pass."

Dillon nodded. "That's it," he said.

Freeman rubbed his fingers together, his eyes narrowed. "So it's sheep?"

"Lamonte has over ten thousand of the woolies on the other side of the pass," Dillon stated, "waiting to move them when the Bar G range is cleared for him. I saw big flocks grazing on the slopes when I came through the pass the other day. I didn't think anything of it then."

"Lamonte is paying Jack Drummond to break Bar G," Freeman said softly, "so that he can move in with his crews and take over the range. It'll be an out-and-out steal, and the Graysons won't be able to stop them once the sheep are moving over the range." He paused and he said, "What else?"

"That big flock of woolies." Dillon stated, "has eaten up all the grass on the other side of the pass and they have to be moved pronto. Lamonte has been kicking because Drummond hasn't cleared things already. He wants action now."

"He getting it?" Freeman wanted to know.

"Drummond is burning down a nester shack tomorrow night, getting the nesters together, and telling them Bar G is getting ready to burn every one of them out. Then they're riding on Bar G."

Freeman shook his head. "The nesters will fight like hell," he muttered, "unless they're straightened out. They won't believe anything I tell them. They'll think I'm just trying to stop the fight."

"You'd better get out to Bar G tomorrow night," Dillon said. "Tell Bellew what's going on and have every hand at the house when Drummond rides up."

"You going back to Drummond?" Freeman asked.

Dillon nodded. "I'll watch him tomorrow," he stated. "I might be at that meeting he has with the nesters." But he was wondering a little if Fenton had confided his suspicions to anyone.

At five o'clock in the morning Dillon reached the nester shack where Drummond's crew were holed up. Hagen, the small man, challenged him from the porch as he rode up.

"Everybody in?" Dillon asked.

Hagen put the gun down. He said sourly,

"George Keeley never will come in, an' Fenton ain't here either."

"Where's Drummond?" Dillon wanted to know.

"Ain't in," Hagen growled. "Rest of us kept out o' sight while Bar G was roundin' up them cattle. When they skipped back across the creek we come back here. Where in hell were you?"

"Went into town, looking for you boys," Dillon said easily. "Figured you'd be heading that way."

"You took a long time gettin' back," Hagen said suspiciously.

Dillon looked at him. He adjusted his hat carefully. He said, "I met a lady friend. Want to make something out of that?"

Hagen snorted. "You're the smart one. We're sittin' around here like a bunch o' mongrel dogs."

Dillon went into the shack, found a place for his blanket, and went to sleep. He was awakened by Jack Drummond's voice outside the window. Bright sunlight streamed into the room, making him blink. He figured the time to be about ten o'clock in the morning, which meant that he'd slept five hours.

He got up and walked to the window, peering through the dirty pane. Jack Drummond was standing just below the porch, talking with Hagen. The three sleepy-eyed men with Hagen comprised the rest of Drummond's original crew. Jack Drummond had a dozen riders with him—new men.

Dillon stared at them in dismay. They sat astride their horses, some of them smoking, the others just looking, studying the shack, staring across the creek nearby. All of them were armed. They were shifty-eyed men, most of them apparently unacquainted with each other.

Dillon folded his blanket and quietly took out his shaving equipment. He was standing in front of the cracked mirror, lathering his face when Drummond came in. He heard the tall man, turned his head slightly, nodded and went on with his shaving.

Drummond walked across the room and sat down on the edge of a battered bed.

He said softly, "Not so good last night."

"That Bellew," Dillon said, "is nobody's fool."

"No," Drummond admitted. He said, "You seen Fenton?"

Dillon turned around. "Hagen said he didn't show up last night. He may have taken a Bar G bullet and dropped off in the brush somewhere."

"He took two bullets," Drummond said, "in the belly. Now what do you think of that?"

"That was too bad," Dillon said softly. "So you got twelve boys to take his place."

"They'll do it, too," Drummond grinned.

"Fenton wasn't that much of a man." He was watching Dillon closely while rolling a cigarette, but Dillon's face revealed nothing. Drummond got up to go. "We'll have a little excitement tonight, friend," he intimated. He didn't say what it would be.

"We can stand it," Dillon said. "I don't relish a running fight like last night."

"There'll be no running tonight," Drummond said quietly. He went out and Dillon finished his shaving.

IT WAS a long day, with the new men staying aloof. Drummond gave orders that they could go to Travis City, but that they had to be back by six in the evening. Dillon saddled the gray at one o'clock in the afternoon and rode off alone. He didn't see Drummond, but Hagen said the tall man had been out visiting the nesters.

Halfway to Travis City, Dillon saw two riders coming toward him. They slowed down when they recognized him, and he looked at Karen Grayson and her brother. Young Sam looked very sheepish, and Dillon knew they'd had a talk with Miles Freeman in town. Tod Bellew had undoubtedly informed them of his warning last night which had saved the lives of several Bar G men.

Karen said quietly, "I think we owe you an apology, Mr. Dillon."

"You know my name?" Dillon said. He leaned forward over the saddle horn and he searched the surrounding country. The road behind and ahead was empty.

"I spoke with Sheriff Freeman," the girl said. "I'm glad you're on our side."

"Freeman tell you about the sheep?" Dillon wanted to know. He saw the anger flare up in young Sam's eyes.

"We'll never let the damned woolies through the pass," Sam Grayson snapped.

Dillon said to the girl, "Might be better if you stayed in town tonight, Miss Grayson."

Karen shook her head. "I own the Bar G," she said. "I'm fighting for it, if it comes to a fight."

"It'll come to a fight of some kind," Dillon told them, "Drummond brought in another dozen gun hands. Even if we're able to separate the nesters from him, he'll still have sixteen professional fighters to raid the Bar G."

"Let 'em come," Sam Grayson said tersely. "They'll run into a hell of a lot of lead."

Dillon didn't say anything. He remembered earlier gun fights with professional gun throwers—men who stayed cool when the lead was flying, men who shot straight and fast, and who knew their way around. The Bar G riders were cowhands, and they had not been hired to stand up against the bullets of professionals.

"Sheriff Freeman said that you had some kind of plan in mind to get the nesters away from Drummond," Karen Grayson said. "I hope, Mr. Dillon, that you won't get into too much trouble. I—"

Dillon smiled, nodded and turned the gray off the road. He called after Sam Grayson, "Good luck, son."

In town he had two new shoes put on the gray and rode back to the shack at five in the afternoon. Some of the men were already eating, others were straggling in from Travis City. Dillon saw Jack Drummond speaking with Hagen. The little man rode off, and didn't come back for an hour and a half.

Dillon was in a card game with three of the men when Hagen came back, his eyes glittering. There was another hurried conference with Drummond, and then Drummond counted off three men. Hagen, Drummond, and the three riders left without a word.

"What in hell goes?" one man asked peevishly. He was one of the new crew, and the long day had been wearing on his nerves.

"You'll get your bellyful before the night's over," Dillon assured him.

Leaving the card game thirty minutes later, Dillon walked out on the porch. He studied the night sky for some time in silence. Tonight was much darker than it had been the previous night. Rain clouds scurried across the face of the sky, blotting out the full moon. There was a breeze in the alders along the creek.

He walked down to the lean-to where the horses were tied, and it was there he saw the red glow in the sky some distance to the south. He watched this glow thoughtfully while he smoked his cigarette. He knew now that Hagen had been sent out to ride past the nester houses until he found one temporarily empty, with the family gone to town. That house was now burning, along with the barn. The next step was obvious. Jack Drummond would call a hurried meeting of the nesters, suggesting that they take the law into their own hands. With over thirty armed nesters, and sixteen of his own crew, they would double the Bar G outfit guarding the ranch.

Walking back among the trees, Dillon tossed away the cigarette and dropped down to a squatting position. He was still there, a few rods from the lean-to when Drummond came back with Hagen and the three men. He heard Drummond speak.

"Wait a half hour and then start to circulate among the shacks below. Tell them there's to be a meeting in Ty Tinsley's barn at ten o'clock. Everybody's expected to come, and come armed."

Dillon circled back toward the porch. He was sitting on the railing when Drummond came up alone. Drummond looked at him and

went inside. Dillon got the orders a few minutes later. They were to ride against Bar G a little after midnight. Every man was to be waiting when Drummond came back from the nester meeting.

"You boys have been itching for a fight," Drummond grinned. "You'll have your fill tonight."

AT QUARTER of ten Hagen came in with the other men. The little man spoke to Drummond and the latter rode off.

Carefully, Dillon eased away from the shack, walked down to the lean-to, and led the gray through the trees. He mounted several minutes later and rode due south. In a small clearing back from the creek, he passed the burning nester house. It was a heap of smoldering ashes now. A farmer and his wife stood near a buckboard, looking at the ashes stupidly.

Dillon said to them, "Which way is Tinsley's?"

The man jerked his head over his shoulder. "Half a mile down the road," he muttered. There was no life in his eyes. His jaws sagged.

Dillon said, "Tough," and rode on.

He found Tinsley's without any trouble. A big bonfire was burning in front of the barn and half a dozen men were standing around it. Others were inside the barn, gathered in small groups. A number of rifles were stacked up just outside the barn door.

Among the horses tied near the corral Dillon recognized Jack Drummond's chestnut. He counted thirty-five men, some of them not much more than boys, and in every face there was a look of grim determination.

Dismounting some distance back in the shadows, Dillon tied the gray in among some cottonwoods. He squatted down on the ground here, watching the group of men. One red-faced man with a beard was gesticulating angrily, nodding across the creek in the direction of the Bar G. There were none of Drummond's crew in sight.

The men began to straggle inside the barn after a while, still talking. Jack Drummond came out, a cigar in his mouth, looked around, and went inside again. The barn door was wide open.

When the last man had gone inside, Dillon strolled leisurely toward the barn, hitching up his gunbelt as he walked. He slipped inside and stepped against the wall. Two lanterns had been strung up and Jack Drummond was standing on an overturned crate, talking quietly to the nesters.

Dillon leaned against the barn wall and began to roll a cigarette. He stuck the finished quirkly into his mouth, but didn't light it.

A nester looked at him, turned his head again for a second look, and then watched Drummond.

"They run their damned stock over our crops," Drummond was saying. "They—"

Dillon said coolly from the wall. "What did you have planted, Drummond?"

Jack Drummond turned around slowly, a faint smile on his lean face. His eyes were narrow slits.

"Who's that?" he asked softly, but Dillon knew he'd recognized the voice.

He said, "Tell the boys what you had planted while you've been with them."

Drummond said tersely, "You got any fight in you, mister, save it for the Bar G."

Dillon looked around the barn. The nesters were glancing from him, to Drummond, and he could see that they were thinking—knew that he was simply voicing the unspoken suspicions of many of them.

"I figure," Dillon said, "this fight is as much mine as it is yours. Neither of us have anything to lose. I'm admitting it."

"I've taken a piece of land," Drummond stated. "When the Bar G lets us alone I'm raising stock on it. Any objections?"

"None," Ed Dillon smiled. "Now tell us about John Lamonte and the ten thousand woolies waiting on the other side of the pass, ready to move in across Bar G range as soon as Bar G is broken."

Jack Drummond's right hand dropped down toward the butt of his gun. He said nothing.

Dillon went on smoothly, watching the dazed faces of the nesters, "Any of you boys ever see what ten thousand sheep can do to a stream of water? Every family along Sand Creek depends on that water for life. The day Lamonte's sheep come over the pass, you boys move on."

A nester in the back of the crowd said tersely, "What about that, Drummond?"

"It's a rotten lie," Jack Drummond snapped.

"Some of you boys take a ride over the pass tomorrow," Dillon smiled. "Take Drummond with you."

A heavy silence fell over the big barn. Jack Drummond opened his mouth to speak, and a big, heavy-set nester growled.

"What else you know, mister?"

"Lamonte hired Drummond to break up Bar G," Dillon said quietly. "He came in here with half a dozen gunhands to help him, but he wanted you boys to work with him also. No hired guns will fight as hard as men defending their homes. So he turned you against Bar G and at the same time blamed his rustling on you."

"Two of our crowd were shot," one man muttered, "an' then Jeff Grayson got it. We've been wonderin' who did that? Everybody here kind o' liked Jeff."

"They murdered your boys," Dillon said, "and they shot Grayson in the back so that you'd go at each others' throats. Tonight Drummond had that house burned down and he called this meeting to get you to ride over to Bar G." He was watching the tall man as he spoke, and he was ready when Drummond whipped out his six-gun and fired point-blank at him.

Falling sideways, Dillon yanked at the Navy just as Jack Drummond leaped from the crate and raced toward the rear door of the barn. Drummond's slug tore through the wall of the barn where Dillon had been standing, missing him cleanly. A sudden burst of gunfire outside sent the nesters milling for cover.

Rolling toward the barn door, Dillon scrambled to his feet and leaped through, heading for the corner of the barn. He caught a glimpse of Drummond hitting the saddle over near the corral. The tall man fired at him again, the slug chipping wood from the corner of the barn. An unexpected volley from the trees beyond, where Drummond must have hidden a couple of his men, drove Dillon to cover.

Dillon sent one shot at the man, missed him, and Drummond tore around the corral and in among the trees. He was headed north in the direction of his shack.

Walking in among the trees, Dillon untied the gray and came back. The nesters were all out of the barn now, talking excitedly around the bonfire. When Dillon came back, one of them said.

"How did you get in this, friend?"

"Sheriff Freeman deputized me," Dillon explained. "I've been working in with Drummond's bunch."

"So he's finished now," the nester with the red face scowled.

Dillon laughed grimly. "Drummond has sixteen men riding on Bar G tonight," he said. "All of them gun fighters. Any single men here think they owe Bar G anything?"

"What in hell's the matter with the married men?" one nester asked.

Dillon bit his lips. "We're up against professional gunhands," he stated quietly. "Some of you might not come back." He saw the doubt come into their eyes, and he knew that most of these men had large families and responsibilities.

One young fellow, carrying an old buffalo gun, stepped out of the crowd. He was about eighteen, yellow-haired, blue-eyed. Two others joined him.

DILLON said, "We'll have to ride fast." With the other nesters watching them silently, the three young men followed Dillon down to the creek and walked their

horses through the shallow water. Coming up on the other bank they headed due west, moving at a fast gallop.

Twice Dillon, listening for sounds in the night, thought he heard horses up ahead. He swerved slightly to the south, approaching the Bar G from that direction. They were within a mile of the ranch house when they heard the first fusillade.

Dillon dug his spurs into the gray and shot ahead. Coming up over the rim of a hill a few moments later, he could see the faint outlines of the Bar G spread, house, bunkhouse, corrals, big barns. Small orange points of light flashed from the bunkhouse and the main building, and were answered by a flurry of shots from riders heading in from the north.

Carefully Dillon counted those shots from Drummond's riders. They were shooting rapidly, steadily, as they approached the buildings, but listening intently, he was sure only a small body of Drummond's men were in that attack. The remainder of them he could see vaguely, drifting down the slope from the east on foot. There were a dozen in this bunch, dim shadows against the night, working in close to the buildings.

"Let the horses go," Dillon said softly. He slipped from the saddle, slapped the gray on the flank, and sent it away. He started forward on foot, sliding the Navy Colt from the holster as he ran. The three nesters followed him. Dillon said over his shoulder, "You boys head down toward the corral. Keep down so the Bar G men won't be able to shoot at you. Stay behind the corral and open up on Drummond's men when they rush the bunkhouse."

The three nesters disappeared toward the corrals. Dillon ran silently in the direction of Drummond's men.

On the other side the fake charge of the small body of gun throwers had ended. They had dismounted and were firing steadily, yelling as they leaped from cover to cover. Dillon heard Miles Freeman's voice from the main building, as he came up behind the last man in the group moving down the slope. He edged in closer, making no attempt to conceal himself now.

The gunman glanced back and growled sourly. "We ought to go in there an' bust 'em right up."

"There's time," Dillon murmured. He crossed over behind his man, stopped and brought his gun barrel sharply across the gunman's flat-crowned sombrero. He caught the other as he fell, and lowered him to the ground.

Picking up the gun man's six-shooter, he started forward again. The next man started to turn his head as Dillon went around him.

He had his mouth open when the barrel of the Navy crashed across his skull.

Falling down with him, Dillon lay still on the ground, gripping both guns.

He heard Hagen, the little gunman, say tersely. "What in hell was that?"

They were less than a hundred yards from the bunkhouse now, and still undetected. Dillon flattened himself on the ground and waited.

"You hear a noise, Drummond?" Hagen asked.

Dillon saw the tall Jack Drummond lifting himself from the brush less than a dozen yards away. Drummond said softly, "We'll move in now, boys."

Dillon got up on his knees. All around him he saw men rising, most of them grouped near Hagen and Drummond.

"Head for the bunkhouse," Drummond said. "There's a back door that we should be able to smash in. Once we get in there it'll be over."

Ed Dillon was fifteen feet away from the nearest man. He gripped both guns, steadied himself, and called softly, "It won't be over *here*, Drummond."

He heard little Hagen swear sharply, and then the small man leaped to his own left, at the same time whirling his gun around. Dillon, still on his knees, caught the little gunman with his first shot from the Navy in his right hand. The bullet knocked Hagen from his feet, sending him reeling backward down the slope.

Dillon dropped another man to Hagen's left with a shot from the other gun. He saw Jack Drummond, taking his time, coolly lining his gun on the target. A gun roared from the right side, and Dillon felt the slug rip through his hat. He had both guns on Drummond when the tall man fired at him. He squeezed both triggers as Drummond's slug took him in the right shoulder, knocking him back into the brush.

He heard Miles Freeman yelling then from the ranch house. He managed to roll over and came up on his left elbow, the six-gun still tight in that hand. He fired at another man, and heard the man yell and hurch away.

Somewhere off to his right a man was cursing bitterly.

Freeman was coming up the slope now with the Bar G riders, yelling at the top of his voice, "Don't shoot, Dillon."

Ed Dillon smiled wryly, and let the six-gun droop in his hand. The remaining Drummond hands were waiting for orders and, receiving none, they started to move back up the slope, firing as they backed away, holding Freeman's men off.

Miles Freeman yelled, "Where are you, Dillon?" He was less than a dozen yards away.

(Continued on page 130)

BAR NOTHING BRAND —

*Name your poison to some of
the old-time bartenders—and
you wound bottoms up in
boothill!*

HISTORY does not give us a complete list of the famous bartenders of the old West, but in the yellowed files of the newspapers of the eighties and nineties are stories of valor and gallantry and skill and courage and love and death which enveloped those old-timers.

Boots Henry was a dude, wore white shirts when he could get them, and expensive broadcloth suits measured and tailored to fit. He had Indian black hair, a pallid complexion and never wore whiskers, something singular for the fastidious of his day. He'd come west from St. Louis where he'd swung drinks at the old Stockman's Hotel and Grill. Behind the mahogany bar he was master of the situation.

Boots was killed at Dodge City by Mary Schott because she thought he was sweet on Calamity Jane, Wild Bill Hickok's lady love.

Cliff Harrell was short, husky and a brutal fighter once he was aroused. He seldom took a drink of the stuff he served. He made at least a dozen of the wildest towns on the trails, remaining not longer than six months in any one spot. He was a whiskered, beetle-browed gentleman whose pearl-gray bowler was the pride of his heart.

Let no man abuse Cliff's bowler unless he wanted a fight. He used to hang it on a wooden peg where anyone had access to it. When the derby plopped on the floor, deliberately knocked down, Cliff would slowly remove his apron, slick down his hair and walk in a particularly annoyed manner toward his challenger. Cliff usually won because he had done some boxing in the East, having been born on the New York Bowery. All his teeth were gold; the good ones had been knocked out.

Joe Harper was a periodical drunk, wrote poetry and letters home for men who couldn't write. He knew what to say to their wives and sweethearts and children. He was short, fat and bald, and had lost one eye, over which he wore a black shield. He had a penchant for collecting rubies. As soon as he'd saved enough money he'd buy another ruby. He had ruby stickpins, cuff links and shirt studs and rubies studded the handle of a small clasp knife, given to him by a lady whose memory

he cherished. The last anyone ever heard of Joe was when a friend picked up several of his rubies in a Frisco hock shop and learned that a man suffering from consumption had walked in one day and offered a lot of rubies for a sum far below their worth.

Glide Morris, the dapper little gentleman who played the piano like Beethoven when he wasn't pouring whiskey, was perhaps the most colorful of the lot. He was from Ohio and could draw a gun quicker than a flash. His favorite shootin' iron was a double-barreled derringer which he toted around inside his shirt. He was of half-pint size but had a giant personality. He gave away everything he earned, was a sucker for a hard luck story and a woman who could shed a few artificial tears. He'd skip from one end of the bar to the other like a grasshopper. When he wasn't skipping behind the bar he was skipping on a dance floor. In a saloon brawl in Denver he accidentally shot a man when he tried to keep his derringer from falling out of his shirt. The man died and Glide was sent to prison because he'd had some trouble with the drinker the night before.

There were other bartenders whose fame was known to the old time journalists. Four Fingers Martin, with a penchant for colored silk handkerchiefs; Sam Kellog, who loved pancakes and syrup and could eat fifty at a sitting, so they say; Perry Hatfield who loved a fist fight and always carried a trained, fighting bulldog around with him and won money by pitting him against any stray dog in the streets; Diamond Tom Newton, who smoked opium and had a Chinese servant he would take with him from one job to another, just to cook the stuff; Dick Farmer who could ride any hoss and would bet all he had he could; Henry Goldstein who was fond of the opera and was always telling tales of the lives of famous composers to an unappreciative audience who would listen because he was always setting 'em up to hold his listeners; Morris Goldstein who collected guns that had killed men; and Bill Wyatt who, with thirty thousands in gold nuggets, liked to shine shoes, and gave many a customer a free shine for the sport of it. Yeah, a hard ridin' crew they were.



A hard-riding
crew they
were. . . .

By
**DAVID
CREWE**

THE PRICE OF

There would come a time when Jeff Earle would have to choose whose bullet he would rather take in the back—his friend's, or the man's he hated!

THERE were two men in the Silver Dollar Saloon when Jeff Earle entered. A puncher sprawled asleep across a table and a single customer in blue cotton shirt and overalls stood nursing a drink at the bar.

Jeff Earle swept the room with his eyes, found what he wanted, crossed and knocked at a door in back. A voice called irritably, "All right. All right," and he swung the door open and stepped in.

There were three men in the room, two standing. One was a tall, thin kid with a reckless face, who lounged carelessly against the wall and squinted insolently at Earle through the smoke of a dangling cigarette. The second was older, looked rawhide tough, experienced. Alertness sprang into his pale eyes and he shot Earle a hard, measuring stare. Sight of these two sent warning rushing hard through Earle and for a charged moment the three faced each other, tense, waiting. Then Earle turned his attention to the seated man.

He was thick-bodied, short, with layers of beef stretching tight the seams of his shirt and spilling in balloon fashion over his belt. His face was bloated and his thick lips pushed out in perpetual pout. He hunched there, a fat toad staring at Earle with sharp eyes. For all his sloppiness there was a cattleman's air of authority and power about him.

Earle said, "You must be Sam Stuart. I'm Jeff Earle."

Stuart's black eyes ran over him with insulting deliberation, then seemed to sink into the fleshy folds of his cheeks as he scowled. His voice was like a slap.

"I send for a tough man t' do a job an' he turns out a damned preacher."

He was right—on appearances. Jeff Earle was barely above medium height, and his figure was slight, though tightly knit. He was fastidiously dressed in black broadcloth coat, white shirt, black string tie and flat-crowned, broad-brimmed hat. His features were but lightly dusted with tan and finely moulded, giving him a scholarly, gentle appearance. His hands were uncalledous, long-fingered and supple as a gambler's. His voice was soft.

His long fingers brushed lightly, as though by accident, the tails of his coat, exposing the two black guns snugged at his hips. He asked in gentle tones, "So, think you made a mistake, Stuart?"

Stuart's sharp ears caught the overlapped menace in that voice and wild temper sprang a gray flame in the slim man's eyes. The stories he'd heard of this man, his eccentricity of dress and manner, his blinding speed and cold bloodedness that made him comparable to such names as Doc Holliday and Curly Bill, rushed back upon Stuart. He stole a nervous glance at his own men and found them tensely watching Earle. Earle lifted his head at that moment and hurled the look recklessly back at them. Stuart understood the natural antagonism, fears and jealousies that existed between men of such ability. Death hung on a hair-trigger in this charged room.

Stuart licked dry lips and said quickly, "All right, Earle. All right. I just want a job done."

"That's what you'll get."

"Sure," Stuart said nervously. He wanted to get this explosive feeling out of the room and that couldn't be done while these three confronted each other. So he said, "There's a gent here gettin' to big f'r 'is pants an' thinks he can step on my toes an' get by with it. Name's Ben Keene."

Earle said, "You cattlemen are all alike."

"Cattleman? This's a sobduster."

"A homesteader!" He'd expected to walk into the usual cattleman's war, be pitted against men of his own, or near his own ability. A farmer! A man who milked cows and followed stolidly behind plodding farm horses in his daily rounds of work. . . .

He asked suspiciously "Why call me in for that? You've got a pair right here can handle a sobduster."

"I ain't payin' t' answer questions," Stuart said bluntly.

"You'll answer mine."

Stuart hesitated, biting a fat lower lip. All right. Sure, these two could do it. Maybe yuh've heard of Kid Lyons an' Snap Dorgan," he said proudly. "They been workin' f'r quite a spell. If they gun Keene down th' town an' th' law'll know I was behind it. The fool

GUNSMOKE

By WALT MOREY

He took three quick steps into the street, whipped out his gun and turned. . . .



sheriff's got a ramrod up 'is back. Right now I can't risk crossin' 'im an' th' sobbusters, too."

"They'll know you brought me in," Earle pointed out.

Stuart smiled slyly, "Nobody c'n prove we made a bargain. They c'n only guess. If they do somethin' from guessin' they'll be in bad—with the sheriff." He laughed suddenly.

"Then it'll be known as a private feud between this Keene and myself, eh?"

"That's it."

"Where's the sheriff now?"

"On a wild goose chase I got 'im through th' hills." Stuart spread fat hands. "Town's wide open. Good, huh?"

"That's fine. Where do I find this Keene?"

"Bein' Saturday he'll come to town with his crowd to do shoppin'. Ya' can't miss 'im. Big fella, about twenty-five, blond curly hair, looks an' dresses like a farmer, which he is. Never wears a gun."

"That's enough." Earle reached backward for the door. "See you later. Here? Good. And have the cash ready—I may be in a hurry."

A gust of excitement quivered across Stuart's fat cheeks. "Today?" he asked quickly.

"Of course." Earle raised his head, hit the two standing men with a hard, careful look and backed out, closing the door behind him.

ON THE hotel porch Jeff Earle found a rawhide bottomed chair, stretched his legs comfortably before him and prepared to wait. He had picked this spot as the best vantage point in town. He felt no excitement. This was an old pattern.

Gradually the dusty street filled with people as wagons crept in off the prairie to line the hitch-racks and block the store fronts for their weekly shopping jaunts. He was surprised at their number—then he remembered this was the Great Bend country and stretched from horizon to horizon.

The first band of cowmen finally swept off the prairie in a boiling cloud of dust. From then on they arrived at fairly regular intervals until, by sunset, the hitch-rails before the Cattleman's Bar and the Silver Dollar were jammed with ponies.

Boots raised a steady beat along the board walk and across the hotel porch and Jeff Earle knew his attire and air of remoteness drew many curious glances.

He didn't realize a man had stopped beside him until a voice said, "You lookin' for me, mister?"

Earle came erect in a single startled move; then he saw the man wore no gun. He saw a tall, square-jawed young man in overalls and blunt-toed work shoes. He guessed instantly the hair beneath the old felt hat would be blond and curly. "Am I supposed to be looking for you?" he asked carefully.

"I'm Ben Keene."

It had never happened this way before. Before he'd looked at them through the blue smoke of gunfire. This knocked him off stride and for a moment he was taut, probing for an unseen trap. Keene was the calmer and that angered Earle, for calmness was a habit he cultivated.

Ben Keene asked, "Where can we talk?"

"What's there to talk about?"

Keene smiled bleakly. "A friend of mine saw you meet Stuart in a back room at the Silver Dollar. You didn't close th' door tight enough."

Earle's mind leaped back to the saloon. The man leaning against the bar in blue cotton shirt and overalls. A homesteader, of course. His own shock at suddenly confront-

ing the two gunmen, Kid Lyons and Snap Dorgan, had swept all thought from his mind for a moment. Hence his neglect to tightly close the door.

He nodded at Keene and said, "I'm not usually that careless."

A girl came quickly onto the porch with a whisper of skirts and said in an edged voice: "Ben, I've been looking everywhere for—" She saw Earle and hesitated.

Ben Keene said, "Miss Gage—this is Mr. Earle."

She was small, slender and square-shouldered. She carried her dark head high, giving an appearance of tallness she did not have. Her features were regular and strongly turned and her eyes, meeting his with a straight look, held the deep shadow of trouble.

Ben Keene said, "We have a—little business. I'll meet you in the hotel lobby in an hour."

"Ben, French says Stuart's in town and has brought in a—" She stopped, then asked in an altered voice, "Did you say—Earle?" She swung about, fear springing her eyes wide. "It's you!" she said in a startled voice. "You're the man Stuart brought in."

Ben Keene took her arm. "I'll meet you in an hour, Helen."

She pulled away. "That's the business you had with him, isn't it? I won't leave."

"Then wait inside for me," he begged.

"No, Ben."

"This is between men, Helen."

"It concerns me, too," she said in a strangled voice.

Earle asked coldly, "What's the lady's interest?"

"Miss Gage is the teacher here. We plan to be married."

Earle shrugged and turned towards the lobby.

"Wait," Ben Keene said. "This won't take long." He bent a look at the girl's stubborn face, then brought his eyes back to Earle. "I thought if you heard my side it might make a difference. About forty of us settled here in this Great Bend country. We're not crowding Stuart, and he knows it. It's just that he was one of the first in-here years ago. He's gotten big and had his way a long time. But he can't use a fourth the free range and he's got no legal right to any of it. He's just a fat hog who can't see anybody else get a little. He's tried everythin' inside the law to get us out, and some not inside we can't prove. Stuart's afraid of an open war because of the sheriff. That's why he's settled on me. I brought these people in here and they look to me. I know, he figures if I go, especially through gun-smoke, whether it can be pinned on his hide or not, the rest'll pull stakes."

"They won't," the girl put in swiftly.

"They'll fight, but they want the law on their side and Stuart's been too clever to give them that until now." Keene made a gesture to stop her but she rushed on. "Stuart wants Ben's land, too, because of the springs and the hidden valley that's protected from storm. He's burned Ben out, driven off or killed his stock, had him beaten almost to death one dark night on the trail. Oh, we can't prove it, but everyone knows it's Stuart. Now, he brings you—" One hand was suddenly pressed hard against her mouth. "You couldn't do such a thing," she whispered. "You just couldn't."

Jeff Earle said, "I never question rights and wrongs."

"That's your answer?"

"Yes."

"But Ben's no gunman. You are."

"He should be, in this country."

"It doesn't mean anything to you he isn't?"

"No."

"Suppose we paid you the same amount Stuart will?" the girl said carefully. "Would you leave?"

"A thousand dollars?" Earle considered. "Why, yes."

Ben Keene said doggedly, "No, Helen—that's like runnin'. Besides, I couldn't raise half that amount, and if I could, I wouldn't.

Stuart would just bring in another. This has got to be settled." He looked at Earle, spreading his blunt-fingered hands. "I'm no gun fighter. I'm a farmer. You know that. But I'll be wearin' a gun after I leave here." He turned and drew the girl quickly off the porch, holding tightly to her arm.

His worried voice floated back from the street, "I know, hon. I've been expecting something like this."

JEFF EARLE returned to his chair and continued to watch the traffic along the fast-darkening street. But the scene just past, the whole setup of this deal kept cutting into his mind. Its similarity to a tragic problem of his own long ago was uncanny. Scenes crept out of the dusty past where he'd buried them, their memories and heartaches plaguing him with a faint, distant hurt. Such thoughts and emotions were dangerous for his kind of man, he knew. They made a crack in the hard armor of his living. It was the girl, he told himself, half angrily. But he knew better. It was Ben Keene, too, the type of man he was, his single-minded stubbornness, his fearless way of walking straight into a problem.

He remembered—he'd been twelve the day his father, no more a gun fighter than Ben

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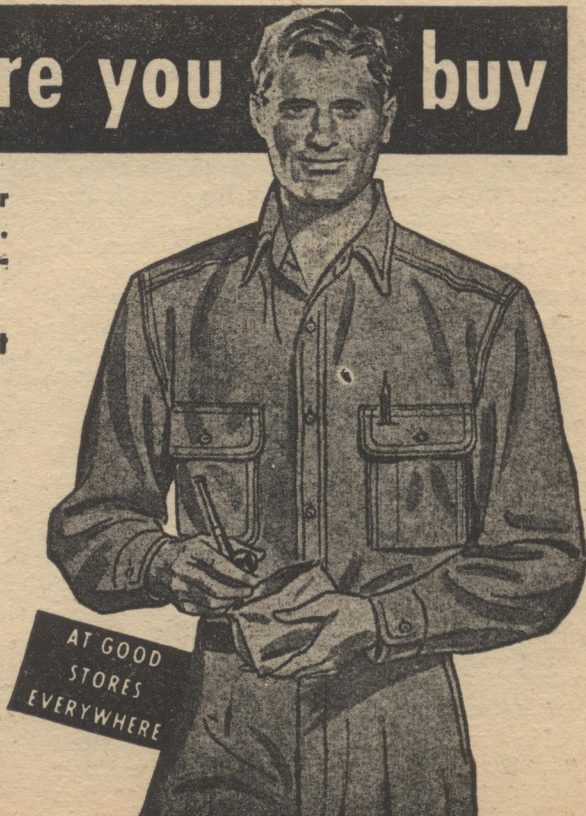
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Keene, stood his ground like this one and calmly waited the steady, inexorable approach of just such a man as he'd become. His father had been so slow he'd pitched into the deep dust of the trail his gun only half clear of the holster that looked so strange on his hip.

There'd been hard years after that. There was little a frail young woman could do to earn a living for herself and a son in this raw land. And he'd been sixteen when death snatched that last support. But he'd grown old in a tough knowledge by this time. Right lay in the blazing muzzle of a gun and to live you had to be as tough, as uncompromising as the land itself.

He'd found he possessed a certain swift, sure dexterity of hand and eye, the gift of his mother, and the cool fearlessness of his father. He knew what these added up to—the man who'd walked the middle of that road, holsters tied down, guns blazing. He'd heard the man had earned five hundred dollars for that second's work. He'd been a well paid dealer in death, tough, emotionless. The kind of man to live and prosper in this hard land. He'd been doing just that a long time now.

Twilight had blanketed the town and the street was intermittently lighted by patches of light that spilled from doorways and windows when he finally rose, went through the lobby and into the restaurant.

A waitress took his order, after which he sat frowning, thinking briefly of the scene on the hotel porch and feeling no particular emotion. Man had to expect trouble when he bucked a cattleman like Stuart. The smart man understood the laws of this land and prepared for it. Keene, like his own father, was not smart.

He finished his meal and when he rose the waitress was before him. He had partly turned away when he stopped. "Suppose," he said. "You had just one meal left in the house and two men came in for it. One offered you five dollars for it and the other a dollar. Who'd get it?"

She said, surprised, "The five dollar one, naturally."

"Suppose the man with the dollar was starving?"

"Then he'd get it."

"What about the five dollar man? What about business rules?"

"Look, mister, in such a case you don't use rules—just common sense. Besides, I'd get four dollars satisfaction watching that starving man fill up."

"Is that so?" Earle said.

He wandered back into the lobby and stood near the door. It was almost time. The street was completely dark now and the patches of light were brighter, turning the dust in

them to gold. He could see the shapes of the crowd flowing along the walk and their voices made a steady boil of sound, laced at intervals by a drum of hoofs or a lusty cry.

He turned from the doorway and climbed the stairs to his room. Inside, he locked the door and pulled the faded shade before lighting the lamp. He methodically checked the loads in his guns, after which he rolled his riding clothes into a tight bundle against the chance he might be in a hurry. At any odds he'd not sleep the night in this room. Lastly, he made sure the guns were loose in the holsters, then blew out the light and slipped out.

HE STOPPED in the darkness of the hotel porch and looked along the street. The vague shapes of wagons clustered before stores and the saddled horses before the saloons. Across the street he caught the fade and glow of some cowboy's cigarette as he lounged in a darkened doorway.

A half dozen men came hurriedly along the walk, bunched closely. As they drew near Earle saw each carried a rifle. Among them he glimpsed the man in blue cotton shirt and overalls who'd been nursing a drink at the Silver Dollar bar earlier in the afternoon. They turned onto the hotel porch, swung out, around and stopped, half surrounding him, purposeful, grim, silent. Homesteaders! Earle guessed at a glance why they'd come.

A big man, with a black spade beard, acted as spokesman. "Mister," he said bluntly, "We come t' give yuh warnin'. Ben Keene insists on goin' through with this fight. We know an' you know he ain't got a chance. It's a matter o' pride with 'im so we can't rightly interfere with his meetin' yuh."

"And so?" Earle asked sharply.

"We'll be waitin' f'r yuh afterwards. This's th' first thing we been able to put our hands on. Sam Stuart's a damn ghost that's scared to come out in th' open an' fight. All his dirty work's been at night or when nobody's around to prove anythin'. It's all been ag'in' Ben an' we know why."

The cotton shirted man said, "If ya' hadn't left that door jarred we'd never knowed."

"Careless of me," Earle said calmly.

The black-bearded man said, "Bringin' yuh here is somethin' we know. We'll fight yuh, an' take care of Stuart later."

"Here? Now?" Earle's voice cracked like a whip.

"I said we wouldn't interfere in this fight. Ben don't know, but we'll be there, too, hid out. There'll be six rifles trained on yuh th' minute yuh come in sight."

Jeff Earle looked coolly into the half moon of angry, determined faces and asked, "What's your suggestion?"

"Ride out, now," the big man blurted.

"And if I don't?"

"Mister, gun down Ben Keene an' yuh'll never ride out'a this town."

There was a grumble of assent. They were aroused, determined men and would do what they said. Earle knew that when he gave his answer, his voice cold, emotionless, his manner supremely confident, "I was hired for a job. It's a matter of pride with me, too."

He shouldered roughly through them and stepped to the board walk. Their voices rose in ugly chorus behind him and one came clear, saying: "He's called th' turn, boys. Come on."

Jeff Earle joined the crowd, a slender, quiet-appearing man in black broadcloth, moving slowly, leisurely along the street.



Yet there was no quietness, no leisure in him. Every nerve was stretched to the breaking point and only years of rigid practice held that outward calm. Against six rifles there was no chance. He'd long known that somewhere along the trail he'd meet a man a trifle of a second faster, or find a spot too hot to handle. He'd never let himself speculate on death—pain, perhaps, then a headlong plunge into blackness. He'd come a long way down the trail to here.

He moved forward, following the pattern. He'd travel the length of this street on each side, and somewhere along there Ben Keene would be waiting—and six hidden rifles.

Before the Cattleman's Bar he turned, slipped through the batwing doors into the noisy interior. He stood a moment, driving his look to every corner of the smoke-banked room. Ben Keene was not here.

Outside, he stopped in the building's shadow for his look at the street. People moving, wagons, horses, the glow of a cigarette like a period in the night. Unconsciously he began searching for the homesteaders. *Fool*, he thought. *They're not here*. He turned up the street again.

At the Silver Dollar he again made his entrance, had his look, and did not find Keene.

He turned to the door. This was a dangerous moment, if Keene happened to be waiting just outside. He'd be outlined, momentarily blinded coming out of the light. Two fast steps took him through the doors into

the building's blackness, from which he again had his look at the street. No rifle-armed homesteaders. But they were ready, waiting by now, wherever they were. Once again he caught the momentary glow of a cigarette as he swung up the street. That cowboy, or whoever it was must be traveling about his pace.

He took a dozen steps and stopped dead. That cigarette—warning blazed through his already taut body and he knew a fierce desire to plunge across the street and identify the smoker.

After a moment he resumed his walk. A cigarette on a crowded street. Maybe he was getting jumpy.

AT THE end of the street he would cross over and retrace his steps. When he reached it he kept his body pointed rigidly ahead and swiveled his head. He caught the unmistakable movement of a shadowy figure diving for cover between two buildings across the street. He recognized the tall, thin shape of Kid Lyons. He did not see Snap Dorgan, but experience told him the other was near. Dorgan was too old and cool a hand at this game to be caught easily. He saw Stuart's full plan then, and blinding rage rose through him to batter at his restraint.

It was a full minute before he felt calm enough to angle across the street and begin retracing his steps. But his anger was not diminished, and he began planning against these two, knowing his best plan would be no plan at all. But he might get them with luck. About Keene, he didn't know. Then the long plunge into blackness.

He concentrated so intently on the two behind, he had traversed the length of the street, was close to the livery stable when he realized it. And here Ben Keene stepped from the shadows, walked into the street and faced him.

Earle stopped, looking straight at Keene, picturing the positions of the men behind him. Lyons at his back. Dorgan somewhere across the street, on his left. They should be showing themselves now. He knew they'd wait until he dropped Keene. Stuart wanted Keene, too.

He thought of the six unseen rifles; wicked holes boring straight at him. He glanced at the dark shapes of near buildings and saw nothing. But they were there, a combined weight of eyes looking steadily down gun barrels. A tremor rippled through him, but it was not fear.

Jeff Earle fought his mind back to the men behind him. He had one small break in that he could make a partial turn as he stepped into the street to meet Keene. With luck he'd give this town something to remember. It had been a long, long trail to here. On that

thought he took his three quick steps into the street, whipped out his guns and turned.

He caught Snap Dorgan stepping cautiously to the edge of the walk, gun half drawn. He saw shock, surprise, twist Dorgan's face, then he moved frantically to complete the draw. Earle's shot jerked him straight. He took a fumbling step, the gun dangling loose in his hand, and pitched forward off the walk. Earle had already whirled on Kid Lyons. Lyons' first shot went over his head, the second splintered a window somewhere behind him. Earle's shot sent the cigarette spouting from Lyons' lips, hurled him backward against a wall. A third gun blasted at Earle's back. Ben Keene had unlimbered, too. Earle concentrated on Lyons and Lyons was fighting to bring his sagging gun up when Earle's second shot spilled him in a long, loose fall to the walk.

Earle whirled then, expecting the crash of unseen rifles, the smash and tear of lead. Ben Keene slid to a stop in the dust before him, gun in hand, and there was an expression on his square-boned face that made Earle hold the shot.

"I couldn't stop, once I'd started," Keene panted. "Thank God! I never could shoot worth a damn."

A big, bearded homesteader stepped from a dark corner facing Earle, rifle cradled in his arm. His appearance was a signal. Others stepped from the darkness about Earle and moved forward, rifles carried loosely. He'd been completely encircled.

Ben Keene said in a wondering voice, "Stuart's men! Why?"

"Stuart was pulling a double-cross, killing two birds with one stone, maybe trying to save a thousand dollars, too," Earle said savagely. Anger boiled through him again and this time he didn't try and control it. He swung about, leaving Ben Keene, pushed by the advancing homesteaders and strode up the center of the street, driving through the crowd that was running towards the spot he'd just left.

WHEN he entered the Silver Dollar it had emptied its crowd upon the street and there were only the bartender and a pair of sleeping drunks in a corner. Earle crossed to the door in back, wrenched it open and stepped in.

Sam Stuart looked up, started and asked involuntarily, "Snap an' th' Kid, what—" Realization shot his eyes wide and jerked him half out of the chair, almost upsetting the table. Sickly pallor flooded up under the tan of his bloated face. He drew a great breath and moistened pouting lips. The muscles of his throat contracted with the effort to talk, but no sound came.

Earle drove words at him with all the venom of his quiet voice, "Didn't expect me, eh, Stuart?"

Stuart's fat hands made aimless flutterings. "Mistake, Earle, mistake," he croaked. "I'll pay. Got it right here. I'll pay." He dug frantically into a drawer of the table and shoved a small, fat sack at Earle.

Earle dropped it in his pocket, holding Stuart in the chair with his eyes. He felt a sudden desire to smash this fat, cringing cattleman. Not kill him. There was no proper satisfaction in that. But inflict pain, more than physical pain. Lasting pain. A thought came to him and he said, "Get up, Stuart, and walk out to the bar." Stuart hesitated and Earle yanked him from the chair, sent him stumbling through the door.

The bartender opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it.

Earle said, "Get a pencil and paper for Stuart." When they came he said, "Write exactly what I say."

Stuart wrote:

To the Big Bend ranchers:

I tried to run you people out, and brought in a man to do the job. Tonight I found out that was a mistake. It won't happen again.

Stuart dropped the pencil and shook his head. "It'll ruin me!" he cried. "Ruin me."

Earle drew one of the black guns, laid it on the bar close to Stuart's pudgy hand and said coldly, "That gun just killed Kid Lyons. Pick it up."

Stuart drew back. "Ya' mean—"

Earle said brutally, "Pick it up, or sign."

Stuart shook his head again, then reached for the pencil.

After he'd signed it Earle said to the bartender, "Get a hammer and nails. Stuart's going to tack this up outside where everybody can read it."

When Earle pushed Stuart through the doors half the town was boiling up the street following his trail. He stood by, watching implacably as Stuart nailed the paper to the Silver Dollar's wall, surrounded by a milling, curious crowd of cowboys, homesteaders and townsmen. When he'd finished Stuart ducked through the doors and the crowd pressed forward. Matches flared in the darkness and a man began to read aloud.

Earle turned, then, and shoved through the crowd. He saw Ben Keene standing uncertainly at the edge of the walk with the black-bearded man and for a moment Keene seemed about to speak, then didn't.

Jeff Earle walked leisurely towards the hotel, in no hurry now, and the anger burned out of him. He had collected his fee and he was forcing a double-crossing little cattleman to pay for his act to the last day of his life.

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 29)



1. If a cowpuncher told you some cattle were "standing on their heads," you would know they were grazing, for that is the meaning of that old-time Western expression.

2. When a Westerner is "on the *cuidado*," he is dodging the law.

3. The expression "made wolf meat out of him" indicates a man has been killed. The term originated, of course, because many who died violently in the old days were simply left where they fell for the wolves to eat.

4. A "mail-order cowboy" is a person, generally a dude, who is all decked out in new store-bought clothes.

5. The term "gut-warmer" is used in reference to whiskey.

6. When a cowboy has his horse shod, he is likely to tell you he has just had the animal "plated."

7. The Western slang expression "cut the deck deeper," means, in effect, "Give me some more information—I don't understand."

8. True. When a cowboy leaves one part of the country for another part, he generally says he has "cut his suspenders."

9. The term, "chucking the Rio" is used of a northerner who affects the dress and ways of one from the Southwest.

10. True. The term, "chouse," means to handle cattle roughly, and so unnecessarily upset and annoy them. Generally, this sort

of thing is done by greenhorns, of course, and is usually frowned on by the more experienced and better cowhands.

11. True. A "cradle" is a sling carried under a wagon and used to hold fuel.

12. If the ranch boss told you to obtain some "California buckskin" for him, you would immediately hunt up some baling wire.

13. To the Westerner, a "butte" is a large hill or rock which stands alone—the surrounding territory having been worn away by erosion.

14. False. A "bull nurse" is a cowpuncher who takes care of the cattle when they are being shipped by train—not a rangeland doctor.

15. A cowboy "takes the big jump" when he dies.

16. True. A "biddy bridle" is an old fashioned bridle having blinders.

17. A "bag pannier" is a bag which is generally tied to the saddle and used to carry equipment of various sorts.

18. If a cowboy told you he was "going after some bait," you would know he was seeking food.

19. True. The Spanish word, "*aparejo*" means packsaddle.

20. An "apple horn" was a type of saddle popular in early times, and having a horn shaped somewhat like an apple.



LUCK OF THE LONG TRAIL

*Jake Butler had an owlhoot talisman that always brought him luck
—trouble was he didn't know it
on the day he died!*

IT WAS almost as hot in here at it was outside on the sun-drenched main drag of Liberty. Jake Butler unknotted his red neckerchief, mopped the sweat from his steaming face, and let his arm sag against the top of the bar. Nobody seemed to be noticing him. He turned restless eyes back to the impatient bartender of the Blue Cat Saloon and gave his order.

The neckerchief crumpled under his big fist on the bar had become more than it seemed—it was an amulet, a charm. Its use was not confined to mopping the sweat from his brow or keeping the trail dust out of his lungs. It was also a mask. In company with a slouch hat it had concealed his identity when he pulled out of Liberty three months ago.

At least he hoped it had. There was only one man in Liberty might have spotted him—the man who had seen him draw away from Rex McBride's shack with a smoking gun in his hand and a fat buckskin poke under his arm. Tad Petersen was his name—McBride's young partner. He had swung his mount around a big jutting boulder down the trail from the shack just as Jake was making his getaway. Petersen had been close enough for Jake to recognize him in the moonlight and they had thrown lead and both missed. Seconds later Jake was safe in the cottonwoods.

He drained the filled shot glass and felt the caustic liquor burn a path through his gullet. That was better. Raising his eyes to the gilt-edged mirror behind the bar, he examined the scene in the room at his back.

At a table to the right of the batwing doors sat three grimy miners in rough red woolen shirts. He studied their faces, but didn't remember seeing any of them before. They were pretty well liquored up and their raised voices carried across the room to the bar. Jake listened automatically. He had to know the

present lay of the land before making his next play.

The sudden clanking of spurs on the boardwalk directly outside the Blue Cat jarred him. He found himself jumpy. He riveted his eyes to the bar mirror. Behind him the batwing doors pushed open and, as he watched the long, limber form of a young miner step inside, Jake stood tense in his boots.

Tad Petersen.

Jake thought it out tautly—the chances of Petersen's recognizing him were remote. And if he did—he would pit his gun savvy against that of any grubber in the territory. His back was to Petersen now, but the bar mirror put him on even terms. Keeping his eyes fastened on the image of Petersen, he unfolded his fingers from the bunched neckerchief and let his hand drift carelessly down from the bar toward his gun butt.

But he paused, fervently hoping there wouldn't be any ruckus. He didn't want to leave Liberty until he had completed his business. His eyes squinted, and he cursed inwardly.

Petersen advanced across the room. There was no suspicion in the young miner's frank, open face. He drew up a few feet to the left, his gun hip facing Jake. Jake would have to pivot in order to fire.

He felt himself at a disadvantage, debated briefly. Petersen's devotion to his old partner had been legendary.

Floating his hand near his gun butt, Jake turned and walked with assumed indifference toward the door.

The batwings had hardly swung to behind him when he was hailed from the bar.

"Whoa up a minute, mister!"

It was Tad Petersen's voice.

Jake's first impulse was to make a quick break down the splintered boardwalk to the

Once in the alley, Jake broke
into a hard run. . . .

By HENRY GUTH

hitch-rack where his sorrel was waiting. He fought down the urge. Across the street in front of the town jail a group of loiterers seemed to be watching him. His quick eyes picked out Frank Dowd, sheriff of Liberty, near the center of the group.

Sweat broke out on his face and under his armpits. The deal was going against him. Was this a trap? Had Petersen been sent to flush him out of the Blue Cat?

No, that wasn't likely. The young miner would be too eager to cut a window in Jake's hide with his own bullet. He wouldn't consent to save him for the sheriff's hangrope—or anybody else.

Jake compromised. He reined his pace to a fast walk. If Petersen came after him he couldn't reach his mount in time. But a few steps ahead a narrow alley escaped from the main street between two high frame buildings. If he could make that alley. . . .

He did. And as he rounded the corner a quick glance across his shoulder showed that Tad Petersen had pushed out of the Blue Cat and was swinging down the boardwalk after him. The miner was shouting something, but he didn't aim to stop and listen. Once in the alley, Jake broke into a hard run. He was out of sight now and he aimed to get away and get away fast.

He was near the other end of the narrow alley, where a new turn would give him added cover, when his right foot wrenched inward suddenly. He felt a sickening pain in his ankle as his body lurched sidewise and his whole weight drove down on the twisted foot. He buckled over.

CURSING the dust-veiled chuckhole that had thrown him, Jake pushed heavily back to his feet. Searing arrows of pain shot through his leg. He forged ahead again but the anguish of moving squeezed whistling grunts from deep inside him.

No use trying to outdistance Petersen now. He would have to shoot it out with him pronto and hope that he could wriggle to cover before the sheriff and his cohorts arrived.

He dropped instinctively to a crouch and peered backward through the settling cloud of dust he had kicked up in his headlong run. An approaching figure was dimly visible in the murkiness. Jake filled his hand. His teeth ground together as he fought down the pain that stabbed through the wrenched leg. With all his heart he hated the man coming on through the dust.

He raised his gun.

Petersen didn't seem to be hurrying. The miner raised one arm high against the dust. Jake's face creased into an ugly grin. Maybe the grubber was wary of real gunplay. Well,

he had only himself to blame for the taste of lead he would get now.

Jake leveled his gun on the shifting, nebulous target down the alley. Petersen had spotted him now and was calling to him. What was he yelling for? A fresh twinge of pain burned through Jake's leg as he triggered in the direction of the voice and the vague, indistinct form.

Dimly as in a dream he saw Petersen freeze for the merest instant, then whip out his gun with the speed of a striking king-snake. Jake triggered again. An iron fist seemed to smash into the side of his head. The world was red and then black. . . .

When he opened his eyes two men were standing over him. The dust had settled in the alley and he recognized Tad Petersen and Sheriff Dowd. The young miner's left arm hung limply and there was a bloodstain on his sleeve. Behind the two men a half-circle of curious miners was forming.

Jake felt deadly tired. A terrible weight seemed to be pressing down on his eyes. He closed them quickly.

The voices of Petersen and the sheriff sounded faint in his ears.

"He's done in right enough," the sheriff grunted. "You shore he fired first, Tad?"

"He did."

Dowd grunted again.

"I believe yuh, son. You ain't never before been goin' around burnin' powder indiscriminate. Jest have to git the record straight, that's all. Who is this hombre?"

"Be hanged if I know, sheriff. So fur as I kin recollect I ain't never laid eyes on him before. Can't imagine why'n tarnation he wanted to gun me."

Jake struggled to bring his reeling brain into focus. Was he getting delirious? This talk didn't make sense.

He forced open his eyes.

Sheriff Dowd was still studying young Petersen.

"Why was you chasin' after this badhat, Tad?"

"I wanted to give him back his wiper, sheriff. He left it on the bar at the Blue Cat. A man needs his wiper."

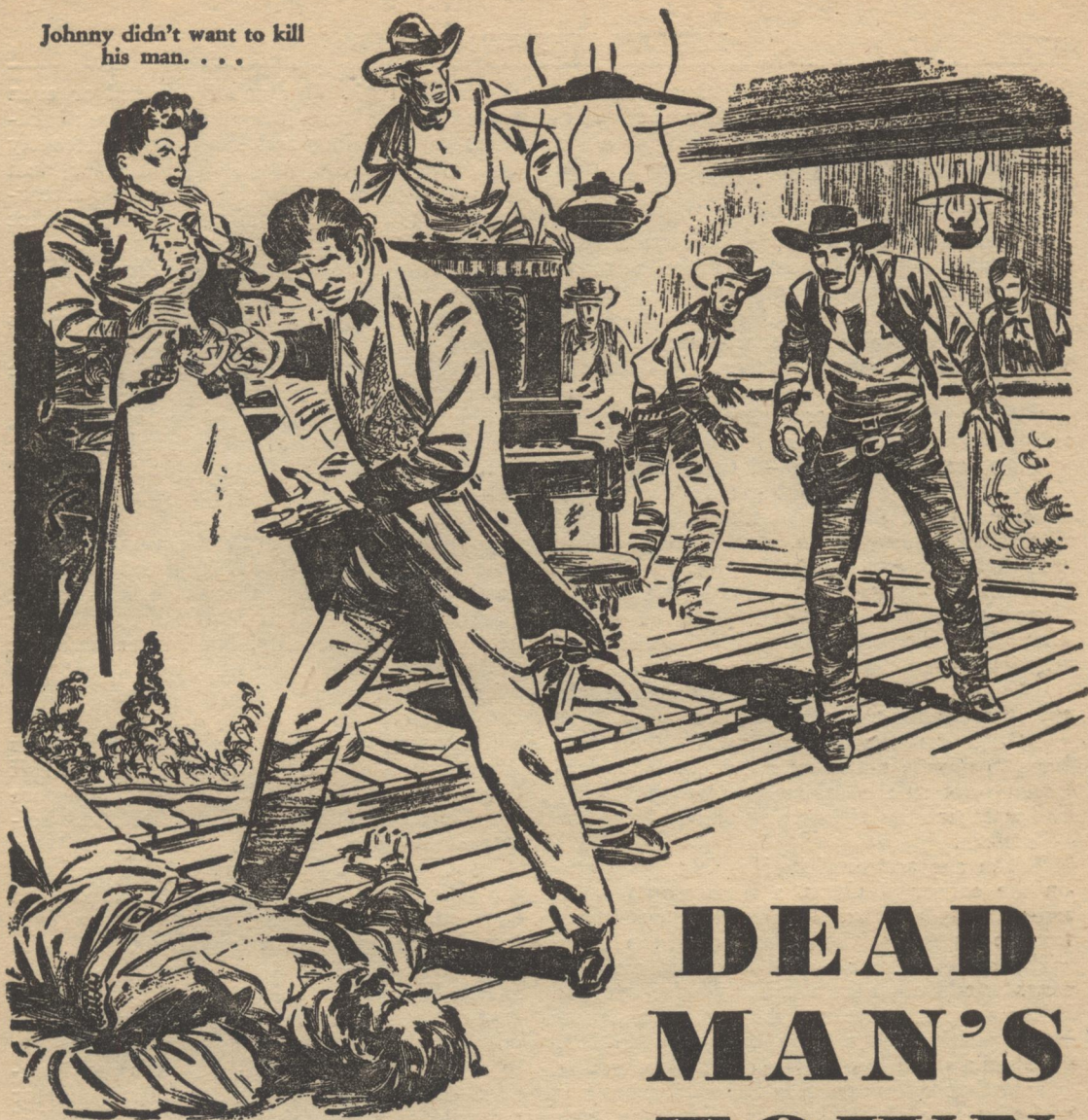
He held out the crumpled red neckerchief that until today had served Jake so faithfully. Jake's luck rag—his talisman. Dowd looked down at Jake and Tad Petersen followed the direction of the sheriff's eyes.

"Reckon you're tellin' the truth, son," Dowd said. "This hombre's neck is bare."

Jake closed his eyes so they wouldn't start asking him questions. He didn't want to answer any questions. He didn't want to do anything but go to sleep.

For the first time in his life he realized that this last rest was long overdue.

Johnny didn't want to kill
his man. . . .



DEAD MAN'S TOWN I

JOHNNY FARROW came to the Utah copper mining country from only he knew where. The stage dropped him off at the shanty-town misnamed Belle City, and the same night he was playing the tinny piano in the Alhambra honkytonk. As jobs went, Johnny's new one didn't rate much above that of saloon swamper. But then Johnny Farrow didn't look like much, as men went. Certainly, he didn't look like a man who would shape the destiny of rowdy Belle City.

He was a pale shade of a man—no more than five feet six, and rail thin. A washed-out look and a nasty cough made those who noticed

Johnny Farrow figured he ought to do all right in Belle City's elections, for when he rode in he already had what every shanty-town politician needs—a bullet in his belly!

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

him at all take it for granted that he was a lunger. And Johnny didn't bother to tell anyone that he was merely recovering from a bad case of lead poisoning. He wasn't much of a talker.

Except on a piano keyboard. Johnny Farrow could make the ivories laugh and cry, moan and sigh. He could make a piano whisper of happiness, or groan with the world's misery. He could strike out angry thunder. But musical talent was wasted on the burly miners who crowded the Alhambra each evening.

"Pep it up, Professor!" they'd yell at Johnny. "This ain't no wake!"

That was when some of them wanted to dance with the percentage girls. Most of the time, however, the crowd lined the bar and filled the gambling tables. And Johnny's music was just a background for the clatter of glasses and the slapping of chips and pasteboards. Three times an evening, though, he had a chance to accompany the Alhambra's star attraction, Kitty Sharon.

She was a blonde girl with a doll-like face that the environment hadn't yet marked. She was sort of untouchable. That is, she didn't have to mingle with the customers for a percentage cut on the drinks they bought. Kitty had another way of bringing patronage to the Alhambra.

When she appeared beside Johnny's piano on the corner platform, a hush would settle over the wide room. Not only the customers but the bartenders, the gamblers and the house girls would turn to watch her, and maudlin tears would come into worldly wise eyes as Kitty sang of home and mother, of a sweet-heart waiting, of a baby being put to bed. She had a small sweet voice and a clean young beauty that had no place in Belle City, but her melodies carried her hardened audience back to something better, real or fancied, than the shanty-town. And the crowd loved Kitty Sharon.

Johnny Farrow loved her, too, by the time he'd been at the Alhambra a week. It was in his eyes when he played for her, when his gaze followed her up the stairs that led to her room. And it was Kitty Sharon who became the cause of Johnny's trouble.

Belle City politics didn't enter into it at first. The trouble started on a Sunday night, the biggest night of the week for the town's deadfalls. Kitty was singing her final song, just before midnight, when two hardcases came slamming in through the swing doors. The commotion they made caused Kitty's voice to falter, and when the pair started to holler she stopped singing altogether.

Johnny's hand became idle on the keys. He looked around, expecting some of the miners or the house lookout to give the trouble-makers

the bum's rush. But nobody moved or even voiced a complaint. The two half-drunk hardcases came yelling and laughing boisterously back through the room. The smaller man grabbed a percentage girl and gave her a bear-hug. The other kept coming on, his bloodshot eyes on Kitty Sharon.

"Come on, beautiful!" he ordered. "Sing for Matt Hagarty!"

Johnny's face went stiff. He rose from his stool.

Kitty said, "Hold on, Johnny. I'll handle this loudmouth."

She stepped to the edge of the low platform, and her voice was suddenly shrewish. "Clear out, Matt Hagarty!" she flung at him. "I told you before, I won't sing for you—drunk or sober!"

Johnny was startled by the venom in her voice. He could see that Kitty hated this burly hardcase with a hatred that made her tremble. Johnny hadn't heard of Matt Hagarty during his week in Belle City, but he realized that everyone else knew the man well. That was why Hagarty and his companion weren't thrown out.

They weren't miners, Johnny saw by their dress. Both hardcases wore high-heeled half boots mounted with jingling spurs. They wore broad-brimmed, flat-crowned hats. And holstered six-guns. The guns, maybe, had the Alhambra crowd cowed. Johnny guessed that the pair were as tough as they looked and sounded. He wished Kitty would go on singing, so the burly Matt Hagarty would calm down.

But Kitty was furious and the words she spat out merely made Matt Hagarty burst out with harsh laughter. "That's no way to talk to a Texan," he retorted. "That's me, beautiful—Matt Hagarty, tough as a Brazos 'gator an' wild as a maverick steer, but I sure feel soft inside when I see you!"

"A Texas saddle tramp!" Kitty cried. "Likely you were chased out of Texas. Were I a man, I'd run you out of Utah!"

"You're a long way from being a man," Hagarty yelled. "And I like you the way you are. Come here, baby—"

He had hold of her then, both arms around Kitty's small waist. She struggled, fought wildly, scratched at his face, knocked off his hat and pulled his hair. She screamed for him to put her down, but Hagarty, enjoying it, hugged her tighter and bellowed his laughter. And none of the crowd made any move to stop it.

Johnny Farrow knew it was up to him. He thought first of the piano stool, but he figured that might kill the hardcase. There was an empty glass beer stein atop the piano, and Johnny grabbed it up. He brought the stein down hard on Matt Hagarty's bare head. The

glass broke, and Hagarty groaned. The hard-case's eyes went glassy, his knees buckled. He fell to the floor, carrying Kitty with him. But the girl got up quickly, and cried, "Johnny, watch out!"

Hagarty was out cold, but the other hard-case was coming across the room. He was a lean, wiry man with a swarthy face and chill eyes. He had his hand on his gun, and he was cursing Johnny. But Johnny hadn't stopped moving. After downing Hagarty, he'd whirled around and grabbed up the piano stool. He swung back now and flung the stool. The swarthy Texan was blurry-eyed from whiskey, and was slow in ducking. The stool smashed into his face with a sickening thud. He went spilling over backwards, and his gun, at last clear of leather, blasted toward the ceiling.

Johnny came from the platform and took Hagarty's gun, then went after the other man's. The silence was tomblike until Hagarty groaned and came lurching to his feet. He stood swaying, staring wickedly at Johnny for a long moment, then stumbled to his partner and prodded him with his boot.

"Come on, Jake," he growled. "Dammit—get up!"

Jake whimpered but didn't rise, so Hagarty grabbed him by the legs and dragged him to the swing doors. He paused there, scowled at Johnny Farrow, and raged, "I'll not forget this, you piano-playing son! Next I see you, you'd better have a gun in your hand!"

He went out then, still dragging the unconscious and bloody-faced Jake.

JOHNNY shrugged it off. He shoved the two six-guns across the bar, so one of the bartenders could put them out of sight. The crowd was still quiet and uneasy, but then Kitty came forward. Johnny expected to be thanked. Instead, he got the surprise of his life. The girl turned her fury on him.

"You fool!" she cried. "Don't you realize what you've done? Don't you know who Matt Hagarty is? Why, you must be crazy!"

She said a lot more. Kitty Sharon in a fury wasn't at a loss for words. Johnny gathered that he'd made the mistake of his life, that Matt Hagarty was the most dangerous man in Belle City—and that Jake Tulare was the next most dangerous. Kitty didn't utter a word of thanks for Johnny's taking her part. Finally, when she'd talked herself breathless, the girl whirled away and took to the stairs with an angry clatter of high heels.

The Alhambra's owner, fat Russ Belden, had come from his office when the trouble started. He now tried to get things back to normal by telling the crowd that the drinks were on the house. There was a slow surge to the bar, then Belden took Johnny's arm and led him to the cubby-hole office. Russ Belden was jovial by nature, but now he was glum looking. He took a tin box from the safe, came to the desk and counted out some money.

"There's your week's wages, and twenty dollars besides," he grunted. "Now it's up to you to get safely out of town."

"So I'm fired?"

"No. You're quitting."

"Why should I quit?" Johnny wanted to know. "Shucks, Russ—I didn't start that brawl."

Belden nodded. "I know you didn't," he stated. "It was Matt Hagarty. Every time he gets a couple drinks under his belt, he comes here and makes a play for Kitty. But I'm thinking of you, kid. It's for your own good. Those Texans will lay for you if you stay here in Belle City."

"I handled them tonight."

"You were lucky. They didn't expect trouble from you—from a sickly piano player. Why, that pair of Texans have whipped the best men in this town. I've seen them do it."

Johnny's thin face took on a stubborn look. "I'm not leaving, Russ. I'm keeping my job, unless you say I'm fired."

"I can't say that, Johnny. Hell—I like you."

"Then I'm staying. I won't run from those two ornery sons."



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"It's your life, I'm telling you."

Johnny asked, "Why's Matt Hagarty got this town cowed? Who and what is he, anyway?"

"He's trouble-shooter for Western Copper Mining Company—Sam Greer's outfit," Belden explained. "Greer brought him in a couple months ago, when he had trouble keeping his miners at work in that hungry hole of his. Too many men were getting killed and hurt in explosions and cave-ins. Hagarty and his partner kept the rest from quitting by gun-whipping a dozen or more of the miners who stepped out of line."

"You mean to say a couple of hardcases can buffalo a mine gang?"

"You don't savvy it, Johnny. Miners are tough and they brawl a lot with each other. But they don't know how to deal with gun-toting hardcases. Nowadays, they toe the mark that Sam Greer draws and those Texans back up. I'm warning you, son, if miners can't buck that pair, you can't either."

"Like you told me," Johnny said stubbornly, "It's my life."

And went back to his piano.

So Johnny Farrow stayed on at the Alhambra, and Belle City waited for something to happen to him. Gamblers in the various dives laid bets as to how long he would last. Miners tramping to work mornings, lunch pails in hand, asked each other if there was any news. They asked the same question at night, coming back from the mines to their shanties and shoddy boarding houses, and for a week the townsmen replied that Johnny hadn't yet been run out of town, beat up, or killed.

More than once during that week, Russ Belden urged Johnny to change his mind and leave town. The fat man became peeved finally, and growled, "If you're staying on account of the girl, you're a crazier fool than I thought. Kitty Sharon's not for a cheap piano player."

Johnny's pale face reddened and he told Belden to shut up.

But Belden went on, "She came here three months ago, looking for a job, like any fancy woman. But right off she let me know she was different—she's out to catch a rich husband. She's smart, that girl. She's already got Sam Greer nibbling at her hook. You'll see that when Greer gets back from his trip to Montana. What would she want with a piano player when she can maybe have a copper king? Don't hang around this town and get yourself killed for a floss like that!"

"I'm hanging around because I don't like being run out."

"Pride, eh?" Russ Belden sneered. "A crazy fool pride!"

"Maybe so," Johnny said, and started practicing at the piano.

But when Belden moved angrily away,

Johnny's fingers became idle. He had been shy about admitting it, but the fat man had hit upon the truth. Kitty Sharon was a big part of the reason he wouldn't leave Belle City. Johnny had lost his head over the girl.

IT WAS that same day, late in the afternoon, when Johnny discovered that Russ was right about Kitty. The girl came down from her room all dressed up. She looked like a fashion plate, with a pert hat perched on her blonde head and wearing a stylish dress of dark green velvet. The dress had leg-of-mutton sleeves, a prim, high-necked collar, and a bodice that hugged her so tightly the smooth roundness of her was more than hinted at. Kitty carried a parasol and wore a happy smile. She breezed out of the Alhambra, and a fine carriage with two handsome bays in harness was waiting for her on the street.

Johnny went to the window. A colored man in livery handled the bays. A tall and darkly handsome man of about forty-five met Kitty, smiled upon her, helped her into the carriage and climbed in after her. The rig rolled smoothly down Main Street. Russ Belden came up behind Johnny, and murmured, "Sam Greer."

Johnny looked as though he were silently cursing. He said, "How come Hagarty annoys Kitty if Greer is his boss and has his eye on her?"

"Maybe Greer's scared of Hagarty too," Belden suggested.

Now that he was back in town, Sam Greer came to the Alhambra at night to hear Kitty sing. He always came late, then, after the girl's last song, took her to the Belle Hotel for supper. Johnny didn't like it, and he guessed he was jealous. But there wasn't anything he could do. Kitty saw him only as a piano player, and still considered him a fool for staying on in Belle City. . . . She told him that sometimes, when she rehearsed her songs, mornings.

But though Sam Greer came to the Alhambra, Matt Hagarty and Jake did not. They were around town, but Johnny did not bump into them. He seldom went farther from the honkytonk than the Copper Kettle Cafe, where he took his meals.

But he was vigilant. He took one precaution that nobody knew about. He wore a .36 caliber pistol in a trick, fast-draw shoulder holster. It wasn't much of a weapon compared to the heavy .45s worn by the two Texans, but Johnny knew that it was easier to handle and more quickly drawn and fired. And, in the right hands, just as deadly as a big six-gun. The .36, however, gave him no peace of mind.

He didn't know when Hagarty and Tulare would come after him, and the uncertainty of it wore at his nerves. He always felt knotted

up inside, and he knew that the strain was retarding his convalescence. He began to wish he could get the ugly business over with.

He heard more and more about Hagarty and Tulare, from Russ Belden, the bartenders, and other townsmen. It was whispered that the pair had ridden with a wild bunch in Texas, and were wanted for everything from horse stealing to bank robbery. Hagarty was by far the worst of the two, and though he might brag of his love for Texas, the Lone Star State had no affection for him.

Belle City didn't love Hagarty, either. An election was coming up, and Hagarty was ward-heeling for the candidates Sam Greer favored. Greer wanted the re-election of the town councilmen and the town marshal who now held office, and Hagarty and Tulare were lining up the votes.

"It's more than politics," Belden told Johnny. "It's a shady sort of business. Dog-eat-dog business. And Greer's the hungriest dog."

"How's that?" Johnny asked. "What's his business got to do with politics?"

Greer's business, it turned out, took in more than the mine. He owned a share of every saloon, dance hall, and gambling place in Belle City—except the Alhambra. And the two thousand and more miners in the town spent most of their wages in such places. But there was even more at stake. There were three smaller mines besides Greer's Western Copper, plus some good copper claims that were owned by townsmen who hadn't the money to work them properly. Greer hoped to grab them—if he got big enough.

"If we can get our men in office," Belden said, "we'll clean up the town. We'll stop the sale of whiskey that's no better than poison. We'll run out some of the tinhorn gamblers and fancy women. The miners will use their money then to bring their families here from the East, and that'll make Belle City a real town instead of a tough camp. And then the other mines will be able to produce and prosper."

"What chance have your men of winning the election, Russ?"

"A mighty slim chance," Belden said, frowning. "Those Texans can throw the fear of the devil into men. Still, our gents will make a fight of it."

IT WAS none of Johnny Farrow's business. Belle City wasn't a town to win a man's affection, and Johnny, being more or less a stranger, knew little about the men running for office. But he liked and trusted Russ Belden, whose Alhambra was a square-deal place, and he felt that the town's few merchants, who were on Belden's side so far as politics went, were decent men with the good of the town at heart. He sized up Charlie

Harmon, Mike Dulaney, Bert Wyler—owners of the three mines not owned by Sam Greer—and judged them to be the right sort.

How much of his dislike of Greer was due to Kitty Sharon, Johnny didn't like to think about. It wasn't until the night before election day that Johnny decided the voting was some of his business. It was Sam Greer who decided him.

Sam Greer had come to hear Kitty sing that night, and no doubt to take her to supper afterward. Before the girl appeared, Greer came over to Johnny's corner. He was wearing a fine gray broadcloth suit and a diamond glittered on his tie. He gave Johnny an amused grin.

"Been hearing about you, Farrow," he said. "You roughed up my two boys while I was away from town."

"So?"

"So I just wondered how you managed it."

"That pair's not as tough as they look."

"You're wrong about that, friend," Greer said. He lighted a cigar, all the while watching Johnny with amusement. "They only let you get away with it because I told them they'd be out of their jobs if they bothered you."

Johnny's face stiffened. "Now, why would you tell them that?"

"You had somebody talk for you," Greer said. "A lady." He laughed in Johnny's now reddening face. "Though what she sees in you, outside of your being a good piano player, I don't know. There's sure no telling about a woman."

Johnny just sat there after the man moved away to one of the roulette layouts. He felt all empty inside. He'd been jumpy for a week because he expected those hardcases to even matters with him, and there'd been no danger at all. He was protected by a woman's skirts, and that .36 caliber under his left armpit was a joke.

Then he was sore.

He looked up as Kitty appeared. She saw the anger on his face, and said lightly, "What's ailing you, Professor?"

Johnny growled that nothing was ailing him. He said, "What's the idea, asking Sam Greer to keep his two toughs off me?"

"I don't want to lose a good piano player. That's all."

"You've lost one, now."

"What?"

"That's it," Johnny said, getting off his stool. "I'm done playing this thing. I'm done letting you hide me behind your skirts."

He turned away from her, and Kitty cried, "Johnny, don't be a fool all over again!" He didn't let on he heard her. He went straight over to Sam Greer, grabbed him by the arm, spun him around from the roulette wheel. He said, flat-voiced, "Greer, I've just quit my job."

Now that Kitty's no longer got me for a piano player, you can turn loose those gun wolves of yours."

Greer said, "Go away. Don't bother me," and turned back to his gambling.

And that was the exact moment when Johnny finally decided to take a hand in the election.

There was an after-midnight meeting in the rear of Jeb Fowler's general store. Russ Belden called it on Johnny's insistence. Half a dozen merchants, the three independent mine owners, and a couple of mine foremen were there. None of the candidates were present.

"It's like this, friends," Johnny said, "you figure your candidates won't have a chance of being elected if Sam Greer's gunslicks are hanging around the polls. Well, the thing to do is—get rid of those two hardcases."

"How?" asked Charlie Harmon, who owned the Little Utah Mine.

"We can hunt them up and disarm them," Johnny replied. "We can lock them up somewhere until after the polls close."

"And some of us get killed, trying it," Harmon growled. "Count me out. It's a darn' fool notion. Just because you were lucky enough to get the best of those Texans once, it doesn't say it'll happen again."

"I'll take the risk," Johnny argued. "All you men have to do is back me up."

Harmon shook his head and started to leave. The others were as unwilling to face Hagarty and Tulare. They too turned to the door. Johnny felt like a fool.

He didn't even feel better when Russ Belden lay a hand on his shoulder, and said, "You can't reason with men who've seen what Hagarty and Tulare can do. Forget it, partner."

Johnny nodded. He went from Fowler's store to Bateman's Saloon and had a couple of drinks. He was all tangled up inside, about Kitty smiling at Sam Greer and hoping to marry him just because he was a rich copper king—and about her talking up for him, so he wouldn't have to take a beating, or worse, from Matt Hagarty and Jake Tulare. He was mixed up in his mind, too, about Belle City and the election, and about honest but timid men who wouldn't fight for a right sort of election. Maybe, too, he was mixed up by his convalescence. And finally he was mixed up more by the whiskey he was drinking.

He was stumbling a little when he left Bateman's Saloon. And he was blurry-eyed. When the two men came out of a dark alleyway close to the Alhambra, where he was headed, he couldn't do much about it. He couldn't defend himself with his fists, and he didn't think to grab for his gun. Almost before he knew it, Jake Tulare had locked his arms behind him and Matt Hagarty was slamming blows into his face. The pain made Johnny's brain reel,

blinded him. There was a roaring in his ears, and through it came Matt Hagarty's harsh laughter. It was fun for those tough Texans, but not for Johnny Farrow. . . .

THEY dumped Johnny from a buckboard, far out on the desert, then turned their rig and drove off through the darkness—laughing. Johnny lay there, as limp as a rag and throbbing with pain. He was only half conscious for a long time, and even when his mind cleared he was too weak to pick himself up.

He lay hating Matt Hagarty and Jake Tulare, planning to pay them back, yet knowing that the sensible thing was for him to get up and start walking in the direction they had headed him. Only a fool would go back to Belle City after such a beating. There was nothing in that town for him, yet Johnny knew he was going back.

He did go back. When the sun came up, a party of Mormon horse-traders found him. They gave him food and water, and would have given him a mount had he been willing to go their way. But Johnny was going the other way, back to Belle City. He started walking, full of pain still, but stronger now with his belly filled. And he had his gun. Those hardcases hadn't thought enough of him, feared him enough, to take away that. It was their error, Johnny thought.

Election was nearly over by the time Johnny got within sight of the town. He got a hand-out meal at a nester place three miles east of town, then went on. He heard the mine whistles wailing quitting time as he plodded the last half mile, and he entered the town as the miners swarmed in from work.

The miners headed for the voting place in the town hall, midway along Main Street, and Johnny moved with them. A long line formed on the street and reached into the hall, but the men in it were quiet and without enthusiasm. Johnny saw Russ Belden in the Alhambra's doorway, and knew by the frown on the fat man's face that the miners were voting as they had been expected. Perhaps they were not to be blamed, Johnny decided. Matt Hagarty stood on one side of the town hall doorway, Jake Tulare on the other. The hardcases were grinning and making a show of friendliness, but they spoke a word to each man as he passed inside. And the guns they wore talked too.

A freight wagon stood near the town hall, and Johnny made for it. He climbed onto the wagon and at once had the attention of the men in the line. His battered face drew their eyes. But Johnny had something to say, and he shouted it.

"Friends—it's your right to vote as you please! When you get inside and mark your

ballots, do it as you think you should. Nobody can use a gun on you for not voting Sam Greer's way!"

A surprised muttering ran along the line. Some men looked startled. Up by the town hall entrance, Johnny saw, Matt Hagarty and Jake Tulare were getting together with Sam Greer who had just come from casting his vote. Greer was scowling. The two hardcases appeared to be cursing.

Johnny went on, yelling it. "Stand together against those gunslicks and you've got them licked! Matt Hagarty and Jake Tulare are all talk, anyway. If you doubt that, I'll give you proof."

He swung around to face the pair, and called, "Matt—Jake, I've got a gun inside my coat. Either brace it, or come away from that doorway. And if you do come away, keep moving until you're out of town—for good!"

Sam Greer said, "Do as he says, boys. Get out of town. I won't have any part of this." And he left the entrance.

A hush lay along Belle City's main street, and for a moment nobody moved except Sam Greer—a man suddenly careful not to associate himself with trouble. But before the mine owner got across the street, bedlam broke loose. The line of voters broke; they scattered, scrambled to get out of bullet range, some yelling in panic. And only two men remained by the town hall entrance. Matt Hagarty, the braggart Texan, and his ugly-eyed partner, Jake Tulare. Both were grinning, without amusement.

Johnny Farrow taunted, "Yellow, Matt?" Hagarty wouldn't swallow that. He'd already lost too much Texas face. He yelled, "I'll handle him, Jake!" and grabbed for his gun.

There was Hagarty drawing, and shooting. There was the sickly piano player up there on the wagon, a pointblank target. But a gun had come into Johnny Farrow's hand, and it too was blasting—not as loudly as Hagarty's, but blasting just the same. Then there was Hagarty collapsing, and Johnny still standing there—his gun turned on Jake Tulare, now, who yelped an oath and went for his weapon.

Tulare's gun roared and roared again, and a man's scream echoed it—but it was not Johnny Farrow's outcry. He still stood there when Jake Tulare sprawled down on his face. He stood there even after the crowd came

back, and a man said, in an awed voice, "What do you know? A wild shot got Sam Greer. One of Jake's shots!"

"He's dead?" Johnny asked.

"Not dead," the miner replied. "But he sure knows he's been plugged. He maybe won't die, but he'll never be the same man."

Johnny might have laughed, as some of the crowd did. Not because a man was hurt, but because a blight had lifted. But he merely shrugged and climbed down from the wagon. For an ailing piano player, he took gunplay pretty calmly. He even reminded the men to go in and vote, as they pleased. Then, after Sam Greer was carried to Doc Graves' house, Johnny crossed to the Alhambra. He asked Russ Belden, whose round face was beaming, if Kitty knew about Greer. Belden said she did, that she was in the barroom.

Everyone but Kitty was outside. She stood in the far corner, by the piano, her head bowed. Johnny felt choked up, but his voice was gruff, saying, "It wasn't my bullet that got Sam Greer. You've got to believe that, Kitty."

"I know," the girl said quietly. "Russ told me."

"Well, then, I'll say good-by."

"Johnny—"

"Yes, Kitty?"

She still didn't look up but now her voice was husky with emotion. "I was wrong, Johnny, about what I wanted out of life," she said. She waited and then said, "Johnny, don't go away."

Johnny's face lighted up. He didn't know what to say to that, but he knew he wouldn't go away. Yet he wouldn't stay at the Alhambra as a piano player. No need for that—from tonight on, he could make his way in Belle City. And some day, he thought, maybe he would be able to give Kitty everything she wanted.

He said, "I'm staying, Kitty," and only the entrance of Russ Belden and a bunch of other men kept him from taking Kitty in his arms.

Russ Belden clapped Johnny on the back, and asked what the whole town wanted to know, "Son, where'd you learn to outshoot a couple of hardcase Texans like Hagarty and Tulare?"

Johnny grinned. It was the first time anybody in town had interested himself in his past.

"Why—Texas," he said.



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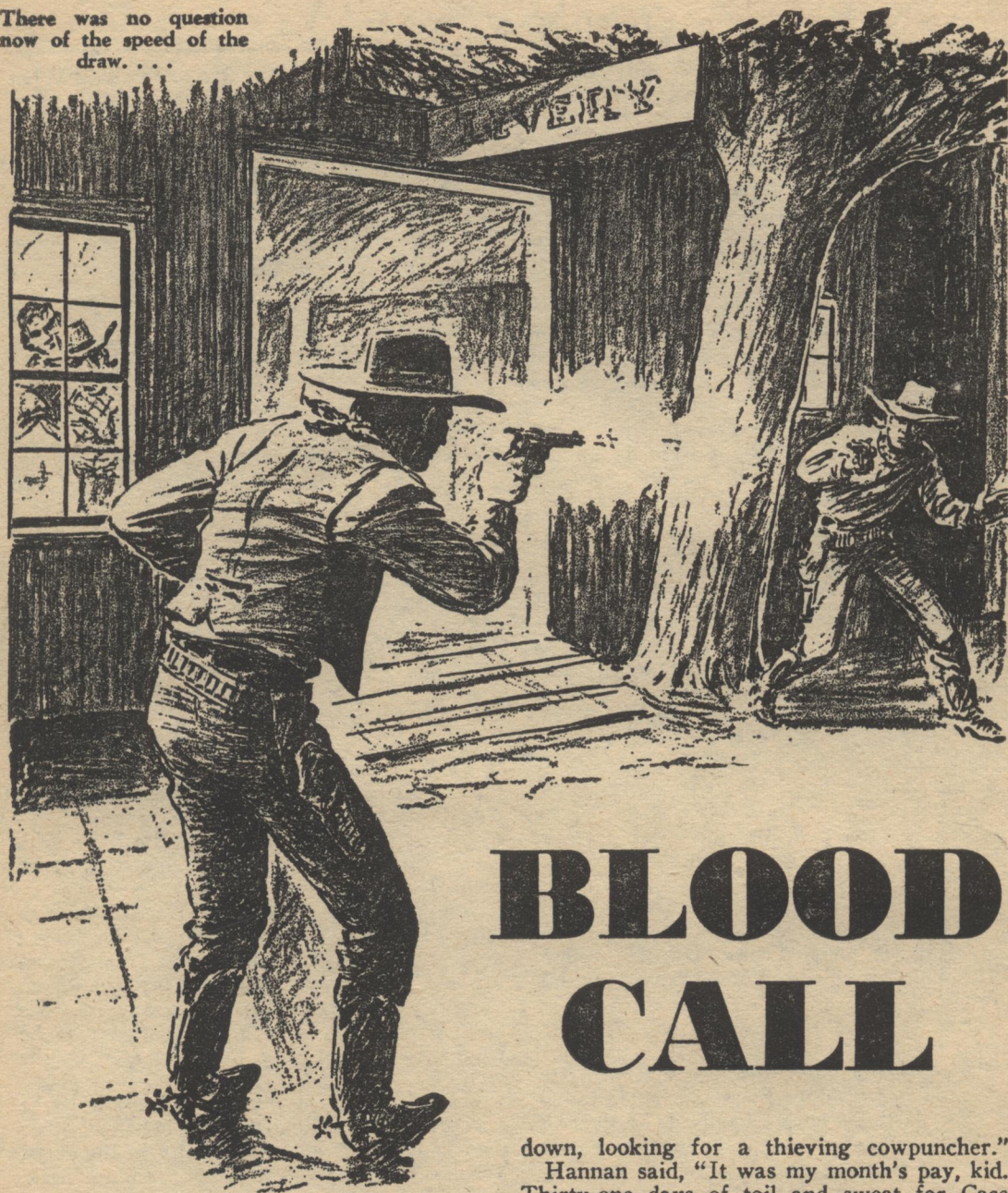
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BLOOD CALL

THE two horsemen rode out of the notch, not too straight in their saddles, and let their tired brons take their own good time climbing to the crest of a long low ridge. From this eminence they looked down on a swatch of pale yellow light they knew marked the cowtown of Mesa.

Hugh Varney heaved a weary sigh and looked over at Frank Hannan. "Maybe the skunk is down there spending that roll. Maybe he ain't, but I need a drink. Bad enough t' work eleven hours by day without spending another three hours in the saddle after sun-

down, looking for a thieving cowpuncher."

Hannan said, "It was my month's pay, kid. Thirty-one days of toil and sweat for Cass Irbine. That's all it was. If I ever catch that jasper I'll beat him nigh t' death."

"Got a hunch he's out of the country by now," Varney said. "Well, let's go down into the town."

"Lot of noise boiling up," Hannan said when they could see the outlines of Mesa's frame buildings. "Must be a dance."

"Not interested, Hugh."

"Me neither," Varney said, conscious of his weariness for the first time, and thought of Lydia. If she were here in Mesa, he knew, he'd take her up there to the Masonic Hall and

His lightning guns were fast, Hugh Varney found—but a woman's laughter could be more deadly!

dance the whole night through, as beaten as he was.

They heard the music as they rode up the street and saw the couples flit past the two big windows. The mingled talk and laughter trailed them to the Mesa saloon where they dismounted and hitched their studs to the tie-rack. Wagons and buckboards, saddle horses and buggies choked both sides of the street and the walks were crowded. Varney dodged three men who suddenly broke out of the saloon and flung at Hannan, "What's their hurry, Frank?"

Hannan said, as they stepped through the batwings, "Trouble, kid. Get out of here."

They turned and slammed their way out to the walk and a group of men crowded them off into the street. Varney yelled, "What's the matter here?" and his last word was drowned out by the crash of gunfire. Above the racket he thought he heard a man yell, "Arch Fancher!"

A big man with a heavy mustache and heavy paunch shouldered his way along the walk in front of LaRue's General Store. The star on his vest glinted in the lamplight. Hugh Varney's eyes were drawn away from the lawman to the tall, thin man who stepped quietly out of the saloon. His eyes were deep set, a pair of dark pits on either side of his nose. Shadows played in the hollows of his cheeks. He quickly built a smoke, struck a match and cupped his hands over the flame. The cigarette caught fire but there was no warmth around the lips that held it.

Hannan whispered to Hugh, "It's Fancher. I saw him over in Nevada a year ago."

The gunman said, "Ask the barkeep if I didn't give him a fair shake, sheriff. I came here peaceful-like. I offered them all a drink and that puncher said he was particular about the company he kept and the men he drank whiskey with. He'd take no treat from a killer."

The sheriff said, "Get out of town, Fancher!"

"In about two hours," Fancher said. "I aim to dance with a couple of pretty girls, sheriff. You get impatient you'll find me up there." He walked past Hugh Varney, his shoulder rocking the Dipper rider slightly off balance. "That was not intentional, my friend," he muttered and snapped his cigarette away.

The lawman let his breath sough out and

walked clumsily into the saloon. Varney and Frank Hannan came in behind the man and looked at the puncher stretched out on the floor. The barkeep still had his teeth pressed down hard against his cold cigar.

The Mesa sheriff knelt down beside the dead man. "Rode for Thurman's Boxed H," he said. "Name of Rip Horgan. He was always a trouble-maker when he come to town and allowed he was a salty cuss."

The barkeep growled, "Get him out of here."

Hannan nudged Hugh. "Some shootin', kid. Two holes in his chest you could cover with a four-bit piece."

"Reckon I'll pass up that drink," Hugh said. "Let's get on our way." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Just a little after ten. We can get to Bridgerville before Charlie closes up."

"And before the hotel dining room is dark, Hugh?" Hannan smiled, and dropped a hand on Varney's shoulder and shoved him toward the door.

RIDING out of Mesa, Hugh said, "In a way I'd like to have seen Fancher make that draw. There's nobody faster, I've heard."

Hannan was silent for a quarter of a mile. Then he said, "I often wonder, kid. Sometimes I figure a man's reputation is built up a lot by the mouths of other men. After a while you hear so much about a thing, say an advertisement for stomach-ache, until you believe it can do everything a man says it can. You take it for granted. A man gets an idea in his head and lets it have its way with him without giving it an argument."

"Speakin' of advertisements, Frank," Varney countered, "would you say that wa'n't a powerful testimonial Arch Fancher left behind him?"

"Horgan? That man's built himself up with his mouth. Fancher has a brain, two hands and a gun. You have the same and you're pretty good with them all."

"Tryin' to git me to build myself up, Frank?" Hugh laughed.

"No. But you take it too much for granted that Fancher is top man," Hannan said.

"While I do I'll live as long as a man should," Hugh said lightly, and thought of Lydia Hume again. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen, one that didn't have to

By JOE ARCHIBALD

pinch her cheeks to keep the color in them. Even after a long day of waiting on the hungry customers that came to Ben Isbell's Sunset Hotel, her eyes kept their sparkle. She was dark-haired and tall and straight and Varney knew she had been born to be a rancher's wife. He was making his plans, had already talked with Cass Irbine about the land he would need. His father had saved him something out of the collapse of the small Varney ranch in Texas three years ago. It would be enough to start. With Lydia.

"I'm hopin' and prayin' I'll find Shinn in Bridgerville, Hugh," Hannan said. "The dirty little sneak."

"He had a good start," Varney said. "We were loco to think he'd stop to spend your money in this county, Frank."

"A whole month's pay," Hannan groaned. "I'd fight Arch Fancher for it if—"

"Forget it," Hugh snapped. "Whenever you need some money—"

"I got my pride," Hannan said stubbornly.

A few street lamps were burning when they rode into Bridgerville, eight miles from Irbine's Dipper. In front of the Antler saloon, one lone bronc stood. "About empty," Hannan said. "We'd better jump in there quick if Charlie's closin' up."

Varney was looking toward the hotel. He said, "You have your drink. I'll be gone only a few minutes."

"That's all I'll wait," Hannan said, and hurried into the Antler.

Hugh Varney angled across the furrowed street to Isbell's and walked slowly up half a dozen wooden steps. He went into the lobby and turned left and was about to push the door of the dining room fully open when he heard Lydia's tinkling laugh. The lights were very dim in the big room and he could see a couple seated at a table in a far corner. The blotch of white he was very certain was the girl he had come to see. Her eyes, swiftly getting used to the semidark, made out the fancy waistcoat of the man sitting close beside her. He was sitting very close and Hugh Varney caught his breath sharply and held it. He heard a man's throaty laughter and Lydia's immediately blended with it. No other woman he'd ever known had laughed quite like her. He backed away, fighting the urge to drive forward and knock the man through the window, glass, sash and all. All at once it occurred to him that a man could not be blamed for seeking Lydia's favors if she so willed it. He withdrew, backstepping out into the small lobby, an empty cold place where his heart had been.

Outside the night seemed inky black; he could not see the stars. He stumbled toward Charlie's place and went in and joined Frank Hannan at the bar.

Hannan said, "You look sick, kid. Here, pour yourself one."

Varney elbowed the bottle aside and it spilled most of what it contained before the barkeep set it on its base.

He said, "In the dining room in the dim lights. With a fancy drummer. Laughing close to his ear and liking it, she was. Lydia—"

"You sure?" Hannan asked, finishing his drink.

"I've got eyes, Frank. I've got ears. I've got a memory. This is her night to finish up last." Hugh Varney poured himself a stiff drink and gulped it greedily. He took a second and then threw the glass away and it broke in many pieces against the wall.

The barkeep said, "That'll be a quarter more, Varney."

Frank Hannan sighed. "Women," he said.

Hugh nodded, head dropped in his hands and staring at the wet surface of the bar.

"Maybe you should have looked more," Hannan said wearily. "She was sittin' there with a drummer. She might've meant nothin' at all. He could have been an old friend or a cousin or—you take it for granted she—"

"I saw what I saw, blast it!" Varney roared. "Let's get out of town."

Frank Hannan nodded. "Sure, kid. Wish I'd found Shinn, though. Forty dollars I'd rope-burned my hands and chafed my seat to get. I hope he's caught red-handed the next time, riflin' a man's bunk and he gets a bullet in his dirty heart."

The thin light shone in the windows of the hotel dining room as they rode past the Sunset Hotel. Varney thought he heard Lydia's laughter again and he tried to shut off all his senses until they were well beyond the town.

THE next morning shortly before six o'clock, Hugh Varney was still sitting on his bunk. All the other punchers were in the long, low-ceilinged room at the far end of the bunkhouse, having their breakfast. The morning had broken bright and temperate but to Varney it was bleaker than the night before.

Frank Hannan yelled at him. "Come an' get your chuck, kid."

Hugh Varney got up. He had made up his mind and so he gathered his personal belongings and stuffed them into a small duffle bag. He took his shaving mirror off the wall and dropped it in last, and took a final look around. He had had fun here, and Irbine had been a good boss. Carrying the bag, he walked out of the bunkhouse and across the yard. Hannan came running after him.

"Maybe I'll be luckier some other place, Frank," Varney said when Hannan caught up with him. "I've made up my mind. I'm

goin' it alone, too. You never was a fiddle-foot and you wouldn't like tryin' t' keep up with me."

Hannan fell back. "You make up your mind about things too quick, kid. No, I won't leave Cass in a hole."

Hugh Varney talked with Irbine for nearly an hour. When he walked away from the ranch house and toward the corral to get his horse, Dipper punchers could hear Cass cussing up at the house.

At the gate, Hugh reached down and took Frank Hannan's hand. "I'll miss, you, horse-face. Lots of luck. Maybe I'll ride back this way sometime."

"You're a fool, kid," Hannan said, and turned away quickly.

Two months later, Hugh Varney, still unable to put Lydia out of his mind, rode up to the bunkhouse of a cattle outfit near the Wyoming line. The battered tin mailbox near the gate bore the spread's brand, Bradded H. A small fat man, mending a piece of harness, switched his chewing tobacco from one cheek to the other and looked up at him appraisingly.

"Howdy."

Varney grinned and nodded. "Any chance for a cowpuncher here, friend? The chuck-lines are gettin' mighty sick of my face."

"My name's Hoot Massey," the handyman offered.

"Hugh Varney."

"Light an' give that bronc a rest. Looks like it needs it, Varney. The boys'll be ridin' in 'fore long. You can talk t' Irv Tucker." Hoot jammed a heavy needle through leather and cussed at the effort.

Cooking smells aggravated the emptiness at Hugh's meridian. The clatter of pots and pans was music in his ears. He hadn't eaten since early that morning.

After a long silence, Hoot said, "I like a man that don't talk too much."

The shadows, stretching away from the three big cottonwoods near the gate, were washing against Varney's boots when he heard the beat of hoofs. They came from a northerly direction and steadily built up. Hoot tossed the harness aside. "Sounds like they're starvin' to death, Varney."

Hugh walked across the yard as the Bradded H bunch spilled through the gate. A loose-jointed man got out of the saddle first and banged dust out of his levis with a battered hat. He looked toward Varney and his face opened with an infectious grin.

"Your name Tucker?" Hugh asked.

"The same," the foreman said. "Lookin' for a job, I hope?"

Hugh nodded.

"Loco," Irv Tucker said, and grinned at his punchers. "Don't know what he's gettin' into, huh? Here at the Bradded H we work

the lard out of a man. We buy his body an' soul for forty-five a month an' the swill he eats. Ever hear of Simon Legree, mister?"

Hugh tried to maintain a solemn countenance.

"That's the boss's real name. Changed it to Al Bodine," Tucker said. "Throw your stuff in the bunkhouse. You're hired."

Hugh said, "Thanks, Irv," and gave his own name.

During the days that followed, Hugh Varney tried to put Lydia forever out of his mind, but every time he forded a waterway, large or small, he heard her tinkling laughter in its racket. At night, as he stood guard over the night herd, he heard her whispering, and always, when he looked up at the stars, he was reminded of the twinkle in her eyes. The weakness would come over him and he would resolve to ride back to Bridgerville early the next morning. But when morning came he would think of her sitting close to a city man in the semidarkness of Isbell's dining room, and he stubbornly held to his decision.

The town of Malo Falls was only nine miles away from the Bradded H and the punchers wondered why Hugh Varney, at the end of his second month, had gone nowhere near it. A runty, bow-legged rider named Peep Rundlett finally put their wonder into words. He was keeping tally of the calves that were being roped and branded within a wide circle of Bradded H punchers when the question came to his tongue and slid off.

"You ought t' get yourself some fun, Hugh," Peep said. "All work an' no play makes jack, but—you dodgin' a sheriff—or somethin' in calico?"

Varney, face smeared with soot from the branding fire, got to his feet. "Nosey like one of these critters, Peep. Maybe I ought t' put a hot iron on your rump."

"Can't blame him, Hugh," Irv Tucker said. "Ain't natural for a handsome cuss like you t' hive up like a hermit. There's heifers in town you might look over."

"I ain't interested, Irv." Varney's voice was cold in the autumn afternoon's heat. "Must be somethin' wrong with 'em, if you gents offer 'em away free. I hired out to work range."

The foreman turned to watch a puncher wrestle a recalcitrant calf to the ground. The dust enveloped Varney and stung his throat. The stentorous voice of the tally-man began to rub his nerves raw. The hoarse lowing of the cows and frantic bleating of roped calves thickened inside his head, and all at once he knew he wanted something for a while that would take the taste out of his mouth. He went up to Peep Rundlett when the branding was finished.

"Think I'll go along with you tonight."
Peep grinned. "We'll look out for you, Hugh. Them wild females won't hurt you."

AT SEVEN o'clock that night, Hugh Varney, Peep, and Irv Tucker walked into the Malo Falls Saloon. It was a great box-like room, the ceiling of which was the roof. The bar was against the west wall and nearly a dozen men were bellied against it. Four men played cards at a table near one of the two big front windows, and a drummer with a fancy vest and gray derby hat sat in an armchair, scribbling on a pad of paper with a pencil.

Varney looked at the fancy vest and an unhealthy whiteness appeared around his mouth. He felt like moving over and kicking the chair out from under the drummer. He felt Tucker's fingers pulling at his shirt-sleeve.

"Let's get us a drink."

The foreman had to fairly shout his words, for there was a heated argument going on between a small knot of customers at the bar. Hugh Varney ran his eyes over the men quickly and saw that one of them was Arch Fancher.

"You heard this yahoo tell me I'd had enough to drink," Fancher roared, hooking a thumb at a barrel-chested man standing close to him. "He means I got some enemies that I might meet up with an' that I'll need a steady hand and a steady eye. I'll show you how I carry my whiskey—" He turned quickly, drawing his six-gun, and the barkeep yelled angrily, "Leave them lamps alone, Fancher. Put up that iron!"

The men at the card table forgot their game for the moment. The drummer slid his fat yellow pencil over his ear and got to his feet. Fancher laughed. Then he yelled, "Sit down, you dude! Tip the point of that pencil up a little, mister. I'm goin' to shoot it off your ear!"

Hugh Varney stiffened and stepped away from the bar. Peep Rundlett said, "Easy, kid. He's a hellion even when he's sober! He'll blow this room apart if—"

"Look," the drummer said. "I wasn't makin' any trouble here."

"Sit down!" Arch Fancher snapped, and drove a bullet into the boards close to the man's feet. The drummer fell into the armchair and looked pleadingly toward the men at the card table.

"Won't hurt you a bit, dude," Fancher grinned.

"You've had some drink," the drummer said. "You might miss, my—friend. Isn't anybody goin' to stand up for me here?"

Fancher stepped away from the bar, a

cold, calculating grin on his face. "Sit still, dude, an' don't move a muscle!"

The drummer said desperately, "It ain't myself I'm worryin' about. I've got—" He reached inside his coat with his right hand and Arch Fancher fired. The drummer was driven nearly through the strong wooden back of the chair, and then crumpled and lay sprawled in it. Irv Tucker rocked Arch Fancher off balance before the gunman could throw a second shot, and Hugh dove at the man and pinned his right arm. Three other customers gave him help.

Fancher fought to get away from the wall. Varney yelled, "You're a big brave bucko, Fancher! A poor scared drummer. Guess you can't hold your drinks!"

"I'll kill you for that!" Fancher roared. "Give me that gun of mine!"

"Not for a while, mister," Irv Tucker said.

A card player who had been bending over the drummer turned around quickly. "Didn't have a gun on him. Somebody help me get him to a doctor. I don't figure he's too far gone."

Fancher said, "He never should've made that move. How'd I know—"

Hugh Varney said, "You an' Peep have your drinks, Irv. I'll help get that man out of here."

"No lawman in this town?" the Bradded H foreman asked.

The barkeep laughed. "Don't tell me you're a stranger here, Tucker? It's only when a one-legged drunken swamper goes on the prod that you'll find Sid Price."

Fancher said, "Give me that six-gun!"

Tucker broke the hogleg and emptied it of shells, then threw it at Arch Fancher. "Better start ridin', Arch. If that drummer dies it will be murder. He had no gun."

"I'll go when I'm ready," Fancher said, his eyes cold, and showing not the slightest trace of feeling. "Keep out of my way, friend."

The barkeep stripped a cot in the back room and came out dragging a spring. Hugh helped two men lift the drummer on it and then picked up one end and helped carry the badly injured man out of the saloon and across the street to the doctor's office. Three hours later, the fat bald-headed man with the thick eyeglasses got up from the side of the sagging bed and wiped the sweat off his face with a big bandanna.

"Luck," the doctor grunted. "A little lower an' he wouldn't of made it. He ought to pull through. Figure I'd better get me some sleep. Somebody better stay with him."

"I'll do that," Hugh said, and glanced at the blood-stained vest hanging over the back of a chair.

"I'll be in the next room," the doctor said.

HUGH VARNEY turned down the wick of the wall lamp, then went over and sat down by the drummer's bed. The man grinned up at him. His breathing was getting steadier.

"That was a fool play you made in front of a gunman," Varney said. "What was you reachin' for?"

"Get it—from inside my coat, mister," the drummer asked weakly. "The leather wallet. I thought if I showed it to the man—"

Varney reached for the man's coat that had been flung across the foot of the bed. He got the wallet out of the inside pocket and opened it. The wounded man said, "A picture in it. My wife and kid."

Hugh found it, looked at it and laughed deep inside. There was a little kid about four years old standing beside a passingly pretty woman. The little shaver had his lower lip thrust out and he wore a hat that belonged to a grown man and it was cocked over one ear and made him look topheavy. He was standing in a pair of boots ten sizes too large for him.

The drummer said, "Everybody laughs—when I show 'em that picture. He's a cute little cuss—full of the old Harry."

Varney tried to think of something he couldn't seem to remember. He looked at the fancy vest again, to see if it would help him. Suddenly he asked, "Friend, were you in Bridgerville a little over two months ago? There's a pretty girl waits on table at the hotel there. Name of Lydia."

The drummer smiled. He closed his eyes for several moments and Varney wondered if he should call the doctor out. Then the sick man said, "Remember her all right. One night I was feelin' mighty low in spirits an' I went to get a cup of coffee. I asked her to sit with me an' talk. I showed her that picture. I show it to everybody. I can hear her laughing over it now—"

Hugh Varney got to his feet, went over to the window and looked out at the dimly lighted street. Like Arch Fancher, he understood, he had taken too much for granted, had made up his mind too quick. Snap decisions on the part of them both had nearly ruined a couple of lives. The drummer would have been a dead man now if Fancher hadn't taken those drinks. The man was beyond cure, and he'd go on with his taking it for granted that he was the top man in the country with a six-gun, and would build up his killings. He heard the voice of Frank Hannan in the quiet of the room.

I figure a man's stature, his reputation, is built up a lot by the mouths of other men. After a while you hear so much about a thing. . . .

Hugh thought, *I took it for granted that*

Lydia wasn't what she seemed. Arch is taking it for granted that all men are smaller than he is. You can do damage that way. I wonder if he is as wrong as I have been.

He heard boots thumping up the stairs. Irv Tucker and Peep Rundlett came in. The foreman whispered, "How is he, Hugh?"

"Sleepin'. He'll make it all right."

Peep said, "Get the doctor up to watch him. We'd better get out of town."

Irv Tucker breathed in deeply. "Fancher's still prowling the streets, Hugh. He's cravin' Bradded H blood. He figures to mix it with his whiskey, and me, not bein' the fastest man with a gun—"

"What time is it?" Varney asked, tiny little needles pecking the length of his spine.

"Only about nine-thirty," Peep said. "Irv's right. We'd better leave Malo Falls."

Varney picked his hat off a table and put it on. "Wait for me here," he said. "I should be back in less than half an hour, boys."

"Wait," the foreman said and got Varney by the arm. "Is it in your mind to—"

Hugh looked out the window. "You can see him over there, Irv. He's just beyond the range of light from the lamp in front of the hardware store. He's watching this place. I used to be pretty handy with a six-gun. Wish me luck."

Peep said, "We'll smash our way out together. Three guns are better than one."

"Not exactly a fair fight," Varney snapped, and tried not to think of Lydia. "Everythin' has to be settled tonight. We get loose now he would come looking for us. I figure that man's had a little too much whiskey now. It will shorten the odds a mite."

He shook himself loose from the foreman's grasp and stepped across the room and through a door leading to a flight of rickety steps in back of the false front.

Once in the dark areaway, his feet set firmly against the hard ground, he summoned the courage he had to have and tried to shrug aside any thought of risk. He was thinking of the drummer as all men with families who could at any time be exposed to Fancher's violence. The man was a festering sore and the poison had to be drawn out of him once and for all. All hell, Varney thought, was not going to stand between him and Lydia now. He had had his lesson and a man had nearly died in the process. There was a moral obligation involved.

HE MOVED slowly toward the wide main street where the night's racket was slowly thinning from the pressure of Fancher's presence. He shouldered his way around the corner of the Malo Falls Wells-Fargo office, hugging the clapboards tight. Two men walked past him, stopped,

then ducked into the nearest doorway, and so gave him away.

Fancher yelled hoarsely and fired. The bullet sent splinters flying from a porch post and they stung Varney's cheek. He threw a shot at Fancher as he pitched to the left and knew he had missed. A second bullet tugged viciously at his sleeve and went singing away.

Arch Fancher came across the street firing a third shot and Varney felt the force of the slug against his ribs as he backed quickly through a partly opened door. There was a clatter behind him, a man's frightened cry, and the slamming of another door. He felt a wave of nausea and fought it down, and stumbled over a cobbler's bench. He came up quickly, facing the door and pumping two shots through it. He thought he heard Fancher grunt painfully and then whirled and dove for the back door. All his fear was gone now and he was hardly aware of the stickiness in his side. He had taken Fancher's lead and he was still on his feet. Fancher was taking too much for granted with all that whiskey in him.

Malo Falls had become very still. There were faces at windows. The streets were clear. They belonged to Arch Fancher and Hugh Varney. The town was theirs until the issue was decided, by one or the other. Horses stamped nervously at the tie-racks, blowing their alarm through their nostrils.

Varney stumbled only a few yards down a narrow alley when he heard Fancher smash his way out of the cobbler's shop. He spun around and exchanged shots with the man and glass broke up close to his head. He slipped in a puddle of water and yelled at the gunman, "Hold your fire, Arch. They're right behind you!"

Fancher pivoted, his six-gun throwing lead, and Hugh laughed and got to his feet. "An old trick, Arch! I thought you was smart!" He got set to face the man, two bullets left in his Colt, but Fancher suddenly dove back into the cobbler's shop. *Has to reload*, Varney thought. *I'm a sucker not to kill him while I have the chance.* He ran down the alley and cut to the left and followed another warren to the main street. He came out near the livery stable, his own six-gun fully loaded again and slipped into the dark shadows under a locust tree.

He was sure that something moved at the mouth of an areaway across and up the street before he heard Arch Fancher's invitation to show himself. The gunman moved into a patch of light and seemed to be dragging a leg. He'd hit Arch then, Varney thought, and the fight was still even.

"Come on, blast you!" Fancher roared. "Stand up to me."

There was a desperate tone to the gunman's voice. In it there seemed to be a trace of regret, yet some resignation and a great weariness. But there was no mistaking the cold ferocity on Arch Fancher's face.

Hugh Varney slipped away from the sheltering branches of the locust tree and not more than forty feet separated him from the famous killer. There was no question now regarding the speed of the draw, for the six-guns were already in their hands. Fancher, a leg practically shot out from under him, had to waste a second or two getting solidly set, and Varney's first shot nearly knocked him back into the dust. Fancher fired as he rocked on his heels and the bullet burned Varney's cheek, but there was something in the man's eyes that told him he was finished before he took the Bradded H puncher's second shot. He broke at the waist, pitched forward.

Malo Falls became suddenly alive. The walks shook under the pound of boots. Hugh Varney heard Irv Tucker yelling at him as the sickness came over him. Reaction knocked his legs out from under him and he felt broken up inside. The town became a rapidly turning wheel, with himself as the hub.

When Varney got control of his faculties again, he looked up at the doctor with the bald head and the thick eyeglasses.

Hugh tried to sit up. "Say, how's the drummer?"

"First rate," the doctor said.

THREE weeks later Hugh Varney walked into Isbell's Sunset Hotel in Bridgerville. It was the supper hour and the dining room was filled, but Lydia Hume dropped the tray she was carrying when she saw him framed in the doorway. She rushed past startled customers and into his arms. Her voice was muffled against his shoulder and he wasn't sure of the things he said, but he guessed he deserved all of it.

Isbell walked up and said, "You got a night off, Lydia. Better run upstairs and change. I'll talk to this half-witted fiddle-foot."

Isbell said a few minutes later, "In another two days she would have been gone, Hugh. She got tired of waitin'. Just because she was bein' pleasant t' a drummer—"

"He's the reason I come runnin' back," Varney said. "He put me t' rights, even though he nearly killed us both. How do you explain some things, friend?"

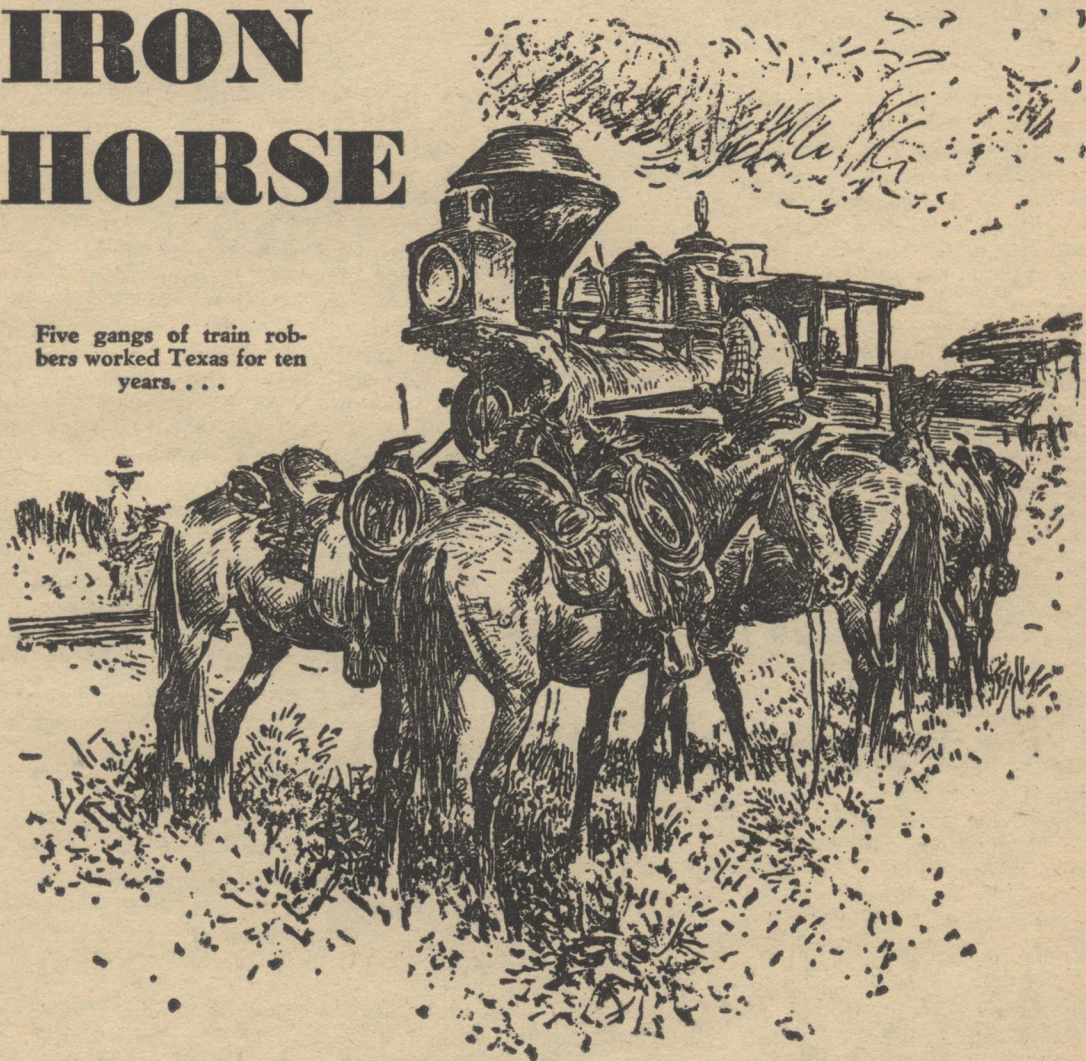
"Only way we do is by buildin' churches, I figure," Isbell said. "Well, here she comes an' she's too good for you."

Lydia wore a dark blue dress with a tight bodice and lace collar. Isbell said something as he passed by her that put the color in her cheeks. Her laugh was like the ringing of little bells.

LONGRIDERS OF THE IRON HORSE

By LANCE KERMIT

Five gangs of train robbers worked Texas for ten years. . . .



Luke Bellows lost his ears to a steel rail longrider—and got them back!

WHEN the Southern Pacific Railroad was completed through Texas, back in the 1880's, with its terminus at El Paso, train hold-ups were frequent. For a period of ten years five gangs of train robbers "worked" Texas, with the Southern Pacific as their especial prey.

One of the most notorious of these gangs was headed by a slick bandit called "Captain Dick," who, within a single year, held up six trains and escaped with a large amount of booty.

One night Dick held up a train east of Del

Rio, the most important town on the long haul between San Antonio and El Paso.

On that occasion he suddenly appeared in the express car and ordered the messenger, Luke Bellows, to elevate his hands. Bellows refused and Dick, instead of shooting him, pounced on him and cut off his ears. He afterwards mailed them to Bellows as a "keep-sake."

After looting the express car, and taking everything of value from the passengers, Dick forced an aged maiden school-teacher to step out onto the prairie and dance jigs, hornpipes and whirling dervishes to tunes he played on a guitar that he carried hooked over the horn of his saddle. The members of his gang gathered about her and filled the ground under her feet with bullets.

The Southern Pacific immediately offered a reward of \$2,500 for Dick's capture, dead or alive. Shortly after this the robber chief was shot by a comrade, Alfred Allee, while sitting by a campfire. Allee cold-bloodedly collected the reward.

Another gang operating along the Southern Pacific was headed by Jack Flynt. Flynt and his pals stopped a train some miles west of Langtry one night. But the ease with which they were caught discouraged train robbers in that part of Texas for some time to come.

On the night of the hold-up, Flynt's men placed a number of horseshoes on the rails. When the engine began bumping over the metal objects, the engineer slowed up. Flynt and his men leaped aboard the train and "rushed" the express messenger, one Windy Smith.

Windy was no coward. He had killed two train robbers who tried to rifle his car several months before. But, being taken utterly off his guard, he was forced to let Flynt and his men get away with \$3,600.

Windy was so disgusted at what he termed his "disgrace," that he resigned his job with Wells Fargo and joined the Texas Rangers under Captain Frank Jones, who had already started in pursuit of the Flynt gang.

"Captain, I know how to get those chaps," said Windy. "No stranger can loaf through these parts and not be spotted by someone."

"What do you suggest?" queried Jones.

"Let's check every hamlet—and let's start with Bullis Crossing."

Sure enough, when the Rangers arrived at Bullis Crossing, a man furnished a clue.

"Four strangers passed through yere the other day," he told them. "One had a long, red scar down his right cheek and—"

"That's Flynt!" announced Windy.

"Another one," continued the observing Texan, "was minus the trigger-finger of his left hand."

"That's Wellington," said Windy.

"Another one wore a big Mexican sombrero, that had about thirty dollars worth of silver braidin' on it."

"That's Jim Langsford," Windy cut in.

"Another one had boots with heels so high he wobbled like he was shaky on his laigs with fear."

"That's Tom Fields," said Windy decisively.

"And," the Texan continued, "I reckon they camped right nigh here."

Windy nodded decisively. "Yeah—and I'll bet they buried the booty here, too. Captain, I reckon we'll come up with them fellers if we ride over Crockett County way."

Windy's hunches had been good so far, so Captain Jones took another chance.

After a three weeks' chase the Rangers sighted their men in Crockett County, just as Windy had predicted. During the running fight that followed, Jack Flynt's horse was shot from under him. As Flynt fell he was hit by a bullet from a Ranger gun. Not knowing he was dying, he raised himself from the ground and shot himself through the head. He had vowed never to be taken alive.

Wellington also had his horse shot from under him and took refuge behind a rock. Twice he leveled his guns at Captain Jones who was charging him—and twice he held his fire.

"I may be a train-robber," he said when they captured him, "but I ain't no murderer—and takin' life is sure unlawful, no matter how you look at it."

Langsford and Fields were also captured and later the money was found buried near Bullis Crossing as Windy Smith had foretold.

WINDY'S previous encounter with train bandits became notable as ending the most unsuccessful attempt at train robbing ever made in Texas and the Southwest.

One night an eastbound Southern Pacific train, with Windy on duty for Wells Fargo in the express car, stopped at a water tank about five miles southeast of El Paso. The side door of the car was open. The interior was in complete darkness.

Suddenly two men stole up to the door.

"Whoever's inside there, throw up your hands and come out where we can see you, or prepare to cash in your checks," threatened one of them.

Windy made no reply—but as he seized his rifle he muttered to himself, "Must be new in the business."

He crept through the darkness to within three feet of them and shot them both.

While train-robbing grew less frequent, there was an increase of badmen who operated in the El Paso district, touching

the westernmost parts of Texas and New Mexico.

On one occasion a train had just left El Paso, bearing among its passengers several members of Billy the Kid's gang, including Billy himself. In charge of the prisoners was the man who had run them to earth, the famous manhunter, Pat Garrett.

As the train pulled up at a water-tank, a mob appeared and the leaders declared that if Garrett did not surrender Billy the Kid, they would kill not only the prisoners but Garrett and his fellow officers as well.

Pat Garrett felt that both his honor and his life were at stake; for Billy the Kid and his men had surrendered to him on his promise to escort them safely by rail to Santa Fe.

Knowing this, Billy the Kid sensed what was passing through the sheriff's mind, and he said:

"Lend me a gun, Pat. We can lick the whole outfit. If they rush us, I swear I'll help you, and if they don't wipe me out, I'll go back to my seat when the shootin' is over and give you back your gun."

Garrett agreed to this strange compact, was about to hand the Kid a gun, when one of his deputies called his attention to the fact that the crowd was dispersing. Trouble was avoided and in a few minutes the train sped on.

The "Texas Kid" was another famous bad-man of that period. He had a disconcerting way of working back and forth across Texas, from Texarkana on the east to Texico on the west, stealing horses whenever he needed a fresh mount and shooting any audacious gentleman who attempted to impede his progress. Texas Rangers and sheriffs with their posSES were always on his trail. But the Kid must have been born lucky. He always got away.

Finally he headed up into New Mexico. At a horse auction in Albuquerque he shot up no end of citizens and forthwith several posSES pursued him for the large reward placed upon his head—either on or off his body. The trailed him into West Texas and then lost him.

They were building the Southern Pacific branch from Sierra Blanca on the main line up to Texico at the time. In charge of railroad construction work was a contractor known as Colonel Legge, who had a penchant of going after badmen for rewards.

"I'm a railroad builder," he told several Texas Rangers, "but if I ever lay eyes on this Texas Kid, I'll turn angel builder!"

One evening a few days later a pleasant-faced stranger with a soft voice and gentle manner arrived at the camp. He entered Legge's quarters and was carefully taking

apart an old silver watch he found hanging on the wall, when the colonel walked in.

"Evenin'," greeted the stranger. "I find your timepiece somewhat out of order, and being a watchmaker by trade, I took the liberty of adjusting the works."

"That is surely most agreeable of you, stranger," Legge replied, "and I reckon your jewelry work should be repaid with a little chuck."

He asked the newcomer no questions as to when he came or whither he was bound, this being considered offensive in West Texas. So Legge and the "jeweler" sat down to "chuck," and the colonel enjoyed hugely the chatter of his soft-voiced guest.

"I reckon," said the latter, after he had been assigned to a bunk, "that tomorrow I'll get these various parts of your timepiece into a meeting-of-the-whole, and then you'll have Rocky Mountain time plumb accurate."

Next morning when Legge awoke the stranger's bunk was empty. Also the best horse in Legge's corral was now only circumstantial evidence.

"And I had calculated to ride a smart piece down the gradin' today on that animal," fumed the colonel. "Looks like that tender-foot jeweler has abused my hospitality."

Legge found the parts of his watch on the table where the visitor had left them. One of Legge's workmen, who knew something about watches, attempted to assemble the parts and found the mainspring missing. "Therefore," he told Legge, "this yere timepiece ain't worth a cuss!"

Some weeks later several new hands arrived in the railroad camp, bringing news of the escape of a prisoner from the jail in Las Vegas, New Mexico.

"He helped himself to the sheriff's pistols," one of the men told Legge, "then climbed aboard a horse at a livery stable, led out another animal and trotted out of town."

"How'd he get out of that jail?" Legge wanted to know.

"Sawed his way out with the mainspring of a watch," was the reply.

"Mainspring!" roared Legge. "What was that gent's name?"

"They called him the Texas Kid, colonel. A greaser up Las Vegas way captured him and got the reward."

"Texas Kid!" thundered Legge. "And to think I had him as easy as an egg under a settin' hen, with the reward all mine, and mistook him for a jeweler tenderfoot! Come first drink-time this evenin', I reckon you-all will participate with your boss, for this thing is sure one on me!"

ARE YOU BUYING SAVINGS BONDS?

*For Captain Conover's troops, Fort Hondo
stood for hell—and more than one man
went underground to prove it!*

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



RIDE WITH THE DEVIL



CHAPTER ONE

Hondo Stands for Hell

CAPTAIN CONOVER came up from the corral with the dust thick upon him and the weight of his command evident in his carriage. Trent held himself flat against the wall of the supply shed, letting the sharp shadow cast by the eaves mask his presence as much as possible. Trent did not like Troy Conover. Liking the man was virtually an impossibility. The whole fabric of Army regulations lay between Conover and those who served under him. The man had no blood, no

soul, in duty hours. And if there was warmer juice in him, a capacity for comradeship, his discipline was so severe that subalterns and troopers alike had little desire to uncover it.

Watching Conover swinging up toward the porch of his quarters with the dust of a long and fruitless ride on him and a man's natural impatience to be again with his wife apparent, Trent felt satisfaction. The hardshell of the regiment was into something this time which he could not bull down with a citation from



Twenty men tipping over the crest, forcing sliding horses down the embankment. . . .

regulations. But at the same time, Trent felt a little sorry. There was a certain strain of justice in Conover, and within the narrow limits of his interpretation of Army law, he clung to it. What Conover faced now was bad business. It might possibly be too strong a medicine—more than the man deserved.

Not that Trent could do anything about it. Not that any of the rest of the company, watching here and there from shadows about the post, could do anything about it. They had signed in to do a hitch against the Indians, not to tangle in an officer's troubles with his wife.

Conover reached the porch across the front of his quarters. He stopped outside the door, swept off his hat, and beat at the dust on his tunic and trousers with it in a return of the vanity which made him the most impeccably dressed officer in the mounted service, even under campaign conditions.

Trent was just a little too far away to make out the words Conover called quietly on the porch. Receiving no answer, the captain pulled the netted frame over the door open. As he did so, his wife appeared in the doorway. Kemmerer, the supply sergeant, had said that Ruth Conover alone made life livable at Fort Hondo. Most men on the post agreed. The captain's wife was young, one of those startlingly beautiful women whose fragility was enhanced by the desert, rather than destroyed by it. Proof, Trent had often thought, that Ruth Conover was in fact not what she seemed—that her fragility was a thin and deceptive veneer over surprising inner strength and hardness.

The woman came out through the doorway. Conover opened his arms to her. She went into them with a willingness, an unrestrained and apparently genuine welcome. Then, when her hair was in Conover's face and the moment should have belonged completely to them, another figure appeared behind her, coming also from within the house. A tall figure, carelessly balanced and wholly unhurried. The figure of a man dressed in the unrestraining buckskin and jeans of the high ridge trails.

Trent stiffened, involuntarily. He had been waiting for this. They all had been waiting for this. Even Ruth Conover and Jeff Blane had been waiting for it. Only the captain had not known. And here it was.

Conover straightened and took a backward step from his wife. His voice reached Trent's ears easily.

"You were ordered out into the Sand Canyon country while I was gone, Blane!" he snapped. Blane shook his head.

"No," he answered imperturbably. "I was told to get a line on Pequeno. It didn't take as long as I thought. That's all. I've been back two days, Captain."

"You knew exactly where he was when you rode out of here."

"Maybe," he agreed.

"You're under arrest, Blane. Confined to quarters till further notice."

"Like Steve Trent and some of your best troopers?" Blane asked easily. "Don't be a fool, Conover. You're fighting a war out here. A nasty war. You think you can bring Pequeno in with nothing but a cook and a saddle boy left to ride with you?"

"I can get him without you."

"Can you?" Blane seemed amused, but even at this distance Trent could feel the man's force, his brittleness and his scorn. "You forget I'm no trooper," Blane continued. "I'm no horsewhipped Lieutenant, either. I'm a free agent. A scout, hired by the war department. You can't arrest me and my quarters are where I light down. Go easy, Conover. You get Pequeno before the rains or you don't get him this year. And I know where he is. If there's anything between us, let's keep it like that—let's not drag the Army in."

Blane smiled briefly, tipped his head toward Ruth Conover, and walked down the steps. Conover turned, watching the man move across the dust of the parade ground until he disappeared beyond the corner of the quartermaster's shack. Pivoting, the captain faced his wife again. She was still directly in front of him with a shard of the low afternoon sun an explosion of light against the fairness of her hair and a moving evening wind pressing the too-soft material of her dress against her richly rounded, long limbed body.

The captain spoke quietly to her. "Would you get a tub of water onto the stove, Ruth? I could do with a bath."

There was no more than that. The two of them moved into the house and Conover pulled the outer door shut after him. Trent shoved out from the wall of the supply shed into the sun. This had been nothing. No accomplishment; no settlement. It had been quiet and the quietness had given him a strange feeling. Trouble had to be in the open. It had to have relief. It could not be kept confined. Between men like Conover and Jeff Blane, it could not be silent. Not woman trouble.

TRENT followed Blane's tracks through the dust of the parade ground. He found the man at the stables, talking to two troopers on fatigue duty there. As Trent came up, one of the two was verbally wiping Blane's boots.

"The damned ironhead! I hope you put your spurs into him to the shanks. He's split enough backs at this post. Hondo stands for hell, all right. And because of him. You don't fight Apaches by mucking out stables or sweating on a drill ground!"

The other trooper leaned on the handle of his scoop, speculation in his eyes.

"Odds are shifting, Jeff," he said slyly. "Payday's coming up. I'd like to put a little cash down on this right. You going to get the lady?"

"Lady?" Blaine inquired. "The captain's wife? If I want her, I suppose. Depends on how badly Conover wants to see Pequeno up by the heels and how much guts Conover has."

Blaine grinned at the troopers and went into the stables. Trent waited until he came out, then stopped the man.

"Look, Jeff, this isn't a trader's post," he said. "Keep out of the messhall talk. Keep the shades drawn. You can do at least that much."

Jeff grinned again with the mocking, infuriating twist of his lips which was a trademark for his recklessness, his devilry, his complete lack of ethics in anything.

"You like a hammering, don't you, Trent?" he asked. "You take it like a little man, whether you had it coming or not. For the Army. Discipline, great god of the dragoons. You make me sick! If Conover had ridden me like he has you the last few weeks over a one-night sasarilla drunk, I'd have his guts strung out in the sun to dry!"

"The hell with Conover," Trent said steadily. "Stake him out to the ants if it suits you, Jeff. That's your business. But give the rest of us a chance to do the job we were sent out her for. Conover's overdone it the other way, but we can't run down Pequeno and his wolves with a detachment that's coming apart at the seams. There's got to be some discipline left—and you're cutting it to pieces!"

Blaine laughed shortly.

"You're breaking my heart, Trent," he mocked. "I want something more out of this than a paymaster's envelope. Something that makes a trick in this bucket of dust worth while. Get in my way and I'll just take a longer way around, that's all."

Blaine laughed and moved off. Bill Simpson came down across the parade ground, hurriedly buttoning his tunic. Bill halted a yard away, got off a fair salute.

"Captain's compliments, Lieutenant," he said rigidly. "Arrest is eased to permit you at headquarters. He wants to see you."

Trent scowled.

"Loosen that top button, Bill," he said. "You're choking to death. You've been out here long enough to know better than to swallow a ramrod when you're around me. What's up?"

"Captain Conover wants to see you at the house, Steve. On the double, he said—"

Simpson about-faced and stepped off briskly across the parade ground. Trent watched him go. In quarters he was a homesick kid. But he still had enough red, white, and blue in his eyes to work hard at soldiering, even in the

Arizona sun. Trent wondered how long it would take that sun to cook the starch from Simpson. Combing these merciless hills for the Red Wolf of the Apaches was no job for tin soldiers.

CONOVER was in his living room, striding restlessly back and forth in a long, loosely wrapped robe. His legs, below the hem of the robe and above the line where the tops of his boots had been, were black with dust. The captain was waiting for his bath. Trent thought he could hear Ruth Conover in the kitchen, ladling water into a boiler on the stove. He was grateful she was not in the outer room with her husband. She made even a conversation between C.O. and subaltern difficult. Not the thought of her; not a sense of her nearness—a man might not be subject to these—but simply by her presence.

"At ease, Lieutenant," Conover growled as Trent closed the door behind himself. "Simpson told you your arrest was modified. I'm removing it altogether. I trust your judgment on personal conduct will be better in the future. This is off the record. I need an opinion—yours, I think."

Trent nodded.

"You've been on tour out here before," Conover continued. "You know the country a little. Steve, what do you know about Blaine?"

Trent shrugged.

"Jeff doesn't get in the papers. No newsprint in Arizona, in the first place. In the second, Jeff's kind is quiet. I've heard talk. You must have heard it, too. But he's the best scout in the high country—that much is certain. Head and shoulders above anybody else. Knows Apaches even better than he knows these hills. Maybe a dark page somewhere back if a man wanted to open it. I don't know. It's hard to make anything of talk."

Conover nodded.

"Yes. I'm not asking for a history on the man. Just one answer."

Trent raised his brows.

"Would Blaine sell us out to Pequeno—to get something he wanted?"

Trent gave this thought, adding the captain's motives to his own knowledge of Jeff Blaine. There was something incredible about the question. Admitted that Blaine was hard, that he openly slept with the devil, still a man's suspicions could go too far. In his way, Jeff was the last ember of a tradition, a man who had outlived his epoch. To dig this deep was like questioning Carson's motives in leading General Fremont to the sea, or the roots which had anchored Jim Bridger to his fort on a fork of the Green. If nothing else, Pequeno and his cutthroats were a challenge to Blaine. And Jeff would tangle with the gods,

themselves, if a chip were knocked from his shoulder.

"No," Trent said slowly. "I can go that far. No."

Conover dropped into a chair, relief apparent in his face. The hem of his robe climbed and Trent could see the white brush scars about his knees. The captain rode an iron saddle, but he had not yet learned the difference between a drill ground and the chaparral.

"Thank you, Steve," the captain said quietly. "You back my own judgement. I wanted my hands free, but I could hardly risk our entire campaign. You are ordered to active duty again as of now. Pequeno is apparently in the vicinity of Sand Canyon. We've fenced with him long enough. I intend to get him, wipe out his entire band, once and for all. Pick a third of the company as an attack party and have them ready to ride by morning. Full equipment. Ready the balance as reserves. I'll detail your orders later. And now—my bath is ready, I think. You might—ah—ask Mr. Blane to come up in a few minutes. I want his report on the Apaches."

Trent saluted and let himself back out onto the porch. As he reached the foot of the steps, a voice called guardedly to him from a corner of the house. He moved into the shadow there and found Ruth Conover waiting. She gripped his arm fiercely.

"Steve, don't let Jeff come up here. Get him off the post—now—tonight!"

Trent looked at the woman. The young body, the hungry eyes, the queer excitement of a woman on an unfamiliar road. A wife in a remote post was a companion and a counter-balance for an officer. Army counsel. But not this kind of wife. She was more dangerous than too much whiskey.

"Why?" Trent asked bluntly. "Jeff won't go. You know that."

"He has to," Ruth Conover said urgently. "If he doesn't, Troy will kill him!"

"Then it is Jeff," Trent murmured. "The captain is out of this. He doesn't count. Only Jeff Blane."

"Do you know what's inside of me, when I don't, myself, Steve?" the woman asked. Trent shook his head.

"I'm the last man on the post who'd know what's inside of you," he said sharply. "But if there's trouble, it wouldn't be Jeff that I'd worry about!"

"He's got to get off the post," Ruth Conover repeated.

"For himself—or for Troy?"

"I don't know," the woman answered miserably. "But will you make him go?"

"Will I bring in Pequeno single-handed?" Trent murmured. "It'd be easier. I'll stick to the Apaches. They're enough for me. You talk to Jeff. I'm to send him up."

"You and Troy and that Indian!" the woman spat. "Is he so important?"

"To me—yes. He's my job," Trent agreed slowly.

He turned away from the woman then, and strode rapidly down across the parade ground. He found Jeff Blane sprawled on a bunk in the barracks.

"The skipper wants to see you, Jeff," Blane raised up. He grinned.

"You should hear this, Steve," he suggested. "Put sand in your craw."

"I intend to," Trent answered quietly.

Blane shot a glance at him, then bent for his boots. Shedding his jacket, he pulled a fresh shirt from his kit. Trent waited while he pulled this on and sloshed water over his face at the trough outside the door. The water and the careless toweling brought high, effective color to Blane's face and left small, damp curls along his hairline. He fell in beside Trent, handsome in his carelessness and completely untroubled. Troy Conover was in for a bad time.

CHAPTER TWO

Injun Proof

THE captain was just finishing his meal. He glanced through the open door of the dining room as Trent and Jeff Blane came in from the porch. He nodded courteously at them.

"Sit down, gentlemen. I'll be with you in a moment."

Somewhere in the back of the house, Trent heard Ruth Conover moving about. He wondered if she had seen this in the beginning, when she had smiled at Jeff. If she had, then there was savagery in her. The kind of savagery which made men cheer a dog fight or gather at a bear pit when champions were matched.

Conover finished the cup of coffee before him in full view of the two waiting men and with admirable coolness. Finished, he stepped into the kitchen. Steve heard water poured and thought the captain might be rinsing his hands with the fastidiousness of long habit. In a moment Conover came out of the kitchen, across the dining space, and into the front room. He stopped in the center of the rug and looked at Trent.

"You have your orders, Lieutenant," he said crisply. "You're not needed here."

"With your permission, I think I'll stay," Trent answered.

Conover shrugged. He turned slowly to face Jeff Blane.

"You're not an Army man. I suppose there are some things I can't expect you to understand, Mister Blane," he said carefully. "I

suppose there are some things about this country that I don't understand either. Otherwise, I wouldn't have asked to have you attached to my command in the first place. But this has to be clear: I'm not a fool; I'm not blind. And regulations do not tie my hands completely. I can't order you off of the post. You know that. However, I can make it plain you are to keep away from this house."

The captain paused and looked thoughtfully about him.

"This would have been better, outside," he went on. "Unfortunately, I have to consider the welfare of the detachment, even if you won't. We have privacy here, at least. I'll ask you to be careful of the furniture, Blane. Government property, you know—"

Jeff Blane came to his feet. An easy, graceful, unstudied animal movement. He grinned wickedly.

"I've been waiting for this, Conover," he said. "Too long. But you ought to have your chance. This isn't soldier work."

That stung. Trent could see it bite into Troy Conover's professional pride. Any work was soldier work to the captain. Anything any man could do, a soldier could do better. Tradition was behind a soldier, tradition and the ramrod of discipline. Until this moment, Trent had believed he could avert physical contact between these two men. He believed he could prevent Conover from making a fool of himself. Certainly the captain, a little older, a little lighter, and entirely lacking Blane's rough and tumble skill, was mismatched. Conover must know that. In his mind must be the knowledge that a beating at Blane's hands would loosen his control over his troopers. And a word from an outsider, a blunt and matter-of-fact caution at the right moment, would steady him.

But Blane made this impossible with his grin and his mockery of soldiers. Conover would fight him—here, now. Trent stirred in his corner chair. It would not be Conover's kind of fight. Blane had a scorn of sportsmanship. A fight was a means to an end.

Blane moved unhurriedly forward. Ruth Conover appeared in the kitchen door. She paused for a moment, taking in the scene, staring at the two men on their feet in the center of the room. Her face paled. Her hand went up to her mouth in a little, involuntary gesture of alarm—perhaps of terror. She started forward in a quick half run.

"Jeff!" It was protest, wrung from her.

Captain Conover turned abruptly. His level eyes stabbed out at his wife. His voice had the ice, the impersonal chill, the strange and unaccountable impact which is the outward evidence of an ability to command men.

"Ruth."

The woman paused. She tried to meet the

eyes. Her defiance struggled briefly. Her head lowered. Turning slowly, she went back into the kitchen, closing the door behind her. Conover glanced at Trent.

"I need a witness to this, Lieutenant," he said quietly. "But I'll ask your promise you'll not interfere."

"Pequeno is still in the hills," Trent answered.

"I thought of that," Conover agreed. "Duty's a hard master. But this had to come. I could ride nowhere if it hadn't. Not with it on my mind. And if I can't ride tomorrow, you'll assume command. An army is not one man, Lieutenant."

Trent nodded. Conover swung back around to face Jeff Blane.

"If you're ready, Mr.—"

Blane came in smoothly, his hands low. They struck surely and with terrible force. Troy Conover went up onto his heels, took a backward step, and crashed heavily to the floor. Steve Trent flinched. He had seen men hit like this before. Their minds were stunned, their reflexes shattered. They were finished before they began. Blane stepped back, grinning satisfaction. But there was iron in the captain. He rolled slowly over. With one hand he wiped at the blood under his nose. And with exaggerated care, he worked his feet under him and straightened. Blane eyed him with grudging astonishment and moved in again.

Conover was dazed. Trent could see that. But he could not be tricked twice into the same mistake. Clumsily but effectively he tied up Blane's drive this second time and then, surprisingly, loosed a series of undirected short punches which brought audible grunts from Blane as they thudded into the man's lower ribs. Blane backed, with the captain following him, until he was against the wall. He used his knee, then, driving Conover back a little, and hit the man hard and cleanly on the jaw.

Conover skidded onto the carpet with the force of the blow. He was hurt, but he came up woodenly, with little sign of additional shock, and bored into Blane again. Trent sat stonily in his chair. He was a witness. No more than that. He had no affection for his superior, no personal interest in either of the men. And if friendship were a basis for partiality, then he supposed he wanted Jeff Blane to win. The scout, at least, had made an effort to be companionable about the post. But this was beyond partiality. Trent knew he was watching something close to the incredible.

BLANE was cutting the captain to pieces. His first blow had staggered Conover to the very edge of consciousness. But Conover was hanging on with something which went beyond spirit. He was hanging on and

he was hurting Blane in his clumsy rushes. Trent saw the hurt begin to appear on Jeff's face as he was carried back against the wall again by a series of blind body blows.

Twisting away from Conover, Blane circled, found an opening, and smashed a third terrific drive into Conover's face. The captain lost his footing and went down again. But he seemed to come up even faster, this time. Beaten, dazed, hopelessly outmatched, he lurched into Blane as he had before. But this time his pistoning hands worked high. Blood appeared on Blane's face. And a curious astonishment showed in his eyes. He tried to get his hands up in defense. He seemed to momentarily forget looking for his own opportunity. Conover kept pressure against him and Blane gave ground until he reached the wall. He hung there, trying to cover his face, while Conover battered it unmercifully.

Trent understood, then. Troy Conover, as he had said, was no fool. He had planned this as carefully as he would plan a campaign in the hills. Not as a man who understood using his hands would plan, but as an officer of the dragoons. He had calculated the difference in the effectiveness of the weapons which himself and his enemy would use. He had measured out a certain amount of sacrifice to overcome this. And when the right time came, he had thrown his entire force in attack on the weakest point of the enemy's defense.

Jeff Blane had given over trying to reach Conover with another blow. His whole attempt was at covering his face. When Conover staggered back a step after a moment, Blane remained against the wall, his hands and arms up about his head. He was beaten. Not by a better man. Jeff was as big as they came in the high country. But by a man who had realized his vanity was his features and who had taken a terrible beating in order to land a few blows on Jeff's face.

Blane's nose was broken. His mouth had been battered to shapelessness. After a moment he lowered his arms. Panting a little, Conover spoke through his own swollen lips.

"Get yourself cleaned up, Mr. Blane," he said raggedly. "And check your gear. We're riding after Pequeno in the morning—for the last time. We're setting our trap. You know where he is. You'll ride with me, with a small detachment behind us. You'll put us in contact with Pequeno. We'll use our force as bait, drawing the Apaches into the right kind of country. When we're set, we'll send for Lieutenant Trent. He'll come in from behind with the balance of the force."

Blane scowled blackly. Conover returned the stare.

"If there's anything left of this to settle," he said carefully, "it can wait now until we have the Apache chief in irons."

Blane looked at Conover for a long moment. There was astonishment, grudging respect in the look—and a harsh hatred. He turned slowly, pulled open the door, and stepped into the night. Trent rose and crossed to Conover. The man was rocking on his feet. Trent's quick, practical eyes took in the evidence of Conover's hurts and his mind moved toward the problem of putting the officer in his saddle in the morning. He touched Conover's arm.

"Better come along down to the dispensary, sir."

A smile appeared on Conover's face. He laughed unsteadily.

"Nonsense, Lieutenant. I never felt better in my life!"

NEITHER Captain Conover nor Blane appeared in the compound of the post after Trent left Conover's house. Night was done and Conover's wisdom in calling Blane up to the house kept news of the fight from the command in general. Trent did not know where Blane had gone. Into the brush, likely, to lick his wounds like an animal. Trent was not interested. His work was cut out. There was grumbling among some of the troopers he turned out to assist the quartermaster in preparing equipment for the foray in the morning, but with Conover as C.O., grumbling was common enough at Fort Hondo and Trent thought that in the back of every trooper's mind was the possibility that this would be the last detail—that they'd get Pequeno this time and that this hitch in the desert would be done.

By midnight Trent had finished assigning men to the two details involved in the operation ahead. He gave these assignments thought. Conover's force, guided by Jeff Blane, would necessarily have to be small. Its chief function was as contact and bait. It had to be sufficiently small to lure the wily old raider out of his hiding place for a crack at his favorite sport—massacring outnumbered cavalry patrols. Pequeno was shrewd enough to avoid tangling his force with one strong enough to give him serious trouble. And at the same time, Conover's patrol had to have sufficient strength to check attack if it came prematurely, holding the Apaches engaged until Trent himself could come up with the balance of the force.

Conover's strategy was shrewd and extremely risky. Trent was aware that the whole success of the attempted trap rested as much on the selection of the men in Conover's patrol as it did upon the way these men conducted themselves in the hills in the ensuing hours. And there was an added problem. Pequeno was a veteran, a master of generalship. Jeff Blane had contacted him twice before during the summer. Each time, Jeff had brought back

a different estimate of the Apache's strength. The last indicated that Pequeno's party numbered nearly a hundred men. And the entire complement at Fort Hondo was a hundred and twenty.

With saddlers, hostlers, and quartermaster help unusable and with it necessary to leave a minimum garrison at the post at all events, Trent realized he was splitting into two patrols a force which would hardly be fairly matched against the Apache, undivided. His wisest course seemed to be to detail twenty veterans to Conover's patrol, a few more tried men under his own sergeant as a nucleus for the reserve garrison, and to take the balance of some sixty men—including rookies and the less reliable material—to make up his own party.

Trent was weary when he turned in. His mind turned back to the trouble between Jeff Blane and the captain of the post, but with the prospect of winding up the long campaign through which they had all been something real to consider, a personal quarrel seemed unimportant. Trent slept.

THE sun was brassy at dawn. In an hour heat was already sticky and penetrating under the tunics of the men drawn up in route order on the parade ground. Conover made his appearance at the last moment, leaving inspection and the sketching of orders to Trent. When the captain appeared, it was without fanfare. He came down from his house through the dust toward his horse, briskly and with assurance. Comment ran swiftly through the formed patrol as the troopers caught sight of Conover's swollen features, but the captain glanced professionally over the patrol, as though he were accustomed to appearing on the parade ground in a like condition every day of his life.

Stubborn Conover undoubtedly was, Trent thought. And a fool. A fool at war with himself over his duty and a woman. A man twisted by doubts, distrust and bitterness. But none of this showed. He was an officer of the dragoons—a soldier.

"All in order, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"All in order," Trent agreed.

"Where's our scout?"

Trent nodded at a solitary horseman sitting a quarter mile down the trail beside a pole marking the post boundary.

"That's Blane. Had a glass on him a few minutes ago."

Conover dropped his voice.

"You could see how he looked?"

"Not as good as you do, sir."

Conover smiled.

"Thank you, Steve," he said. Raising his voice, he continued. "You'll hold yourself and your force in readiness around the clock,

Lieutenant. This time we'll bring those bloody killers out of the hills with us. If you have no message from me in forty-eight hours don't risk the balance of the men. Send a two-man patrol out to try to make contact with me. Two men—no more."

Trent saluted mechanically. Conover swung up to saddle, then leaned down.

"Look after Ruth for me, Steve," he murmured. Raising his hand, he swept it forward and down. "Here we go boys—" he shouted to the mounted patrol—"over the ridge with the devil!"

With the sun in their faces and dust powdering up about them, the troopers wheeled into column. Trent remained where he was on the parade ground, thinking of Conover's comment about riding with the devil, until he saw Jeff Blane rein out into the trail and fall in beside Conover at the head of the column as it reached the boundary line of the post.

Angling across to his own quarters after this, Trent was halted by a hail from Ruth Conover. The woman was on her porch. He changed course and stopped at the rail under her.

"You blame me for last night, don't you, Steve?" she asked.

Trent looked at her.

"Last night was off the record," he said. "I'm worried about today."

"Then you think one of them—you think Troy won't come back?"

"I know he won't—without Pequeno," Trent said bluntly. "I'm glad you didn't get to the Indian, too."

This was harsh, savage language, with the sting of a lash to it. Ruth Conover winced and turned back into her house, color high in her cheeks. Trent wondered if she understood. He wanted her to. He was not passing judgment. He was merely cutting her off from the problem which faced the rest of the post. He was making her husband's patrol, the trap which had been planned, and this new move against the Apaches something of which she could have no part. She had estranged the captain and Jeff Bane. She was to have no opportunity to do more than that. If there was curiosity in her—if there was anguish and anxiety and uncertainty, she would have to wait them out. He would give her no help.

It was a long day, made interminable by heat and motionlessness. Trent shortened it as much as possible by going into elaborate detail over necessary equipment for his own party, by issuing thorough orders to his sergeant, who was to remain behind, for the conduct and operation of the skeleton garrison remaining at the post when he, himself, departed. He passed on to the sergeant Conover's request that his wife be looked after.

And his last order made the sergeant frown curiously.

"We must try to cover all eventualities," he said. "This may be an open action—a running one. Or there may be no action, at all. Pequeno is shrewd. You are to put body arrest on any stragglers returning to the post and keep them segregated until Captain Conover or myself return and have opportunity to question them. You understand?"

The sergeant's frown deepened, then eased. He nodded slowly.

"I think I do, sir. I am to put any straggler under arrest. Even if he happened to be a subordinate officer or even the post scout."

"Yes," Trent agreed. "Even the post scout. Particularly the post scout, Sergeant. He is to talk to no one until the captain or myself return—if he should come in ahead of us—alone."

The sergeant saluted and left Trent's quarters. Trent tried to sleep a little. At four o'clock, a sentry reported an approaching rider. Trent took his glasses out into the sun. It was Blane. Trent waited for him in front of the barracks. Blane came in at an easy lope and swung across the parade ground toward Conover's house. Trent called out to him sharply.

Blane pulled up and twisted around in his saddle. He looked across at Trent and then up at Conover's house.

Finally he turned his mount and jogged on down to the barracks.

"When you come in with a message for me, Jeff," Trent said steadily, "you deliver it to me." Blane eyed him amusedly.

"You sound like the old man, Steve. The United States Army in one pair of breeches. All hell and a hurry, eh? All right. Conover's plan worked. We made contact with Pequeno near the head of Sand Canyon, where I located him earlier in the week. When he sized us up, he started to move. Plenty cautious, but moving, all right. Conover's heading on to a little flat and is going to light the boys down at sunset like they were making a dry camp. You're to pull out of here and circle back of Lava Ridge, keeping north far enough to keep your dust from being seen. You should come over the ridge about midnight and ease down behind Pequeno in time to follow him in as he makes his attack at dawn. He's caught tight."

"How many in his bunch?"

Blane shrugged.

"This wasn't a survey. A contact, I said. No chance to count. Fifty, maybe."

"Or a hundred?"

"I've seen him before with that many ponies at his back," Blane admitted easily. "But what's the odds? You're the dragoons, aren't you? Conover's killers. Pequeno

wouldn't have a chance if he had a thousand men."

Blane laughed. Trent scowled.

"You're sure it's Pequeno who doesn't have a chance, Jeff?"

Blane's eyes darkened.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked softly.

"This—" Trent answered. "Something could go wrong with the best trap. You've got no business up at Conover's house until the captain himself is back on the post. If Troy Conover rides back in here with Pequeno in iron, I'll stand out of your way. If he doesn't, Jeff, you've just traded one enemy for another! Fill your canteen and switch your saddle to a fresh horse. We'll start out immediately."

Blane looked down at his hands and clenched his fingers.

"You don't hide what you think of a man, do you, Steve?" Trent shook his head.

"No."

"Then we're different," Blane murmured, and he rode off toward the remount corral.

CHAPTER THREE

Red Man's Bargain

TWELVE miles out of Fort Hondo, Jeff Blane reined over to Trent's knee. Blane had kept apart since they had left the post and Steve was startled. He glanced up. Blane was grinning.

"Courier behind us," he suggested.

Twisting in his saddle, Trent looked back through the dust. The sun was low and red against the horizon. Silhouetted in the red light was a rider, hammering along in the track of the troop. Trent raised his hand and signaled a halt. Jeff Blane was leaning forward over the horn of his saddle, his eyes lidded against the bad light. He straightened after a moment, his grin widening.

"You aren't going to like this, Steve," he said.

Trent reined off of the trail and waited. The rider came up rapidly. Trent tried to avoid recognition, but there could be no doubt as to the identity of the figure in the saddle. A woman, riding a good horse harder than a trooper would, and with her hair blowing out behind her, shaken down in the recklessness of her travel.

Trent grappled with this problem angrily, settled it in a moment.

"Carson," he called out to a trooper, "Mrs. Conover is behind us. You will see she breathes her horse, then escort her back to the post and advise the sergeant he is to keep her under surveillance until we return."

The entire company at Fort Hondo shared

Steve Trent's desire to come up with Pequeno. It had been heightened by the Apache's elusiveness. Each man in Steve's patrol had sensed that this should be the last ride. Each wanted his part in it. Carson was not overjoyed by his assignment. He reined sullenly out from his companions and waited for Ruth Conover to come up. Blane seemed to be enjoying himself.

The woman rode straight up to Steve, reined her horse in savagely, and brushed the hair from her eyes.

"You've no right to do this to me, Steve!" she cried. "Leaving the post without giving me any word of Troy. I thought I'd never catch you!"

"It's unfortunate you did," Steve answered quietly. "There was nothing in Captain Conover's message intended for you. I'm sorry. Carson will see you back to the post."

Ruth Conover looked at him for a moment, then swung her attention to Jeff Blane.

"You brought the message from Troy in," she said slowly. "Did you deliver it as he gave it to you, Jeff—exactly as he gave it to you?"

"Practically word for word."

"I wish I could believe you," she breathed. "Steve, I'm afraid. Troy is out with so few men. Pequeno would give him no chance if he could make a surprise attack. Are you sure this is working out the way it's supposed to?"

"Why shouldn't it?" Trent answered. "The captain and myself were in agreement on it when he rode out this morning."

"I'm not talking about Troy and you!" the woman snapped. "You're both soldiers. Of course you'd be in agreement. Steve, I think Jeff is lying. I think he's led Troy into a trap from which he can't escape!"

Trent glanced at Blane. The man was still smiling. He nodded at Carson, sitting grudgingly to one side of the troop.

"We're a long ways out, now, Steve," Blane said. "And we're short of men. Conover's short of men. You may be able to use Carson later. Suppose you let Ruth stay with us. We can drop her in a safe place if we tangle with Pequeno. And she can see whether I'm lying or not. That's what she wants, I think."

There was something in Blane's eyes which Trent thought might be a message to Troy Conover's wife, something which Blane would have told her at the post if Trent had given him opportunity to do so. It puzzled Trent. It made him uneasy. But his duty was not to a man and his wife and a second man who was trying to come between them. It was to his patrol—to the patrol with Captain Conover. There was one task ahead. Only one task. One problem. Pequeno. And Blane was right. They were too short-handed to part with a trooper lightly. Barring a pitched battle under unfavorable conditions—which

was unlikely if Captain Conover's plan for trapping Pequeno worked smoothly—there should be little danger for a non-combatant, if she kept out of the way. Trent raised his voice.

"Fall in, Carson," he said crisply. "Mrs. Conover will accompany us. If we are engaged, see she finds suitable shelter. Troop—forward!"

Blane continued to ride at Trent's knee. Carson made a place for Ruth Conover in the center of the patrol. Blane rode in silence for a mile, then leaned toward Trent.

"Fire in that woman, Steve," he said lightly. "Wish I knew who it was burning for—"

NIGHT closed in tightly about Trent's patrol. Blane picked a trail up a wide, long arroyo. An hour later, he cut up over a low ridge and they came into the obsidian country near the stark upthrust of Lava Ridge. They skirted this, crossed it at a low pass, and swung parallel to it. Toward midnight they cut back against the ridge and climbed it with careful slowness. On the crest, Trent looked at his watch. Ten minutes short of twelve. Blane was a good man on a trail.

Ahead of them lay downward slanting country, broken, serrated by arroyos and steep draws. A country of mesas and buttes and dry watercourses tumbled together in an incredible, intricate maze of miserable riding. Somewhere below them, at the head of Sand Canyon, Captain Carson and his smaller patrol were camped. Somewhere below them, also, Pequeno and the little band of renegade Apaches who had been terrorizing half the state, were on the move. Drifting like silent shadows toward Conover's dark camp. Trent felt the weight of the timing necessary. He could feel the terrible tension Conover must be experiencing now. A small thing gone wrong and death would be sudden. Another command wiped out. Another reprieve for Pequeno.

"You know the way—exactly?" Trent asked Blane quietly.

"Into Sand Canyon?" the scout countered. "Like the palm of my hand."

Steve nodded.

"Let's go."

There was need for silence, now. Need to keep a sharp watch, to avoid obsidian outcroppings and the noisy footing they afforded under iron shoes. Need to watch for sign and listen for it. Need to smell danger. Trent forgot about Ruth Conover, somewhere behind him. He forgot about the fight in Conover's house the night before. He forgot about Jeff Blane. He was thinking only of the blackness of the night and the quarry ahead.

Lava Ridge, behind them, became a looming bulk as they moved down its face. The

country below flattened and became more broken, more confusing. Blane murmured corrections a time or two as Trent reined toward the wrong point of the compass. Men breathed and horses breathed. Hoofs clattered a little against stone in spite of caution. And beyond these things, there was nothing.

It seemed soon, too soon, when light began to grow behind the ridge, giving the flatly lined, rolling crown of the escarpment definition and throwing the first vague hints of long shadows out into the broken country about the head of Sand Canyon. A scant thirty minutes short of full dawn and the Apache's traditional hour for attack, Blane turned his hands up and spread them.

"We're in the canyon."

Light continued to increase. Trent studied the ground along the floor of the canyon for sign. He turned on Blane.

"Are they ahead of us? No tracks."

Blane shrugged.

"I doubt Pequeno'd ride a bottom like this. Probably traveled the rim—"

Glancing ahead, Trent saw a distant butte come suddenly out of the shadows, fully lit by the sun. And at the same time, queerly distorted by canyon walls and torturous turns, rapid, full-scale rifle fire suddenly sounded. He jerked his head around.

"Three miles—four—" he said sharply.

"Farther than that," Blane said quietly. "Nine miles. And it'll be over before we could get half the way down."

"You're sure of the distance?" Trent snapped.

"Very," Blane agreed. "I figured it carefully when I took Conover where I did. You heard me, Steve. We couldn't get half of the way down to him. It's as good as all over down there. We'd better quit saddle and find us some rocks, in case Pequeno brings his bunch this way on the way out. There's nothing else we can do."

STEVE TRENT signaled a halt and his eyes swept the canyon about them. It was generally a sandy, open course, kept so by floods occasionally rushing down out of the higher country. Some brush, but scant cover. Good ground for a cavalry attack, but the poorest kind for defense. A side draw angled in a quarter mile down the canyon, spreading a rubble of debris into the wider course. There was a scattering of boulders and some scrub growth behind it. Steve thought his men could hole up in the rocks satisfactorily, and that the scrub might give sufficient shelter to the horses to keep them hidden from casual scrutiny. There was the question of the party's tracks, which they had made no attempt to conceal, but they could not be unmade. A man took his risks.

"Dismount in skirmish order among those rocks ahead," he ordered quietly. "Carson, detail four men to the horses and see the animals are hidden as well as possible. Captain Conover has engaged Pequeno somewhere below us. There is reason to believe the Indians will retreat in this direction."

"That's covering unpleasant facts neatly, Steve," Jeff Blane murmured. "For the honor of the dragoons, eh?"

Steve made no answer. He watched his men deploy and dismount. He watched Carson tell off four men to look to the hiding of the horses in the scrub growth back of the patch of boulders. Dropping down singly, in pairs and three's, the troopers in the balance of the company vanished among the rocks. Presently only Blane, Ruth Conover, and himself were still exposed. A large boulder lay like a massive finger out into the course of Sand Canyon. Behind it, sheltered on all sides by more water worn rock, was a tiny patch of sand. Steve pointed it out to Ruth Conover.

"Climb into that and don't raise your head for anything," he said. "This may be bad before it's finished. Pequeno will have as many men as we do—maybe more. And I wouldn't want him to know we had a white woman with us, in case we're spotted."

The woman started to move away. Jeff Blane put a hand out to her arm.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "Something has happened down the line. Steve knows it. You guessed it pretty close at sunset, Ruth. And I know what it is. You two can't go on pretending we're the same three who rode away from the post. You can't go on keeping how I stack up with you under your hats. You've got to talk. You've got to put on spurs and turn rough or you've got to pat me on the back. I've got a right to know where I stand!"

"Have you, Jeff?" Steve asked. He glanced at Mrs. Conover. "Get down in behind that rock—now."

The woman moved hurriedly toward the position Steve had pointed out. Jeff Blane followed her. Steve glanced about the junction of the canyons to familiarize himself with detail which he would not be able to see from the rocks, then strode after him. When he dropped down into the sandy pocket behind the huge, protruding boulder, Blane and Ruth Conover were already sprawled down, across the pocket from each other.

Steve hunkered down between them. He spoke to Captain Conover's wife.

"Jeff wants an answer."

"From me?"

"Yes. He knows mine."

The woman looked at Jeff Blane. Her eyes rested momentarily on his tanned, long-fingered hands, outspread on the sand. Her lips tightened.

"Troy is different," she said slowly. "He can be a man. Maybe even my kind. I know that. But the Army—the dragoons. Asleep or awake, he was always in uniform. There wasn't much else—for either of us. I think that was it. There wasn't enough else. And Jeff—"

Blane sat up. He grinned recklessly.

He said, "Now it comes. I've waited a long time to hear this, Ruth. Almost too long!"

Ruth Conover seemed to ignore Blane. She was looking at Trent and she appeared to be talking to Trent, but Steve knew that for the moment she was not even aware of his presence.

"And Jeff was different. Jeff is different. Like this country, maybe. Hard. A challenge. Funny that I could hate these hills so bitterly and love a man who came out of them. I did love Jeff. I thought I did. Maybe I do, now. I don't know—" Her voice suddenly broke. She leaned sharply toward Trent. "Steve, what is this? Don't you understand? Don't you see I don't know anything—that I haven't anything I can hold onto, now? What's happening? That firing down there ahead of us. And our halt here. Has something gone wrong? Is Troy—is Troy—all right?"

"Ask Jeff," Steve said quietly.

Blane nodded.

"Listen," he said. He held up his hand. The firing far down the canyon had stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Blane's face lost its smile. A peculiar conciliatory look crossed it.

"Hear that? It's over. That's Conover for you—the dragoons. A short ride to hell! Troy's all right, Ruth. Righter than he's ever been. And we're all right, too—now."

A slow look of comprehension crossed Ruth Conover's face. Trent was not sure what he had expected. Shock, perhaps. Even horror. Possibly even a flare of grief. A woman could not be a man's wife for half a dozen years and not know some wrench at sudden understanding of the finality of their separation. But none of these things were on this woman's face. Only this slow understanding. Only a curious, analytical look in the eyes as they returned to Jeff Blane.

"You did it, then, Jeff," she said softly. "After the fight you thought of this. You lay awake all night and thought of it."

I'd have been lying awake, anyhow," Blane said. "We couldn't keep on going like we were. The first dish on the table is mine or I don't want it."

Ruth Conover ignored this.

"I liked your hardness, Jeff. I liked the way you gambled. All or nothing, you said, I think. And so you played even Troy that way. You're a bigger man than he was, Jeff. Troy couldn't have done this. Regulations would

have kept him from it, even if he had the desire. So he's dead. He wanted Pequeno. He had his orders and he wanted Pequeno. Now Pequeno has him."

"We're not talking about Troy," Blane said sharply. "We're talking about me—"

Ruth Conover nodded.

"Yes. And there isn't much to say, is there, Jeff?"

Blane did not understand, but the woman had stopped talking and there was a set to her lips which indicated she would say nothing more. Blane tried twice, ineffectually, to bring more out of her. Trent could see what the man wanted, what he needed with increasing desperation. Acquiescence, agreement, a reckless seizure of what he had done as an emancipation for them both. Ruth Conover's eyes were dull, her head tipped down. When he could not stir her further, Blane swung on Trent.

"I suppose there's talk due between us, too, Steve," he said carefully. "With most of it on your side of the line. I won't try to stop you, but there's something you've got to see, first. I brought you a message from Conover. If there's a survivor in the other patrol, he'll back me in that. Every trooper heard the captain give me that message. I led your party as fast and as directly as I could into Sand Canyon. Not you or anybody else can hang the difference in timing which finished Conover on me. Pequeno moved a little faster than we expected. Or we traveled slower than we figured on in the beginning. Or the sun set a little later last night. Or it rose a little earlier this morning. You can't hang Conover's death on me."

"I wouldn't try, Jeff," Trent said. "What Troy Conover had between you was between the two of you. I didn't fit into that. I don't, now. But I am second in command in this detachment. And the captain had twenty men of the company with him. Twenty men, Jeff—twenty dragoons. My men. I'm thinking of them. And I'm thinking of Pequeno, riding up the canyon now with fresh hair at his belt when he ought to have iron at his wrists. That's our quarrel, Jeff—yours and mine. And I promise you that once we're back at Fort Hondo, you can't tell a story I can't cut to pieces. If you do, we'll still have our settlement. Privately, if no other way."

Jeff Blane smiled unpleasantly.

"You've always been seven kinds of a fool, Steve. You'd have to be, with the uniform you're wearing and the way you wear it. But I didn't think you'd be fool enough to threaten me. Not with Troy Conover's blood still sticky on the sand down the line some place. You think I'd quit when I'm only halfway through a game?"

Trent tilted his head at Ruth Conover.

"Halfway, Jeff?" he asked. "You're the fool. You're finished. You're done. A blind man could see that."

Rising, Trent bent over the woman.

"We'll head back to the post as soon as the Indians have passed and the way is clear in front of us. Naturally, we'll stop at the captain's camp. If there's anything to be done, then—" He paused and shrugged. "Jeff and I will have to fall back with the troopers. This is the safest place I could find. Keep low and under cover. You should be safe here and we'll be back as soon as we can."

The woman looked up and nodded dumbly. There was still nothing in her face that Trent could read. Conover had loved his wife. Trent wondered why.

The woman was empty.

He signaled Blane. Jeff rose sullenly and followed him as he climbed up out of the sand pocket behind the big boulder. They scrambled through other rocks until they came to the outposts of the patrol. Steve sent one of the men he found there back toward the others.

"Pass the word for absolute silence," he ordered. "The Apaches will be riding fast, I think. They may miss our tracks, or ignore them. If they don't see us, they may pass us by. We'll put our pay on that."

The man scrambled out of sight. Blane dropped down in the place he vacated. Steve squatted beside him and commenced to adjust the sling on his carbine. Blane looked at him steadily, one hand resting on the belt gun against his thigh.

"Why put this off, Steve?" he asked raggedly. "You know what's got to come."

CHAPTER FOUR

A Better Man

TRENT glanced up.

"Now, Jeff?" he asked quietly. "You can't wait? Pequeno did one job for you. Maybe he'll do another. We're not out of this canyon, yet."

Blane began to swear, the quiet, forceful run of a man to whom profanity was a language of its own, a vocabulary of emotion. Trent waited until Blane fell silent, holding his impatience in check. Blane pulled his belt gun and turned the cylinders carefully, counting its loads—the same kind of gesture an angry man makes when he flexes the fingers of his hand before balling them into a fist.

"You're so damned right, Steve. Nobody can be that right!"

"No," Trent agreed.

"I didn't figure your bunch would run any risk," Blane went on. "We made better time than I figured. We should still be back up on the ridge, not lit down here. Pequeno should

miss us clean. I thought it would work that way. I didn't plan to put you into this."

"I know that, Jeff," Steve answered. "I made my mistake, too."

"Getting us holed up in this rock pile?"

"Where else could we hole up now? No, that isn't it. My mistake was over you. I didn't think the Army would mean anything to you—the fact that you draw your pay out of the same sack as the rest of us. I knew Conover was nothing beyond being another man, as far as you were concerned. I knew you hated him—that you'd jump him, sooner or later. But I didn't think it would be on this ride. I didn't think it would be while we were out after Pequeno, with a chance of getting him."

"You thought I'd wait forever?"

"No. Only until the Apaches were boxed up at the post with their teeth pulled. This is your country, Jeff. It belongs to you more than to any man in the command. It's all you know, all you want to know. It must mean something to you, then. And Pequeno has made it a hunting ground. He's made a fool of the Army. He's made fools of the ranchers on the lower slopes. He's made a fool of you, now. I thought you'd figure that in. What you wouldn't do for Conover or me or the Army—what you wouldn't do for anything else—I thought you'd do for yourself. Would you trade your high trails for a woman?"

Blane looked at Trent sullenly. He shook his head.

"I take what I want, Jeff. I don't trade."

"You traded, this time," Trent countered coldly. "You traded Conover and the twenty men with him—you traded our chances, here, of getting back to the post—you traded your own life. And for a woman you're not sure, even now, will have you. I didn't expect the law to hold, Jeff, or regulations. But where the hell is your own pride?"

Blane lifted a handful of sand and let it trickle through his fingers. He made no answer. Trent shifted and rose a little, so that he could see over the rocks and down the course of the canyon. A rapidly moving plume of dust traveled along above the walls below. Steve twisted and surveyed the deployment of his men, behind him. Not one of them was in sight. There was slight movement in the brush where the horses were, but he thought they were effectively enough screened. Preparations were complete. There was nothing more he could do. He ducked back down.

Blane, spread out on one elbow on the sand, seemed to sense what Steve had seen. Vibrations of hoof thunder in the ground under him, perhaps. He looked up.

"Give me your carbine, Steve. If you want Pequeno so damned bad, I'll get him for you."

Steve started to protest. Blane cut him short.

"It won't be more than two hundred yards when he comes past. The odds ought to be about even, and if Pequeno's saddle is empty, the rest of them won't tangle us. Apaches like a two-to-one thing."

Steve passed the carbine across. Blane ignored the sling and steadiness it afforded the forearm. He raised the weapon, sighted it critically, and wriggled upward until he could level the weapon across the crown of the rock in front of him.

"Through the eyes," he murmured.

STEVE TRENT had been five years in the Territories. He had seen Kaw and Comanche parties on the trail. He had seen treaty gatherings, with their fanfare and the calculated gathering of Indians in full panoply. But he had never seen anything like the party which funneled up out of the narrows of the canyon below him. Stripped down figures, with no vanity in their gear, riding short, swift horses with a skill which was beyond the understanding of even a veteran dragoon.

Pequeno, first. A squat man with the thickness of advancing age already evident, riding as recklessly as his youngest warrior. And behind him a disorderly file, four or five abreast, traveling as fast as a troop in full charge. There were dust-flashing hoofs, lean bodies—twenty men, forty—sixty. The file continued to pour out of the narrows. Eighty men. Steve leaned toward Blane, his hand outstretched. The caution was needless. The scout was already sliding back down the rock.

Blane murmured, "The old devil's got his full force out! He's got the odds, Steve. Enough to box us and finish us off in a hurry. You know a prayer for a swearing man?"

Steve made no answer. Over a hundred Apaches poured out of the narrows and raced on toward them.

"If they see us, we haven't got a chance," Blane muttered.

Pequeno's band came on. Steve studied them, his eyes stabbing for detail, his mind wheeling toward some pattern of defense if defense became necessary. And in his chest, constricted by tightening muscles, was an echo of Blane's silent prayer that their tracks remain unnoticed.

Pequeno swept past the rock outcropping behind which he had left Ruth Conover crouching. The head of the loose column plowed into the area of torn sand where the patrol had turned from the floor of the wash. For an instant it appeared that the Indians would sweep on past. Suddenly Pequeno's hand shot upward. Riding at breakneck speed, he leaned low in the saddle, his eyes on the ground. He shouted. The racing line bent, cutting back toward the bluffs in a smooth encirclement so swift and perfectly executed

that Trent, whose vanity was in the drilled perfection of his dragoons, involuntarily grunted in astonishment.

"Hold this spot, Jeff," he said swiftly. "They're cutting in close to that big rock. If they find Mrs. Conover—"

"Don't be a fool, Steve," Blane growled. "You'll never make it. And if you did, what's the odds? We can't get out of this. They'll get us all in an hour!"

Trent made no answer. Lifting the carbine, he vaulted over the rock in front of him. An Apache shouted, rifles banged. Behind him, the dragoons opened an answering fire. It seemed scattered, sporadic, in the face of the number of targets toward which it was turned, but Steve knew his men were handling their weapons with a grim and desperate speed.

He crossed the first open safely and flung down behind another rock. Waiting a moment, he sprang up and ran again. More Apache rifles snarled at him. It was hard, fast, accurate shooting. He reached another rock and went down behind it. The third time he came up, there were only a half a dozen yards between him and the shelter behind which Ruth Conover lay. He was hit twice in this distance—the arm, somewhere above the elbow, and a cheek cut by a splinter sprayed back from polished granite. He landed in a heap beside Captain Conover's wife.

She saw his wound, the blood dripping from the elbow of his tunic, and asked for his kerchief. He reached it awkwardly for her. Swiftly, with strong hands surprisingly steady, she tied it about his arm. A crevice was close to his face. Through it he had a rapidly moving picture of Pequeno's ringing force. He saw that a number of Indians had pulled out of the narrowing circle about the rocks. With them were horses with empty saddles. No—not empty. Dead men were across them.

A peculiar satisfaction filled Steve Trent. Apaches carried their dead away from a battle. These bodies were the price Troy Conover and his twenty men had exacted, somewhere down the canyon. Pequeno would not get out of his tangle with the dragoons from Fort Hondo scot-free, then. Before they were through, Steve's own patrol would empty more saddles. Not enough—not all of them—but some. Enough for a soldier's pride.

TRENT kept his face close to the crevice, watching as Pequeno, with unhurried surety, dismounted his men and started them in afoot, dodging, closing. He knew what this meant. Stung, Pequeno would exact swift revenge. This could not last long. Two Indians to every trooper. . . .

Suddenly something about the Apaches struck Trent. Something a man would not know until he had had a couple of hitches in

the high country—until he had hunted the red wolves. These raiders had come up the canyon from a victory—a quick, sharp, easy victory over twenty desperate troopers and a single iron-handed officer. Yet they carried no trophies. No dragoon jackets. No caps. No company standard. Not even one of the prized, brass mounted dragoon revolvers bearing the rampant horse of the Colt Arms Company and Samuel Colt's address in New York City. Yet the whole of Apache vanity was centered about trophies of war.

No trophies. Out of this and the empty saddles of the horses drawn out of the ring of attack, Steve Trent slowly and incredulously built a story. A story he could not see—a story he could not understand—but one which he instinctively knew was fact. Troy Conover was not dead. His patrol had not been wiped out. Regardless of the *cul-de-sac* into which Jeff Blane had led them—in the face of the overwhelming odds Pequeno had rolled down against them—they had escaped. Steve had a vague and shadowy picture of Troy Conover, all steel and whang-leather, leading men trained to follow into some arroyo up which a horse could not travel.

He could see Conover's men firing from their saddles as they rode. He could see the red wolves of the desert haul up on their own mounts to watch in astonishment while the crazy dragoons did the impossible. A trick, perhaps, and a reckless ride which the Apaches refused to duplicate. The firing down the canyon had been brief—but only because Troy Conover was the Army first and a man second. His harshness, his single-mindedness, had saved the lives of men who had long bitterly resented these things.

Trent could see this, no more. He understood only that Conover had escaped, that twenty men and the best officer in the high country were somewhere down the canyon still. And twenty men, with Conover, would even the odds here. He turned. Ruth Conover saw the sudden eagerness in his face. He glanced at her and thrust the carbine into her hands.

"Stay behind this rock," he said swiftly. "Keep your head down. Use this if they pile in here."

"Steve—" Ruth Conover caught at his arm, her fingers digging—"Steve—what is it?"

"A chance. A thin chance, if we can get a man out. Jeff's the only one who could make it through the line Pequeno's thrown around us. I've got to get back."

Ruth Conover tipped her head at his wounded arm.

"You couldn't make it, Steve. You were lucky before. And they're in closer now."

"Jeff's our only chance. He's got to get out."

"Where would he go?"

Steve debated this an instant. He could be wrong. For some strange reason, Pequeno's men might have left their victims down the canyon without stripping them. This woman was Troy Conover's wife. She believed him dead. To raise a false hope. . . .

"For help. For help, somewhere."

The woman shook her head.

"It's no use, Steve. Jeff won't go. Not for us—not now. Look."

She pointed. Steve's eyes followed the gesture. A figure was twisting through the rocks at the extreme opposite side of the pocket in which the patrol was caught. A bent, sliding, incredibly swift figure, moving in spurts so sudden that the eye could barely follow it. A figure dressed in Jeff Blane's leather and denim.

Steve bent forward, lifting the carbine from beside the girl. He thrust his arm through the looped sling and raised the weapon swiftly to his shoulder. Jeff Blane scuttled across the bead of the sights, dwarfed by distance. Steve lowered the weapon.

"Too far," he murmured. "Too damned far!"

"Jeff, running away!" Ruth Conover breathed. "I think it has taken this to show me what a fool I've been, Steve. It doesn't make any difference now. I know that. But I want you to understand. I want somebody to understand. There's so little time left. I've been a terrible fool. I wasn't even able to read Jeff Blane right!"

Trent looked at the carbine in his hands. He was past anger; he was past judging.

"If I were a woman," he said slowly, "I think I'd have had trouble living with Troy Conover at the post. And I've read Jeff wrong, too. I made him a devil—black as hell inside, maybe—but not yellow."

An Apache was close. Trent lined the carbine across the rock in front of him and put sixty grains of Army issue ammunition lead into the broad space above the Indian's eyes.

ON THE rocks behind him Trent knew tunic clad figures were spilled lifelessly across ineffectual granite breastworks. There were Apaches face down in the sand, too. But there were too many troopers out of action and too many Indians still pressing in. The savagery of their attack heightened Trent's belief that Conover had escaped the trap Blane had set for him—that Conover had stung the haughty pride of the Apache.

In the back of his mind was the thought that if they had heard Conover's firing, here, then down the canyon somewhere Conover should hear the thunder above this boulder field, now. But confronting this was a hard-won knowledge of these hills and their peculiar acoustical properties, realization that

Conover might be riding swiftly in another direction—that he could not hear. And always the even chance that his hunch was wrong—that Conover was dead.

Jeff Blane worked into the attacking ring of savages with uncanny skill. Trent caught brief glimpses of him. Once an Apache saw Blane, but died too swiftly to call out. Jeff darted on. Ten minutes—fifteen. Jeff had vanished. Twenty minutes. He reappeared far beyond the circle of fire, cutting toward the brush where the horses of the patrol were hidden. The attack had lost its first momentum, but the whole movement was a tightening one, squeezing in relentlessly. Steve glanced at the sun. Two hours of morning gone. It would be over before noon.

Jeff Blane appeared briefly, high up on the canyon wall, working a cavalry pony along a miserable trail. He was a momentary silhouette on the horizon; then he vanished behind it. Trent turned his head. Ruth Conover had been watching Jeff, also.

"If Troy were at the post—if Jeff could ride for him, now—" she breathed.

"Or if I could get you out through those devils like he got out," Steve added. Ruth glanced beyond him and cried out sharply. Steve wheeled and fired at a tawny figure hurtling toward him. The Apache broke and spilled off to one side. The next time there would be two of them—then four. Then all of them, howling, merciless. Death could be swift. Sometimes it was not. Steve looked at Ruth Conover and made his prayer.

Heat. The jarring explosion of probing rifles. The slow run of time. Two hours—three. Noon was beyond the horizon, a time they would never know. Steve's canteen was on the sand at his heels. Ruth lifted it, drew the cork and offered it to him. Steve shook his head. If it had been whiskey. . . .

There was a lull in the firing. The ominous pause before the full lash of the storm. Through it—thin, brassy, arrogant—came the call of a bugle. Out of some recollection, some memory of parade ground days. An echo from Fort Hondo before Jeff Blane had started dropping past the captain's house. A hallucination. Steve glanced at Ruth Conover. Her head was tilted. She was listening, also. So were two Indians across the canyon, standing by the head-down animals which carried the Apache dead.

Then, like sunset, like thunder on a mountain, a line appeared on the rim of Sand Canyon, across the wash from the boulder field. A thin line, certainly, but traveling with a recklessness and speed which made it seem unreal. Twenty men, tipping over the crest, forcing sliding horses down the steep embankment. Sweaty horses, dust-streaked and ridden by madmen.

Maddest of all, sitting erect still, but spurring his horse savagely, Captain Conover rode in the lead. Behind him was a trooper with the company's colors forward tilted. And back of the standard was Jeff Blane. Ruth Conover caught her breath. She said nothing—no sound beyond this sharp, soft intake of air. Trent leaped up, climbing recklessly onto the rock in front of him.

"Close in!" Steve's voice was thunder which rose above the sound of rifle fire. His arm shot up, forward, and smartly down in the hand signal for forward movement. His men came up, scattered widely through the rocks, and surged outward against the ringing Apaches. Conover veered his force slightly to enclose the boulder patch. Sabers out, flashing in the sun, his men plowed into the ragged line of Apache horses as some of the Indians darted back to remount.

Steve's patrol poured a merciless fire into the breaking ring about them. Steve had a glimpse of Pequeno, himself, running desperately on his short legs, shouting. Then a trooper was above him, saber hilt clubbed, and the Apache went down into the screen of dust puffing up from the ground. Conover, the standard bearer and Jeff Blane rode yet together, bending along the perimeter of the struggling forces. An Apache's bullet hit the standard bearer. The man spilled from leather. Jeff Blane, with superb horsemanship, reined sharply and caught the staff of the flag. He raised it high, shouting. His shout broke off sharply. Jeff rocked in his seat, hunching forward, but caught himself.

Steve was handling his carbine at hip level. It was a maelstrom of dust and sound. Out of it, with a suddenness which was almost jarring, came silence. Raggedly weary troopers, grimed but triumphant, began to reform. A huddled bunch of sullen Indians were herded together. Two troopers dragged Pequeno into this group. Steve saw Carson, swearing wildly with excitement, truss the old wolf's hands up behind him. Turning to the pocket at his back, Steve offered his hand and lifted Ruth Conover onto the rock and then down onto the smooth sand flooring the wash.

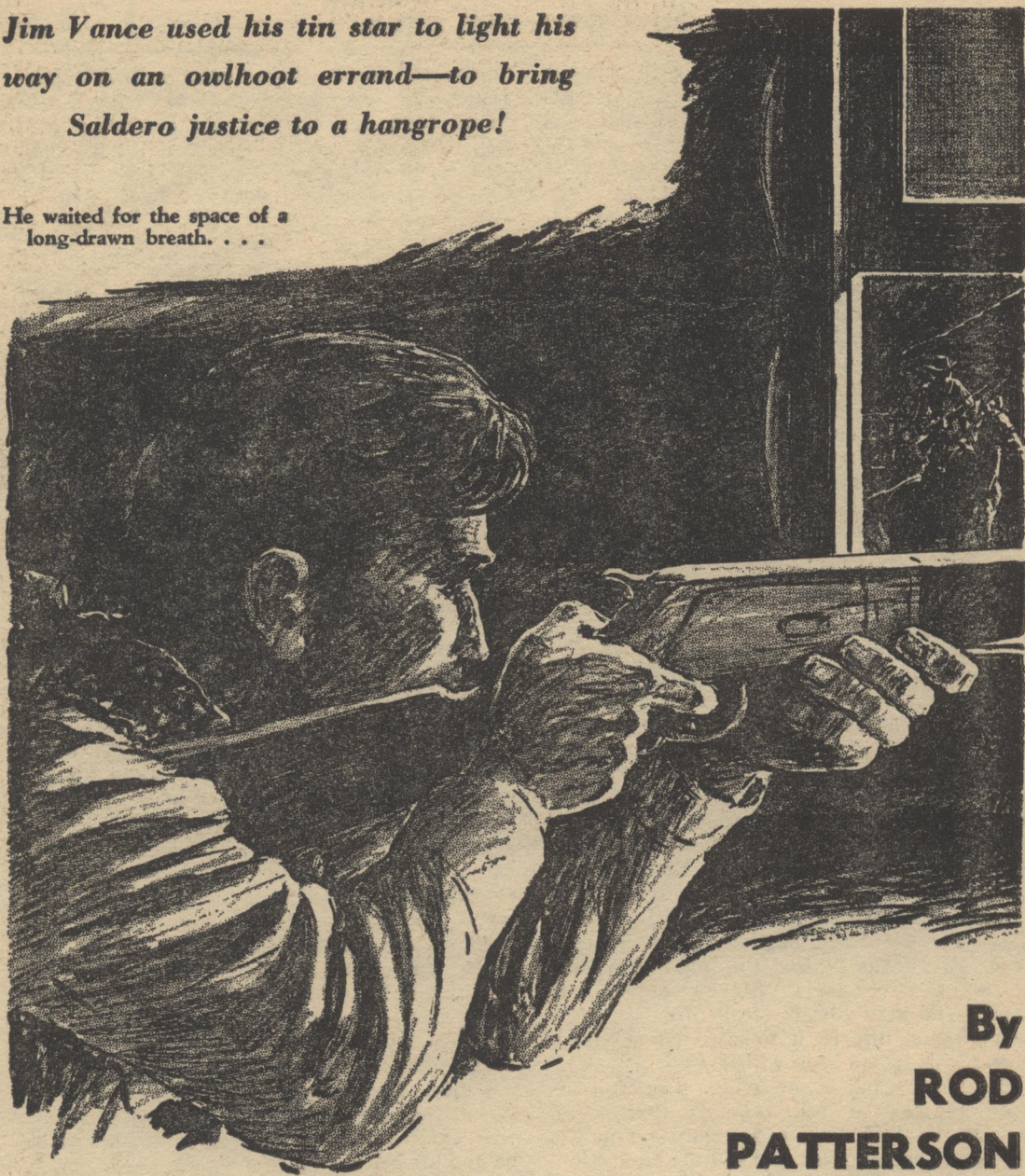
Troy Conover had reined up near the bunching prisoners, speaking rapidly to the troopers handling them. Cool, concise orders. The wildness of the ride down the canyon wall was gone. The strain of the battle. Efficiently, the captain was himself again. An officer of the dragons. Steve didn't think Conover had seen his wife.

Among the bodies sprawled on the sand away from the rocks, one drew his attention—a long body, leather-jacketed, with the broken shaft and rumpled silk of a banner under it. Ruth Conover saw Jeff at the same time. She

(Continued on page 129)

Jim Vance used his tin star to light his way on an owlhoot errand—to bring Saldero justice to a hangrope!

He waited for the space of a long-drawn breath. . . .



By
**ROD
PATTERSON**

CHAPTER ONE

Owlhoot Lawyer

ON THAT fine morning in early June, Jim Vance and his one-man crew, Pretty Sam Sleeper, were stringing barbed wire on freshly driven cedar posts in the hills south of the homestead ranch on Wagonyard Creek. The sun was hot, and sweat glistened like jewels on the layered muscles of Jim's broad shoulders as, bare to the hips, he swung his maul two post-holes ahead of the old man who was working along the fence line with

wire-pullers and an ancient claw hammer. "Riders comin'," Pretty Sam said, pausing to swipe sweat out of his eyes.

Jim rested the butt of his maul at his feet and spat deliberately on his open palms, turning to stare at the rutted trail ribboning off through the sagebrush. "Hand me my gun," he said tersely, nodding to the belt and holster hooked on a strand of wire nearby. "Looks like Haz Blackerby's hat."



BULLETS WON'T BUY MY RANGE

Since filing and proving up on his lowland spread some five years or so before, Jim, though strictly speaking a man of the saddle, had turned to farming for reasons of security. He had pinched money out of the small inheritance left him by a deceased uncle, had spent it on stock and equipment with the idea of experimenting with a newfangled kind of hay called "alfalfa," planning to change over to raising beef when circumstances permitted.

At present his holdings on Wagonyard Creek were rather small, his land, while tilla-

ble, located in more or less barren country, four sections of grass and conglomerate soil, really a cow spread, though now without cattle. The only buildings on it were the log house, log hay barn, a few open-faced sheds and a pole corral, left by the former tenant who had fled without living up to residence requirements.

Most of Jim's neighbors were farmers, working land procured similarly, but a few two-bit cowmen had started layouts in this end of Scrub County, Colorado. They had all lived

in comparative harmony and mutual helpfulness until six months ago when two strangers, representing an Eastern holding company, had bought in on a huge ranch at the rim of the valley. A beef pool ordinarily could be counted on to improve conditions on any range—but not so the one controlled and operated by Hazlett Blackerby and Barney Krippel, a pair of blackleg cattlemen with no scruples whatever about gobbling up land belonging to someone else and making things generally hot for those who dared to offer opposition, or even mere complaint.

Jim caught the gun Pretty Sam tossed and belted it around his waist. The sun hit hard through the mesquites and made him squint, as three riders presently cantered around a bend in the trail.

Haz Blackerby, broad of beam, with a wedge-shaped face, leather-tanned, wearing a white Stetson that cast a line of shadow across his face, cheekbone-high, was sided warily by his two men. He had a rifle loose across his pommel while his men wore pistols on heavily loaded belts.

Haz held up his buck-gloved hand, not a friendly gesture but a peremptory one. He said truculently, "What's this fence play for? You can't close off a public trail, Jim."

"It ain't public," Jim said levelly. "It's on my land. I'll fence it whenever I feel like it."

The big man made a careful study of the situation, noting the revolver on Jim's belt and the belligerent scowl on the face of Pretty Sam. "Don't go 'round beggin' for trouble, friend," Blackerby warned in his rumbling voice. "You started askin' for it when you turned down our offer for your spread."

"Sell at forty cents an acre?" Jim asked. "You're loco, mister! But I wouldn't sell to your BK at any price."

"It's a matter of pure cow sense," the big man stated in a tone of rising ire. "We're big an' need the range. Your outfit alone ain't worth more to us."

Pretty Sam said, unable to keep silent any more, "You'll sing low and soft one of these days when things cloud up on you!"

Blackerby ignored him, asked Jim, "You savvy what happens when anybuddy bucks BK?"

"Yeah," Jim answered in the same clipped tone. "We found Jed Gantry dead last week with a drygulch bullet in his back! His land had been deeded to BK and recorded legal at Saldero the day before he died, but he never had no money on him or in his house when we picked him up! If there's anything worse'n a back-shooter, it's one that steals!"

A dark and rising stain appeared on Blackerby's flat cheeks. "You sling that talk around," he said, "and we don't aim to overlook it. Any more'n we mean to overlook your

protective association. We'll call your bluff on both."

At the beginning of this encounter, Jim had been calm, thoroughly self-possessed, but now his face turned white and his eyes became hot light. He said with soft fury in his voice, "Ride out! You're on wrong ground!"

Blackerby prepared to turn his horse. "You'll be hearin' some more from us," he finally said, then whipped his mount around. He took his men with him and went ramming down the trail.

Pretty Sam looked dubious, scratching his stubble-bearded chin and peering up at the sun, not three hours high. "'Pears like we got business more important than peggin' fence," he drawled.

Jim, staring after Blackerby, nodded.

DRAWING to a halt in Bide Winthrop's cottonwood-shaded yard a short while later, Jim gave the rambling house a hail. From inside came the sound of swiftly running feet; then the door opened and Kate, young and pretty daughter of the owner, came out, shading her eyes against the strike of the sun.

For three years Jim had harbored the notion that no other woman he had ever known was so naturally fitted for matrimony and wedded bliss. Sturdy but slim of form and delicate of face, she embodied all the attributes of a frontier wife. She smiled out at him, provocatively prim, as he swung a leg over the cantle and stepped down.

He said, "Katie, you're purtier'n a brindle pup with that yaller ribbon in your hair."

She blushed becomingly and ushered him into the summer kitchen, where a red-whiskered giant sat eating with a napkin tucked up to his ears. "Set." Bide motioned decorously to a chair across from him. He blinked his gray, small bullet eyes at Jim. "Ain't called off the meetin' fer tonight, have yuh, son?"

"Nope. But it's changed for this noon," Jim told him, sitting before a plate of beans and pork side Kate served him. "Haz Blackerby stomped up on my east forty and talked enough to tip his hand."

"You mean it's war?"

"Or more of what happened to Jed Gantry," Jim said gravely, wielding knife and fork in silence for a moment, then adding, "I hope our people'll back me up in what I got in mind."

Kate, hovering at his elbow with a second helping, said with some anxiety, "Can't something be done about the sheriff and the judge?"

"I've already been to town. Both the sheriff and the judge claimed Gantry got that money for his deed, that some stray bushwhacker killed him for it and lit a shuck."

"I've had about a bait of this BK killin' and piratin'," Bide said with a rancorous scowl. "That's riled talk," Jim reminded him with a half-smile. "You mean it, Bide?"

"I do," the old man thundered.

"Then you can side me with the boys when they git here," Jim said relievedly, "because it's goin' to take a lot of nerve and a lot of mad to make 'em all agree to the scheme I got."

Jim finished his meal, then wiped his mouth and leaned back in his chair. "The meetin's here, and I hear 'em comin' now."

Fifteen mounted men were waiting in the Winthrop yard when Jim and Bide came out and greeted them. All hands cleared saddle and gathered in a group in the mottled shadows of the cottonwoods. Among those present were Ed Laverick, Benjie Carnes, John Sweetman, ranchmen; and Ty Cawfield, Howie Ketchell, Oak Trowbridge, farmers. These six were the most outspoken of their particular factions and what their action was, more often than not controlled the action of the rest.

Jim knew this and laid his first words out carefully, directing his remarks to the six. "Friends, I asked you here instead of at my place because my spread'll be watched by BK from now on and whatever happens is likely to happen there. The time's come for each of us to lay his cards on the table and see who stands for what. Will Ed Laverick please come forward?"

A bowlegged cowman with a whip-keen face and agate eyes left the group under the trees.

"Ed," Jim said quietly, "I hear you've sold your ranch to BK. The sale was recorded at Saldero yest'd'y afternoon."

"I ain't ashamed of it," Laverick said defiantly, although the color of his face indicated the opposite. "My spread edged BK's range. Somebuddy dynamited my well and drove off my hosses. I got a wife and kids to look after. So I sold."

Jim looked thoughtful. "Just so, Ed." Then he waved the man away and beckoned to a grave-faced farmer in the group. "How 'bout you, Oak Trowbridge?"

The man stood up, a crestfallen look on his thin face. "I signed a bill of sale this mornin'," he said in a sullen voice.

"How much an acre?"

"Ten cents," the farmer murmured, haggardly staring ahead of him. "They bought what wheat I had stored up, though."

"How much for the grain?" Jim asked relentlessly.

"Five cents a bushel," Trowbridge said in a louder tone. "They had me where the hide was thin. Kep' cuttin' my wire and BK's cattle tromped four acres of food stuff into the ground. I laid all week, watchin' that break

with a shotgun. Haz Blackerby's boys caught me red-handed last Friday and drug me to town and jail! Sheriff Finney said he'd let me free on'y if I turned over my deed to the cattle pool!"

Jim nodded sympathetically. "Don't feel too bad, Oak. You'll git your land back if everybody here agrees to help."

Bide Winthrop's edgy voice sang out, "There's seven—eight men missin' from this here meetin'."

"Pretty Sam's tryin' to locate 'em," a farmer said. "But Dan Shorey should be here. He told me he was comin' 'bout an hour ago."

Jim stood up and confronted the group, his face, his eyes dead serious though calm. "One thing's got to be settled here and now," he said. "Are we goin' to look on like crows on a fence while BK takes Scrub County away from us?"

"No!" a muttered chorus of voices said.

"We got to do somethin' besides talk and chew," declared Ty Cawfield.

"Don't see what we *kin* do," another ranchman remarked in a handdog tone. "'Cept mebbe shoot it out with 'em. Thing is, they're two to one agin us since Krippl brung in them gunmen from Idaho. Me, I ain't zackly hankerin' to hop fer no harp at my age. I'm a poor shot with a hawleg and I seen Haz Black'by ringin' the courthouse bell with his six-gun one night last week and he never even busted it! Jest bounced them bullets off like silver dollars off the creek."

"Friends," Jim said grimly, "if we stick together and fight for all and not just for ourselves, we can beat BK in a showdown!"

"How?" asked Winthrop. "Spit it out. If it's reasonable, we'll agree."

"I want the right to pick my help," Jim said. "And the right to give orders and git 'em obeyed without any augerin'. I aim to stack the cards against BK and lick them at their own game, no punches pulled, no mercy showed. But I got to be the boss!"

They all stared at him a long time, waiting. Then Winthrop said, "How do we know you ain't got an iron of your own you're askin' us to heat?"

He looked around, saw Kate in the crowd and, among those grim, doubtful faces, hers alone smiled at him.

He said suddenly, "You all know how it is between Kate an' me. I'm statin' now that I won't marry Kate till the day I turn this county back to you—so help me—"

AFTERWARDS he made his peace with Kate and rode off, details of the meeting still fresh in his mind. He was not the only rider on the Saldero trail that afternoon. On the winding valley road, five miles southwest of the Winthrop spread, Pretty

Sam Sleeper reined up to wait for him at a point they had prearranged.

Pretty Sam's pale eyes, usually showing nothing but a cold aloofness, revealed an expression of alarm, but he held his silence and swung alongside, riding stirrup to stirrup with his boss.

Jim told him what had been decided at the meeting at Winthrop's, ending his account with, "There'll be law and order in this county when we're through, or hell with the blower on!"

"You'll be ridin' into some of the last," said Pretty Sam, "if you go to town this afternoon. BK went down the trail afore you come along!"

"I aim to see Judge Camber," Jim replied determinedly. "We'll stay away from the saloons where Blackerby and Krippel do their hangin' out."

The spirits of both men rose as the sun sank. They were chatting happily when they entered the county turnpike at four o'clock and saw Saldero town in the dust-haze a mile away.

Saldero was like a hundred other Colorado settlements—a single street with dust three inches thick, a double row of wooden-fronted saloons and shops, with one building towering two stories above the rest—the brick block that housed a Wells-Fargo Bank and a score of business offices. Next door to the brick block squatted the mud-walled courthouse and county jail, its windows iron-barred and without glass. A red-painted wooden cupola topped the ugly structure and contained a bronze bell filched by early settlers from some deserted mission years before.

Jim and Pretty Sam racked their horses in the lineup, ignoring certain groups of curiously staring citizens along the wooden walks, entered the main vestibule of the brick block and climbed the shaky staircase to the second floor. Jim found a door bearing the caption:

JUDGE CAMBER

ATTORNEY-AT-LAW—NOTARY PUBLIC

There were scuffling sounds inside the office as Jim rapped the panel twice, and a thin voice said, "One moment, and I will be right with you."

Chair legs scraped the floor, and the door was opened after a brief delay by a short, potbellied man with a balding head and frog-like, bulging eyes. There were two other men in the dim office beyond: Sheriff Mark Tinney, a tall, lanky man with a sandy mustache and piercing yellow eyes; and a stranger with a stolid face and gold-rimmed spectacles, who looked like a saloonman, but wore a set of fancy Spanish spurs.

"Evenin', judge," Jim said affably enough. "I got business to talk with you—county business."

The judge looked faintly annoyed, but made an ushering gesture and went back and sat in his swivel chair behind a flat-topped desk in the center of the room. Jim took a chair on his right, facing the sheriff and the stranger against the opposite wall. Pretty Sam lingered in the open door, his bony frame leaning slackly there while he fished for makings and began the building of a cigarette.

"A cigar?" The judge shoved a box of stogies across the littered desk, his eyes almost hidden by the puff of whitish lids. "Is your business private, Mr. Vance?"

"No," Jim said, declining the cigar with a shake of his head. Then he took time to draw a piece of paper from his coat pocket which he carefully unfolded and then handed to the judge with the faintest of smiles. "I have here a petition signed by eighteen land-holders in my district—on the Wagonyard. It won't be necessary to remind you about the trouble we been havin' with the BK people, but this paper covers it. Just skip the beginnin' and read the end."

Judge Camber leaned back in his chair, silent, deliberative, as he stared at the writing and pursed his too-small mouth. Then he speared Jim with a hard stare and loudly cleared his throat. "This here bids me deputize you to Sheriff Tinney with full authority to make arrests. What on earth's got into those people? Why, thunderation, man—"

"They'd consider it a favor," Jim said slowly, distinctively, "if I was to be made a deputy in special charge of trouble comin' out of the dispute with the BK pool."

Sheriff Tinney came erect from his straight-backed chair against the wall. He said, his gaze raking Jim up and down, "I don't need any deputies! I got some!"

"If you want more signatures," Jim went on coldly, addressing the frowning judge, "I can git plenty in twenty-four hours time. My friends in the upper valley've made me their agent to settle this trouble with BK without bloodshed, if possible, and they don't want to go over your head to the state land commissioner—if they don't have to."

The judge waved both hands protestingly, his eyes retreating deeper into the folds of flesh that wreathed his face. "Never mind, never mind!" he cried in a piping tone that didn't match his body's tremendous girth. "I'll make you a deputy if it'll keep that bunch of Injuns quiet for a while!"

The stranger with the spectacles stood up and said to the judge, "Gotta meet the evenin' stage. Be back later." He walked out past Pretty Sam and down the creaking stairs.

Sheriff Tinney was on his feet, an unblinking animal gleam in his eyes. He walked up to Jim. "I'm still two jumps ahead o' yuh, young feller, and you better watch out or

you'll land behind the bars yourself one day!"

He grabbed his hat off the judge's desk and clapped it on his head and stomped out of the office.

"I don't expect no fees," Jim said in a bored voice as the judge reached for a Bible and drew a small silver-plated star from his desk drawer. "And I'll see justice done, no matter if it hits my friends."

The judge swore him in, the words a mumbogumbo on his meaty lips. Then he pinned the star on Jim's shirt front without rising and growled, "It's a mistake. I've warned you, Vance. You got your people to put pressure on me and I resent it. I'm warnin' you—"

"Reckon," Jim said, rising with a grin, "You like it better'n havin' a squawk go out to the land commissioner at Denver. Or am I wrong?"

"Let it go!" The judge seemed at the end of his patience. "Get out of here!"

PRETTY SAM, foreseeing the end of the conference and grinning from ear to ear, had left his post at the door and was already halfway down the stairs, and now, as Jim walked down the hall toward the upper landing, he heard voices loud with anger drifting up from the lower floor.

He reached the head of the staircase, staring down toward the dim light of the lower vestibule, down on a triangle formed by three men—Barney Krippel and his foreman Lud Yates and Pretty Sam on the stairs three steps above the other two.

Krippel was terrible in his rage. A small, wiry man, he had the deep-socketed eyes of a fanatic, and a cruel, bitter mouth that jerked as he hurled a string of oaths at Pretty Sam. Lud Yates stood on his left, a little in back of him, a burly man with a surly face and intense, burning eyes, a tough cowboy who had learned to fight in a hundred barroom brawls.

"I'll say it again," Krippel shouted, trembling in his rage. "No damned yeller-tailed sodbuster's goin' to run this county while I'm alive!"

"How 'bout when you're daid?" Pretty Sam asked from his position on the stairs. "You got to fight me, too, you sawed-off little bar'l of wind! Now git your skinny carcass outa the way 'fore I pull on you and blow yuh out through them damned doors!"

"Fight you?" jeered the cattlemen, beside himself and crazy in his rage. "Why, you lop-eared old rabbit, I wouldn't waste breath to fan you down!"

Jim gripped the upper bannister and yelled, "Cut it out, you fools! Let the law handle your trouble."

"Bullets won't git yuh no more range!" Pretty Sam bellered. "All you git from now on is a lot of hell-room fer your pains!"

Krippel was swearing in a soft and terrible voice as he went for his gun. It came up with a glint, hammering its thunder against the lobby walls. Pretty Sam was quick, but not quick enough to throw his bullet first. Jim heard the roar of Krippel's piece, the solid strike of lead in the old man's stringy frame. Then Sam's pistol spoke. Smoke belched across the hall and drifted down like a devil's halo toward Krippel who tottered and caught himself with a coughing grunt.

Jim drew and covered Lud Yates below, calling, "Keep outer this, my friend. One move and I drop you where you stand!"

Then Krippel was going down, slowly, ponderously for so small a man. He bent his head and his gun struck thudding at his feet. Then his knees caved in, and he fell face down and didn't move again.

Lud Yates faded back and through the outside doors with amazing agility. His boots seemed to glide on oil, and the door stayed open, with the sunset's glow like blood along the floor, a deeper red than Krippel's blood that merged with it in an ever-widening stain.

Pretty Sam, hard hit in the shoulder, sat down like a very weary man and stared at the pistol in his hand, at the thin thread of bluish smoke that left its longish barrel. Then he fainted and rolled down the three steps to the floor below, his body bumping with a kind of measured pace.

Jim reached his side, hitting the stairs three at a time, and dropping to his knees beside his friend. At the same instant the judge began yelling on the second floor, and the thunder of running boots on the wooden walks swept close. A crowd was jaming up outside the vestibule. Two or three men came in with the stilted steps of thorough caution, staring at the scene with open mouths.

Jim held Pretty Sam's lolling head in his arms and turned and said, "Somebody help me git him back upstairs and one of you run and git Doc Broun!"

CHAPTER TWO

Rustler's Range

THE scene was set like a stage in the day's soft dusk on the street in front of the brick block's high facade. The town lay silent, seemingly empty, except for a few saddle ponies at the racks, and three men coming yonder through the middle dust.

But back in the deeper shadows was the pale glint of eyes—many eyes that watched the street with an eerie, waiting calm.

Jim stood on the board walk, feeling the steady cold of insecurity like a wind. He had just come through the brick block's doors. Upstairs Doc Broun, the town's specialist on

lead-inflicted wounds, was probing for the slug in Pretty Sam's shoulder. And someone was coming down the stairs in back of him.

He pulled aside and put his back to the warm brick wall, the glint of his deputy sheriff's star like a tiny pinwheel on his shirt, the dull hard shine of his six-gun where his coat had fallen back.

He calmly watched the three men ease toward him from the street. Haz Blackerby paced a step ahead of the other two. Lud Yates walked on his right, the third hand still a little farther back. These men had just come back from bearing Barney Krippe's corpse to the undertaker's up the street.

The surviving partner of the cattle pool came on without a pause until he reached a spot on the street some twenty feet from where Jim stood with his back against the wall. Then he stopped, and his men stopped, holding the same positions in back of him and spreading out a bit.

Blackerby's face was black with inner fury. He stood there, utterly still, for a long moment, while the tension piled up in the town. Then he said in an iron-hard voice, "I orter kill you where you stand!"

"Call off your dogs," Jim murmured, his gaze meeting Blackerby's without a blink. "Barney drew first. Sam killed him in self defense."

"You're lying."

Jim said steadily, "Mebbe you think I'm singing' low 'cause you got two gunnies in back of you. You're wrong again. If you had ten men behind you, they couldn't shoot me any quicker'n I c'n knock you down!"

Blackerby then called up all his bluster, all his nerve. "Who said anything about a shoot-out here?" he boomed. "I want Pretty Sam Sleeper. He killed Barney, and BK wants him."

Jim said, "He's goin' home with me when the doc gits through with him."

Judge Camber had come out and now stood on the walk, pompous, fat, and suddenly very shrewd as he stared at Jim. He said deliberately, "It's pretty clear Sam shot in self-defense, but I'm placin' him in your custody, Vance. As a deputy sheriff you're responsible for what happens to Sam until a charge is made and substantiated. That's all." He waved his pudgy hands to clear the street, the gleam of shrewdness staying in his frog-like eyes. "Break it up, men."

There was a chill in Jim's heart as he saw Blackerby take his men and walk away. He was heavy-hearted during the ensuing half hour while he rented a buckboard from the livery and drove the team of broncs in front of the brick block. He tied Sam's horse and his own on behind the rig, then went up and carried Pretty Sam downstairs himself.

The old man was a little delirious, and very weak from too much bleeding, but he submitted to Jim's grunting efforts to carry him. Jim drove the buckboard swiftly out of town.

The moon was barely edging the mesquites when the team shied violently at some object beside the trail and nearly tossed Jim off the seat. His eyes caught furtive movement in the clotted shadows. Then several masked men swarmed out of the brush.

"Pull up or we'll shoot!"

Other men on horseback charged from the left side of the trail, and a lariat swung at Jim's head, loop circling with an expert throw. He ducked it in time, grabbing at his gun and blazing away at the nearest rider who reared and lunged away.

Jim jerked the broncs off the trail with a grind of sliding wheels. He fired twice, then heard new hoofs pound up in front of him. He raised his weapon on the high-riding figure, then recognized the flaming beard of Bide Winthrop, and held his fire.

The attacking party turned and ran, their hoofbeats fading down to silence in the chaparral. Winthrop held his rifle and rode close to the rig. "What happened, fer Pete's sake? I was doin' some scoutin' and heered the guns!"

Jim told him briefly as they rode along together what had happened in town. "The judge swore me in," he finished, "but the way it turned out, I'm worse useless than winder shutters on a horse! I can't leave Pretty Sam alone or they'd have him climbin' a rope with his neck!"

"We'll fix that," Winthrop said emphatically. "We'll take 'im to my house and Katie'll nurse 'im till he's strong enuff to ride again."

Jim concurred reluctantly, but reserved his decision pending a consultation with Kate when they arrived at the Winthrop spread. When they clattered into the ranch yard under the cottonwoods, they found Ty Cawfield and John Sweetman waiting in chairs on the gallery, their horses lathered and blowing nearby. Cawfield said ominously, "Dan Shorey's been shot to death! We found him dumped down his own well and his horse killed by pole-axin'!"

Jim's mouth hardened. "Gimme a hand while we tote Pretty Sam inside. Then we'll talk."

KATE met them at the door, a drawn, pale Kate whose dark eyes held a haunted look. She led them into the spare bedroom and helped get Pretty Sam undressed and under a counterpane. He was semi-conscious, and rambled incoherently all the while.

"His fever's high," Kate said, bringing in a

pitcher of cold water. She looked at Jim. "I'll do my best for him."

"If anything should happen to you, Kate—" Jim began, but she stopped him impatiently. "Nothing will. And this is one way for me to help."

Jim and Winthrop rejoined the cowmen on the gallery, and Jim said, "BK ain't foolin' now—they mean to git us on the run and keep the pressure on till we give the whole thing up!"

Cawfield said, "I didn't tell you, but I found twenty of my cows with their throats cut a while ago and about a half mile of my wire drug down!"

Jim's face showed grim resolve. He said, "Ty, I want you and John to ride with me tonight. We make our first move and see what happens. Bide'll stay here and look out for Kate and Pretty Sam."

They went to their horses, mounting in silence. Jim called to Bide, "See you in the mornin'," and led the two ranchmen out of the yard at a gallop.

They rode due east, climbing into the hills above Jim's lowland ranch and arriving finally on BK grass by moonlight that made the land as bright as day. Jim breached BK's wire and they all rode another mile toward timber, coming finally to a piece of open range where hundreds of BK cattle grazed.

Jim dragged his Winchester from the saddle boot and levered a cartridge into the breach. "Use your pistols, boy," he said brusquely. "Each of you git five—I'll handle ten with this rifle. Mebbe this ain't the kindest way to do it, but it'll show Haz Blackerby he ain't the only hombre c'n slow-elk beef!"

Then the hills unleashed the crash of twenty shots, and twenty cows dropped into the grass and did not rise again. Jim took his men and rode back through the gap in the wire and sloped for home, wasting no time but not hurrying either. They parted in the dooryard of Jim's ranch. "Don't guess there'll be any complaint to the sheriff made by Blackerby," he opined. When two grave faces indicated some doubt as to the truth of that statement, he added, "An eye for an eye, that's the lingo BK talks. Any tough game c'n be played by two, and the best man's bound to win if his luck holds out!"

"I hope ours does," John Sweetman sighed. "We're a-goin' to need a lot of it, too!"

That night Jim put into action a plan he'd decided on when he'd left Pretty Sam with Kate. At midnight he arose and dressed, strapped on his gun, and left the ranch.

It was peaceful under Winthrop's cottonwoods and in the house, which showed a single low-turned lamp in the window of the room where Pretty Sam had been taken. Jim tied his horse to a ringbolt in the barn and

ambled toward the house, whistling a two-noted signal to Kate in case she was still awake.

She was, and met him at the door, holding a dressing gown around her and looking a little scared. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Just got to feelin' edgy and thought I'd better stick around."

"Jim, I can't seem to do a thing with Pretty Sam. He wants to get his clothes and go home. Says you'll need him there."

"The ol' horn' toad!" Jim said fondly. "I'll handle him!"

He went to the room where the old man lay restless and burning with fever. Sam gave Jim a glassy-eyed stare. "Dad-blame my socks!" he groaned. "Gimme my pants and gun! No female woman's goin' to—"

Jim gently held him down. "Easy, pard. Kate's only tryin' to bring your fever down so's you c'n ride again." He made his next words tough, knowing the effect they would have. "I oughta bust you down to your corns for dumpin' a jackpot on my head!"

Pretty Sam subsided, sighing, "I'm glad that Krippel's daid. He'd of gunned yuh down as shore as hell, if I hadn't got 'im when I did!"

Jim grinned. He was glad, too, in a way, that the old man was flat on his back for a while. It would keep him out of mischief, perhaps. "Sleep now, pard. You mind or I'll clout you one and knock you cold!"

Pretty Sam shut his eyes, and presently he snored. Jim and Kate cat-footed from the room. In the sitting room in the dark, Jim said, "I'll grab a wink or two on a gallery chair while you—"

They both heard the sudden rush of riders in the yard.

Kate sprang to the door and shot the bolt home, then turned and ran to her room. Boots thudded on the gallery and a heavy fist began to sledge the door. A voice yelled, "Open up! Open up!"

Jim lifted his gun, waiting, his mind a turmoil of thoughts. Kate came back carrying a lighted lamp, a black shawl over her slim shoulders.

White-faced, she cried, "Who's there?"

"Unlock this door!" the voice ordered.

"Go 'way and leave us alone!"

"We want Pretty Sam! Hand 'im over."

Jim recognized the grating voice of the BK foreman, Lud Yates. Footsteps came into the room at a shuffling run. It was Bide Winthrop, rifle in hand, still in his nightshirt.

"Who's there?" Bide roared.

Jim murmured, "There's four or five men out there—BK. Open the door and let me out."

Kate shook her head urgently. "They'd shoot you down!"

"Open up!" Yates bawled, and then a fence post used as a battering ram crashed splinteringly against the oak.

Jim withdrew and stood against the wall, gun angled in a steady hand. "Pull the bolt, Kate, and blow out that lamp!"

This time she obeyed. Her father took a stand, with his rifle cocked, the darkness covering all of them. The bolt jarred back, and then the fence post struck empty air and three men came stumbling into the room, dropping the post and facing the surprise and threat of a six-gun and a rifle held in their faces.

Moonlight from the yard made a pale glow in the room. By it, Jim saw the bandannas covering the faces of the three intruders. "I know you, Yates! Pick up the post and the three of you walk outside again! Don't try anything because we'll be right here and don't turn around on the gallery!"

The three men, hands held head-high, obeyed. Jim followed them out to the gallery, gun ready, centered on Lud Yates' broad shoulders. He passed through the door, walking a pace behind the three cowmen, and then it came like a bolt from the sky. A movement stirred against the gallery wall; a grunt, then a metal object crashed Jim behind the ear.

The moonlight exploded in a burst of blinding glare-white light fringed with a million blinking stars. Falling, Jim sensed that a fourth man had been lurking on the porch. . . .

JIM found consciousness while lying flat on his back on the gallery boards. Sound penetrated to his eardrums, the crash of shots, the frantic yells of men, the sudden quick clatter of horses' hoofs. Then Bide Winthrop's rifle smacked sharply on the gallery.

There came fresh hoofbeats in the chaparral, the crackle of breaking brush, and Winthrop swearing. "He got away on my Morgan mare!"

Jim rose on an elbow, achingly tried to get to his feet. He paused in the effort, seeing the old cowman bent over him, excitedly jabbering, "Pretty Sam clumb out the winder and made a break fer it! He made it, Jim, you hear?"

Kate helped him up and he leaned his weight on a gallery post, trying to orient himself and think clearly. "How long—was I layin' there?" he finally breathed.

"'Bout ten minutes," Winthrop said, getting his wind. "Kate grabbed your gun and we both opened up on them sneakin'—"

Kate supported Jim with an arm under his shoulders, but he stood erect, feeling of the lump behind his ear, saying ruefully, "No holdin' Pretty Sam. Now it'll take me a week to dab a loop on him. He knows every cave and pot hole on this range!"

They made a quick inspection of the yard, and Jim finally got on his horse. "They won't bother you again tonight," he said to Bide and Kate. "Go back to bed and try and git some sleep. That's what I aim to try."

The funeral of Dan Shorey was held next morning at his little bosky ranch on the creek, and he was buried in his own back yard. Jim took charge of the simple ceremony which was loyally attended by the valley men and their wives and children. The rough pine box containing the mortal remains of Shorey stood on a pair of sawhorses in front of the sod-roofed shack. After the simple rites it was lowered into the grave and the men shoveled dirt, while the women and children gathered in a tearful group and tonelessly sang.

Later that morning, the small procession of buggies and wagons set out for Bide Winthrop's where the women and youngsters were ordered to remain for the rest of the day with Trowbridge and Howie Ketchell guarding them. The rest of the men stayed behind with Jim Vance to await the arrival of Cawfield and Sweetman who were out on a routine scout of the eastern hills as a precaution against a sudden, unexpected attack by Blackerby's crew.

At nine o'clock, Cawfield and Sweetman arrived at a stretching run with ominous tidings. "Somebody set fire to BK's northeast pastures," Cawfield said. "There's hell to pay up there and we seen about fifteen riders headin' fer the timber!"

"Pretty Sam," Jim said tensely. "He's tryin' to help, but he's liable to bring the whole country down around our ears! I'll have to go up there and bring him back, alive I hope!"

Bide Winthrop voiced the apprehension of the crowd. "If BK hits us now there won't be a house standin' in the valley by tonight! We're outnumbered, Jim, and will be outshot, too!"

"Mebbe," Jim answered with a kind of wry optimism, "I c'n whittle down the odds against us some. If my idee works, BK'll be too busy chasin' a pair of ghosts to bother the valley yet a while. But to play it safe, you boys better gather at Cobb's Crossin' north of here. That's where Blackerby'll come if he decides to smoke things up today."

There was confusion at Shorey's ranch for a few moments as men went streaming up on their horses and galloped off to deploy in the brush along the creek, several miles to the north.

Jim lined out alone. He didn't go to his own spread, but turned northeast, cutting at a tangent through the chaparral. Ten minutes later, tooping a rise, he glimpsed the thin haze of smoke hovering above the pine timber ahead which would be made by BK's burning range.

The smoke, though it indicated danger, would guide him at least to the vicinity of Pretty Sam's hiding place. He thought he could whistle the wounded man out of his hole within an hour, providing BK horsemen lurking in the neighborhood hadn't got Sam first.

He slowed down to a walk in a region of scrub pine and deep, scarred washes where cow trails made a network that obliterated other sign. The smoke was thicker here, and he began to get glimpses of the fire through gaps in the rising hills. The blaze was crawling eastward with the wind like a sparkling necklace of red and orange-colored jewels thrown down haphazardly on the open range.

JIM climbed his horse to a vantage point on a timber-covered bench. There he reined in, taking the scene in grimly, forebodingly. Then he heard a rifle shot, followed by the heavier reports of revolvers, a yell or two, and silence that blanketed with startling emptiness all sound.

The shots and voices had come from very close, apparently from a clump of jackpines a hundred feet below the bench on Jim's left hand. He turned the sorrel and sent it cautiously downward, letting the horse pick its own way over the rugged slope. A moment later he pulled up, dismounted, lifted his rifle from its boot and went straight into the pine trunks on foot.

He heard the voices, guttural and ungente, before he saw the men themselves. Flattened on a shelving rock, he inched upward and peered over.

Ten yards from where he lay, in a clearing among the trees, sat Pretty Sam, astride Winthrop's Morgan mare. Facing him and fanned out in a half-circle, ten riders stood on sweat-streaked horses. Lud Yates had a rifle trained on Pretty Sam.

Pretty Sam sat silent, but Jim saw the whiskered wildness on his hollow cheeks, and the bloody stain on his shirt where his wound had opened up. He clung with both hands to his saddle horn.

"Shoot," said Pretty Sam, the words almost inaudible. "Go ahead, you damned savage!"

Jim shoved his rifle up and laid the barrel on Lud Yates' back for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. He bracketed the foreman in his sights, at the same moment seeing a BK hand get off his horse and advance on the old man, shaking a loop out and swinging it in a widening circle for a throw.

"That's all," Jim said from the rock, and his voice echoed strangely among the trees. "Reach 'em—plenty high!"

His command, though spoken in an ordinary tone, had the effect of a gunshot on the ten riders below him. One or two twitched in the

saddle and started to turn their heads. Jim changed their minds for them.

"Never mind! Keep lookin' at Pretty Sam!"

Pretty Sam wore a dazed look of disbelief, which was displaced by an expression of jubilation so intense it was pitiful. He opened his mouth to cheer but only a hollow croak came out.

"Ride 'round 'em, Sam," Jim ordered quietly. "And keep on goin' when you're in back of me. Come on, you ol' warhoss!"

The old man obeyed, lifting his bridle reins and skirting the lineup of vacantly staring men. But when he edged up to the shelving rock, his hands were clasping his saddle horn to keep from pitching off his horse. Jim motioned him onward, then glanced back at the men in the clearing.

He saw ten burly backs, ten pairs of shoulders cupped forward, ten lifted pairs of hands so still they seemed to be painted against the dark green of the pines above. "Stay put," Jim said. "If I'm still here when the first man turns, he'll git a bullet between the eyes!"

Then he slid back down the shelving rock, pulling his rifle after him. He whipped around, went loping after Pretty Sam, and caught up with him at the spot where he had left his sorrel a few brief moments before. He sprang to the saddle, jerked his horse into motion, grabbing Sam's bridle and towing the Morgan behind him.

They circled the bench, moving at a brisk trot, but once in fairly open ground, Jim cut loose from Pretty Sam, and they both settled down to a fast ride, flogging their mounts to maximum speed for the first fifteen or twenty minutes.

Topping a ridge deliberately, Jim slowed down to survey their back trail. He was disturbed to see Yates and his men only a quarter of a mile behind and signaled to Pretty Sam and they both dove off the ridge, plunging into the wildest part of the land ahead. A few shots were fired by BK but the singing lead went wide, and the shouts and hoof thunder soon died away behind.

They zigzagged for an hour, cutting through almost impassable thickets, and along toward noon came out on the county stage road about five miles from town.

To Pretty Sam's surprise, Jim headed toward Saldero instead of the upper valley. "Hey!" the old man protested. "Where the hell yuh takin' me?"

"To jail," said Jim in a firm voice. "The safest place for a rampagin' ol' buck like you! Don't gimme no augerment but come along!"

Color had come back to the old man's face, but now it flamed with indignation. "Looky here—" he began, but Jim quelled him with a frigid stare, and on they rode.

But as they neared the town, Pretty Sam

complained again, "A helluva way to treat a man!"

"You're too important to me now," Jim said, "to git yourself strung up. I may be needin' you in days to come."

"S'pose they pot me while I'm helpless in a cell?"

"They won't dare. I'll have Sheriff Tinney and Judge Camber on the spot the minute you're safe in the calaboose!"

THE town lay dry and sun-punished in the hottest half of the mid-June afternoon. Outside of the usual groups of bystanders and the usual lineup of ponies in front of the saloons, nothing out of the ordinary seemed afoot. Drawing rein in front of the 'dobe courthouse, however, Jim spotted ten BK horses in a white lather at the rack. Pretty Sam saw them, too.

He yelled, "I ain't goin' to stay here! It's murder you're askin' fer! Mine!"

"Take it easy." Jim dismounted and gave the old man a tug that toppled him. But he landed on his feet with Jim's arm around him for support. They walked together across the walk and entered the courthouse, the old man reluctantly, Jim with a grim look on his face which already had a tough cast due to his three-day stubble of black beard.

Sheriff Tinney sat in his office and blinked in astonishment at the two men who walked in. But Tinney was not alone. Ten dirty, sweaty cowboys stood and sat along the smudged white wall—Lud Yates and his crew.

The silence here was like the quiet when a corpse is carried into a dusty, crowded room. A look passed between Yates and his riders, something less a look than a covert signal men might pass to each other when a fight was going to start.

Jim saw that look as he marched up to the sheriff's desk, towing Pretty Sam in back of him. "I got the man who set Haz Blackerby's range afire," he said, and heard the snort of startled breath from the men along the wall. "I brung Sam in, and you c'n book him right away."

Sheriff Tinney straightened in his chair, his jaw unhinged, his yellowish eyes popped wide. Then he stared over at the puzzled Yates and asked, "Is this true, Lud? Was it like he says?"

Yates nodded, slowly, uncertainly, his pale eyes aglitter and studying Jim with a keen, hard care. "We seen Sam Sleeper set that fire. More'n that, we ketched him at it. But when we tried to bring him here, Vance jumped us with a rifle and took him away from us!"

The sheriff swung his gaze to Jim's still face. He swallowed once, then blurted out, "Did you do that?"

Jim nodded, a thin smile turning his mouth into a curl. "Lud and his boys was set to play cat's cradle with Sam's neck when I got on the scene. I wanted him to have a fair trial, and that's what he's going' to git!"

Lud Yates choked on his rage and chagrin. "Why, you damned—"

"Shet your mouth, Lud!" the sheriff said harshly, a baleful frown on his ruddy face. Then he looked at Pretty Sam, and snapped, "You're under arrest on an arson charge. Take that grin off your face and come with me!"

"One second, sheriff," Jim stopped him as he rose behind the desk. "I got a question to ask Yates and his men, if you don't mind."

The sheriff's hate burned like a flame behind his eyes. "Ask it."

Jim turned and looked at Yates, at the sullen men near him. "You stated you caught Sam in the act of settin' that fire?"

The foreman's thin mouth shaped a snarl. "I said it, and you heered me the fust time!"

"And you men saw him do it, too?" Jim grinned at the BK hands.

They all nodded, defeated expression on their sweaty faces.

"What you gettin' at?" thundered the sheriff, pounding on his desk.

"Don't git your bristles up, sheriff," Jim said calmly. "I'm only takin' proper recourse to the laws and statutes of this here sov'reign state of Colorado. Bein' as how this here case means so much to so many, I'm askin' you to lock up Lud Yates and those nine men under protective custody!"

The sheriff opened his mouth and forgot to close it. "You mean—" he finally found the words to gasp. "You mean—"

"Hold 'em for safety's sake till we have a trial," Jim said, his mouth hardening on the grin, his eyelids crawling down. "I declare these men as important state's witnesses and will git a writ from Judge Camber to make it stick!"

"Now, wait a minute!" came Lud Yates' frantic yell. "You can't do that to us! Why, hell's bells, the jail ain't even big enuff to hold—"

"You'll squeeze in," Jim told him cheerfully, "if we kind of push a bit!"

The office was abruptly filled with the unearthly clamor of shouting, swearing men. His face white, Sheriff Tinney yelled at the top of his lungs for order, and finally got it. "You been out-foxed, Yates," he said in a grinding but chastened voice. "Come along with me and Pretty Sam. I got no choice but to lock the hull kaboodle up!"

While the racket swelled again and before it died away for the second time at the sheriff's yelled request, Pretty Sam said to Jim with a woebegone grin, "Guess it's the pen fer me."

"If you go, we'll go together," Jim assured him. "But you'll be out 'fore winter comes, anyways. I aim to postpone the trial and keep gettin' a delay long as I can. Time it comes off, BK'll be cleaned out of the county and you'll be so full of vinegar and fizz we'll have to tie you in the starve-out for a month!"

BEFORE Jim left the sheriff's office that afternoon, he borrowed paper and pen and printed a crude poster which he tacked on the bulletin board on the courthouse wall. It read:

PUBLIC NOTICE

Fence-cutting will be punished by all county officers with immediate arrests. Also cattle found outside its owners' pastures to be impounded by the sheriff until a fine of one dollar a head is paid. All damage to private property to be listed and charged against damager pending trial. See also other provisions of U. S. Homestead Act.

Office of Sheriff

Jim left the courthouse and a very sullen sheriff, and made his way to the Brick Block. Judge Camber's office was locked for the day. He went back to the street, made inquiry, and finally located the paunchy judge in Sprague's Saloon in the surly company of Hazlett Blackerby.

Jim strode directly to the bar where the judge and the cattleman stood with a bottle between them. He ignored Blackerby completely, and addressed the fat man coolly. "How's this sound to your legal savvy, judge?" he asked. Then he went on to recount what he had just done, including the arrest and jailing of the BK men. During his speech, Blackerby pulled back, cold fury on his face.

The judge maintained a forced look of judicial calm and when Jim had finished, he said, affably enough, "Seems to me, Vance, you're takin' a lot of authority on yourself."

Jim eyed Camber mildly. "Finney didn't dispute me—I just done my duty, judge."

"Your duty," Blackerby cut in, snarling, "covers too damn' much territory to suit me!"

"I ain't tryin' to suit you, Haz," Jim said. "Thought you knew."

"I'll bail my men!" the ranchman choked, the threat of physical violence in the way he stared at Jim. "No damn' smart aleck's goin' to cut my crew in half and git away with it!"

"Not in half," Jim reminded him. "You still got twenty men at least."

The judge held up a hand for silence. He finished off his whiskey, then looked at Blackerby and said, "You can't fix bail on Yates and the boys—at least I can't. State's witnesses ain't bailable."

The ranchman appeared to swell. "I'll go higher and git action!" he cried.

The judge looked hurt. Then he glanced at Jim, and said to Blackerby, "I *could* git 'em a change of venue and move 'em down to Taloosa. Yates and his pards ain't thought of too highly in these parts and—"

Jim's gaze turned hard. He had not foreseen this contingency at all. But he curbed the anger he felt, and said, "It better be straight whatever you do, and if it ain't legal you better git yourself a good fast hoss and a plumb hot pistol!"

"Look here!" the judge bleated, his chins vibrating with sudden rage. "You tryin' to threaten me?"

"No!" Jim said flatly. "Just tellin' you somethin' that'll add a few years to your life!" He wheeled and walked away.

He took Pretty Sam's mount in tow, mounted his own, and galloped out of town.

Twenty men were waiting at Cobb's Crossing when he came pounding up from the south that afternoon. Tethered horses stood in the thin shade near a greasewood motte; and Jim dismounted and stood restlessly before his friends, repeating the news he had in a clipped, impersonal tone of voice. Ed Laverick was present, and Oak Trowbridge who had returned from the Winthrop ranch an hour before. These two men had nothing at stake since selling to BK, but both recognized that this movement was against a force which had contributed to their loss.

Jim finished with, "I'm almost positive Blackerby'll ride to my place first, aimin' to knock me out as the leader of this here shivaree. He'll have twenty men at least and mebbe the ten I had locked up, if they can find a way to git 'em outer jail quietly."

He rested forearms on his saddle, eyeing the group across the horn, a thin, grave man with the flame of determination in his eyes. "We'll ride to my spread now. It'll be some time 'fore they git there, but I want to be ready when they come."

Bide Winthrop said impatiently, "Well, what're we waitin' fer? Let's ride!"

Jim held up his hand as the men moved for their horses; he waited with a slow, steady smile on his face until he had their full attention. "One thing, boys, we're goin' inter hell and I hope we'll all come out again. If some of us don't, the rest'll look out for the fam'lies that're left behind." His smile faded, and he said quietly, "Are you ready? Let's burn the breeze!"

All the way to his ranch on Wagonyard Creek, he tried to shut the worried thoughts of Kate Winthrop from his mind. He knew she and the other women would be safe enough as long as Blackerby was stalled before his force gained momentum for a valley raid, but if the settlers failed to block them on the creek. . . .

He didn't want to think about that now; later, if developments made it necessary. And there was no excitement in him now. Suddenly he considered what lay ahead not as a cause to fight for—as he previously thought—but as something vital that had to be done and won with whatever personal risk it involved. And he alone would have to accept the blame, the penalty, if things went wrong, for the men who blindly followed him were now inflamed and would not condone mistakes or forgive disaster if it came.

CHAPTER THREE

Maverick Brand

IT WAS close to dusk when they came streaming out of the mesquites along the creek and halted in the ranch yard before the log-walled house. Jim bade the others remain in the saddle. "You're to climb the ridge and spread out, circlin' the yard from above. The brush and timber'll make all the cover you need till dark, but keep down low and hitch your hosses out of sight.

"I'm goin' to wait inside the house—bait for the trap," he went on in his quiet voice. "It's an ambush for BK, the kind of tactics our fathers used not many years ago when they held this country against Injuns and renegades. It worked for them when they were outnumbered, and, with any luck, it'll work for us. Listen for a shot from me if and when they come. If you don't hear one, you'll know Blackerby's laid down his guns. The sound of a shot'll be your cue to open up and pour your bullets where we're standin' now!"

"S'pose," Ed Laverick suggested, "they bypass this ranch and hit straight up the creek?"

"Then every man for himself," Jim said grimly, "and God help the most of us!"

The yard boiled with the dust of twenty horses; then silence came. But quiet's reign was ominous and hard to bear, both for the men who lay on the ridge and in the pines, and for Jim who entered the empty house and took his station before one of the front windows which he opened to the cool twilight.

Suddenly he felt the drag of weariness. Perched on a straight-backed chair as a precaution against falling asleep, he held his rifle across his knees, his six-gun checked and handy on his hip, and rolled and smoked a chain of cigarettes for the next half hour, that seemed an interminable wait.

The sun dropped flaming over the chaparral and full darkness plunged upon the silent land, engulfing it with solitude. Crickets set up their sawing chirp in the dooryard weeds, a somehow comforting sound to the man who waited statue-still inside the house. The out-buildings, seen through the open window sash,

looked to Jim as forlornly desolate as an uninhabited nester's squat.

The moon edged over the distant hills, a crescent first and then a disc and afterward as big as a wagonwheel. It laid a silver trail through the mesquites and across the broad bare yard, a ghost-walk down which presently a foraging coyote dam slunk, then melted into the shadows with a chilling yip that was instantly answered by an eerie chorus in the far sand hills.

An hour passed, then two. Jim's eyes grew heavier with needed sleep. But suddenly it came—the clink of a horseshoe ringing clear on stone. He knelt on the floor and laid the barrel of his rifle on the window sill, placed the stock against his cheek, and moved a finger over the trigger guard. His heart was beating thunderously now.

A single rider moved across his line of vision in the yard, coming from the north, not the south! He stared, breath caught in and held. Then it ran out with a hard gasp, for the horseman was not a man, but a woman. It was Kate Winthrop!

Jim laid his rifle on the floor, standing in a crouch, calling sharply, "Kate!"

The girl on the pony gave him a startled gasp and swung around in the saddle, a hand at her throat. "Jim, you spooked me—I thought you weren't here!"

"Git down and come in! Quick, damn it!"

She obeyed, booting the horse off into the shadows, running on silent feet toward the house. He let her in, grasping her by the shoulders and shaking her angrily. "Why'd you come here? Didn't your father tell you to stay with the others?"

She pulled herself away, haughty suddenly, then full of fear. "I had to come, Jim! I've been watching the town trail for the last two hours from Dunghill Knob! I saw a dust cloud to the south as the moon came up, and it's headed this way! I thought—"

The roughness of his grip on her arms made her cry out, "You're hurting me! Jim—"

He pushed her back into the darkened corner of the room, forced her down behind the ancient horsehair sofa there. "Stay here till I tell you to move!" he said harshly. "The air in here'll be full of lead in about—"

He didn't even have time to finish it, for at that moment the yard outside began to rumble with the thunder of massed hoofs. It sounded like an army moving in, except that there were no barking shouts of officers or yells of cavalrymen.

Jim crept to the open window, groping for and lifting his rifle from the floor, sliding it across the sill and staring down its gleaming barrel at Haz Blackerby's attacking posse in the yard.

There were all of thirty riders in that force.

It was an impressive panorama of slowly milling riders, grim, dust-covered men in chaps and sombreros, rifles on their saddles, pistols glinting in their hands. They were totally silent in that moment of arrival out of the brush, silent except for the clopping of hoofs, the damp squeal of leather, and several rifle bolts thrown back savagely.

The moonlight lay garishly over the smoky scene; it gleamed from guns and bridle trappings, and from bright gewgaws on saddles and leather leggings. There was a lull in the clinking and clanking sounds, and out of that black hole of silence Haz Blackerby's big voice boomed, "Here's where he is—there's a saddle pony over there!"

A second voice—that of Lud Yates, the BK foreman—said, "'Tain't Vance's, boss! He forks a sorrel with black feet!"

Jim knew then that Yates and his party had been released from the Saldero jail with the connivance of the sheriff and the judge! It was just as well, for now the entire BK crew sat under the guns of the valley men! Jim had his moment of savage joy. He looked swiftly to catch a glimpse of Blackerby, but too many identical big-brimmed hats made recognition difficult.

His finger curled slowly around the trigger. He waited for the space of a long-drawn breath, and then he threw his voice out of the window and across the confusion in the yard. "Stand fast!" he called without shouting. "We've got you covered twenty different ways! Drop your guns on the ground and reach for a piece of sky!"

Pandemonium was his answer. Riders reared their horses high, neck-reining violently, wheeling, pivoting, side-hopping in the dust, a merry-go-round of movement, dizzying even to steady eyes.

Then Blackerby's voice rang out, "Off your hosses, men! Take cover and pour it on the house!"

Jim aimed at what he thought was the leader of the beef pool, and then saw he was wrong and moved his rifle barrel to the left in a quick shift, seeing his man far over, almost out of sight. But there was no time for trying to pick Haz off his horse because that whole panoramic picture narrowed and focused on a rider moving into his rifle sights—Lud Yates!

He fired. Yates threw his arms high and went queerly out of his saddle, landing on his head in a crumpled, crazy fall from which he did not rise or move again.

The echo of that ringing shot rocketed back through the sagebrush hills, traveling farther away in diminishing faint reports. It was Jim's signal to the valley men in the pines on the ridge above. And that signal was answered instantly.

A crackle of rifle fire lifted in the moonlight up there. A scattered hail of bullets flailed the yard and raked the brush beyond.

Jim levered and fired again, noting that this time again a rider obligingly filled his sights and was knocked kicking. Men were dropping from saddles, kneeling in the dust, others retreating toward the log barn's bulk a hundred feet away.

Jim ducked as the first volley smashed the house from the guns of the BK crew. Bullets struck the window frame shatteringly, and whanged the walls in back of him. He thought of Kate, crying, "Head down. Way down!"

Haz Blackerby's voice sounded muffled in the yard. "We're cross-ripped! There's men all around us! Watch it, boys!"

Jim drew a bead on a crouching rifleman and toppled him face down on his own weapon. Then the valley men on the ridge let go with another fusillade that emptied two saddles and killed a running cowboy on his feet. A third volley followed, and this screen of lead cleared the foreground except for four dead men and a wounded horse.

"Dig in—dig in!" Haz Blackerby was howling from somewhere near the barn.

Horses stampeded past Jim's window, riderless and wild, and the dust was a solid, choking blanket that covered everything alive or dead. A bullet ripped Jim's cheek open but missed his ear. He slapped at the bolt of his Winchester, squeezing the trigger and seeing the livid spurt of flame.

He heard the yells of his friends on the ridge, a continuous yipwhooping like Indians murder-bent. And he heard the louder racket of their guns beat bullets down upon the yard, the barn, and the brush beyond; and saw the brighter glimmer of their muzzle-flame. The settlers were sliding gradually down the slope, hemming in the yard and the men cupped like animals in an arena, giving no quarter to men who themselves had given none.

This was like war. Dead men and horses lay tangled together in the dust, and the acrid stench of powdersmoke grew ranker with the smell of blood. Jim's weapon grew hotter as he fired at the needles of gunflame yonder, near the rim of the yard. But he went on firing, reloading, firing, until his rifle jammed.

Kate suddenly had crawled beside him, crouching low, defying his command to move away, seizing his rifle and desperately trying to work the magazine. Jim drew his revolver and let the hammer fall, the weapon jerking heavily in his fist.

There was a grim, purposeful coolness about him as he fired and fired again. Three BK men made a delayed attempt to charge the house. He stopped them in the middle of the yard, killed one and drove the others back.

The taunting yells of the valley men came

very close. Blackerby's yelled commands had ceased. Only the scattered volleying of his surviving men went on without a pause. Then, suddenly, a big man on a black horse broke out of the wide-open doors of the barn and bucked a moment in front of it.

There was no mistaking the blockiness of that arrogant figure. Jim knew it was Haz Blackerby, about to make one final desperate attempt to take the house for his remaining men.

Throwing caution and fear to the winds, the BK leader straightened his plunging horse and pointed it squarely at the house, at the window where Jim crouched. Jim held his breath, almost in admiration of this perilous act that Blackerby was putting on.

Then the big man bent forward, and drove home his spurs. The black lunged toward the house. Jim saw the glint of a pistol in Blackerby's right hand, saw the weapon rise as the horse loomed larger, coming fast.

He curved a sweating palm around his own gun. In that fraction of a minute, too short to be gauged, Jim heard the shouts from the converging line of valley men as they came brush-hopping down into the yard, and he heard one last staccato volley from BK as they scrambled up and dove into the brush.

Then Haz Blackerby was at the end of his run. His horse loomed massively in Jim's vision as he drew back, leveling his gun. The big man fired once, the bullet burning an inch from Jim's bare head. . . .

Jim fired—once—twice—not using the trigger but fanning the hammer swiftly with his open palm. There was a scream from the black and then Kate Winthrop's shriek right after it. Afterward, silence, the slightly numbing silence of stunned ears.

Jim went to the window, climbed out and got Haz Blackerby's boot free from the stirrup that held it, dragging the dead man away from the twitching, dying horse.

He heard the fading boom of guns only vaguely, and only vaguely realized that the valley men had pursued the survivors of the BK crew into the hills to administer the last full measure of retribution to men already damned.

Jim moved deeper into the littered, smoky yard. Other horsemen were galloping in from the south, their big hats showing above the giant sage. Three riders presently picked their way toward the tall man who waited with a bleakness on his bloody face, and little interest in his haggard eyes.

The three men halted, one of the trio, a man with a solemn face and black spade beard, saying, "I'm a U. S. Deputy Marshal—Klane's my name. What's yours?"

"Vance. Jim Vance."

"Howdy, Vance. Meet my deputies, Leith

and Turnbull. We heard about you from Doctor Broun in town—and from a man called Pretty Sam. Looks like you've had yourself a handsome jamboree. We heard the artillery ten miles south of here."

Jim shrugged, hearing Kate call him softly from the house. "Some trouble we finished with the cattle pool," he said laconically.

"We didn't hurry," said the marshal. "Didn't wanter cramp your style by gittin' here too soon."

"Thanks." Jim's interest was perking up. "Who sent you here?"

"Gov'nor of Colorado, son. He had a letter from a Miss Winthrop—Kate, if I remember right. I got it in my bag in town."

Jim's gaze sharpened on the marshal's gloomy face. "You've talked to people in town?"

"Hell, yes! You got nothin' to worry you. That letter said there was a lot of crooked politics goin' on, and violations of the Homestead Law. The Gov'nor sent us, and when we got in, we found the sheriff and the county judge had skipped. They'd turned loose a lot of hoodlums some deputy had got locked up."

"The wheels of the law turned mighty slow down here," Jim said. "We couldn't wait and hope to save our homes."

"Judgin' by the looks of this here yard," Klane said, "you've done saved near everything."

Jim looked up, the dullness fading in his eyes. It was all over. The dust settled slowly in the yard again and the smoke had blown away on the gentle wind. Around Jim's house groups of settlers stood talking in low tones. The silence was complete except for minor sounds, the soft thud of hoofs, the creak of wagons carrying the dead to town and a coroner's court.

Kate Winthrop stood on the doorstep, very grave, very close to Jim Vance who looked at her unsmilingly. She seemed to study him for a long time, with a curious intent compassion in her eyes. "You've won," she said finally, simply. "I—prayed so hard—for us!"

"Thanks, Katie." A grin started slowly and then began to spread out to his ears. "You're good at writin' letters, too."

She blushed furiously, and dropped her eyes from his. "Now," she said very softly, "we can have peace."

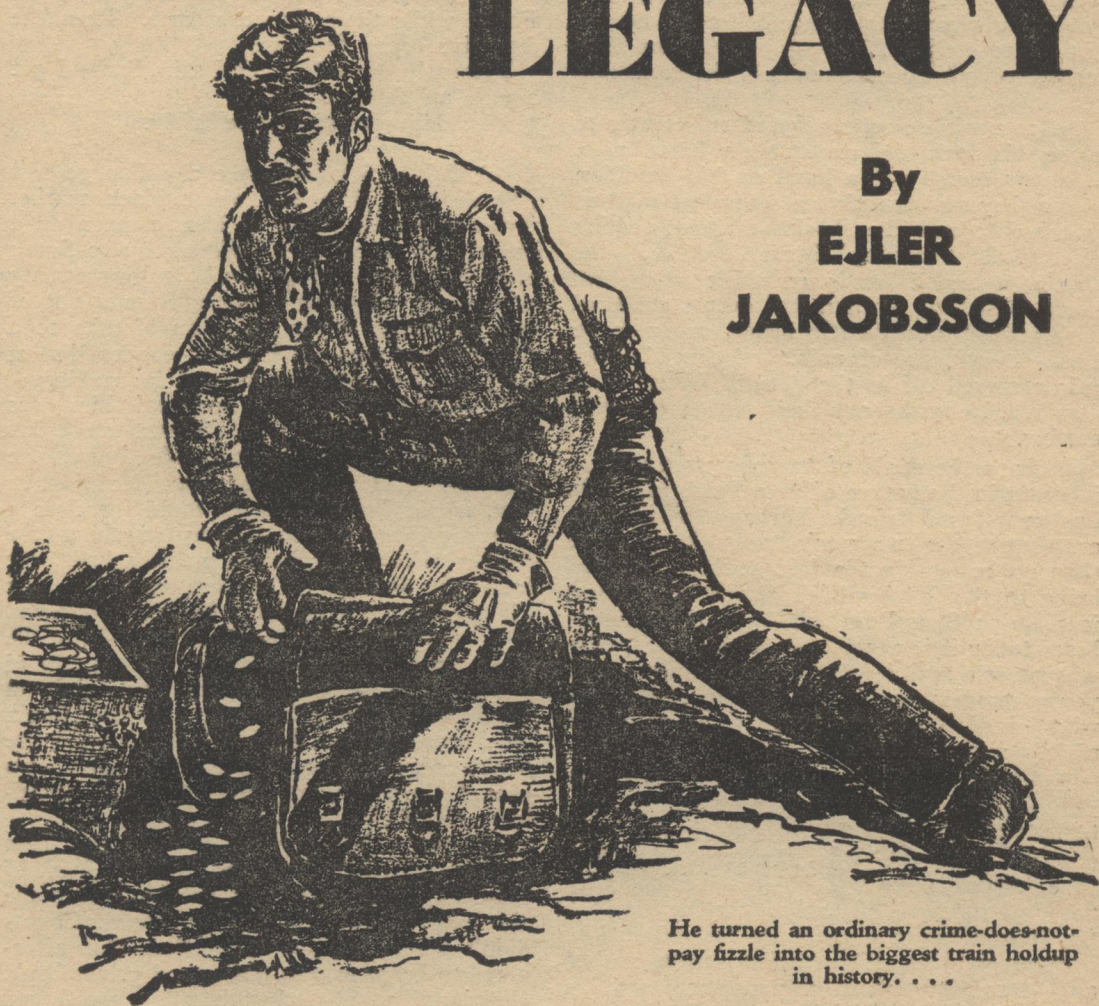
Bide Winthrop came rolling across the yard. He stopped before the house, pulling energetically at his beard, blinking his bullet-small gray eyes. "I rec'lect we made a deal with you, Jim Vance. A county fer a gal, or vici verci. Am I correct?"

"Correct," Jim grinned. "Take your county, Bide."

(Continued on page 128)

BADMAN'S LEGACY

By
**EJLER
JAKOBSSON**



He turned an ordinary crime-does-not-pay fizzle into the biggest train holdup in history. . . .

Worth more than the price the Union Pacific put on his head is the legacy of Southwest's most elusive bandit—engraved on his tombstone!

NOBODY much knew that history of a sort was about to be given a boost in Deadwood the night young Joel Collins yipwhooped away his—and several other ranchers'—trail-herd dinero. Not even Collins himself guessed at it, though he may have had an inkling the next day, when he couldn't think of a single good reason for going home. He'd bossed a big herd to Deadwood—not only his own cattle, but that of his neighbors. The next day his sole possessions were a head

that big, a cottony taste in his mouth, and the awesome realization that in one wild night he had gambled away, not only his own years' sweat, but that of the range country that had trusted him. It was one of those mornings when a gent needs a friend.

Joel found one in a personable young man who liked to ride in the shade and steer his course by the stars. The two eased out of town that day—and proceeded to put a price on their heads. This was a relatively simple

stunt, and it cost them nothing save some peace of mind. They pulled guns on a passing stage—the horses bolted and one of the guns went off. The driver, named John Slaughter, got in the way of that single bullet and betook himself to eternity, leaving Joel Collins staring open-mouthed in the dust of the vanishing coach.

After a while Joel recovered sufficiently to curse his luck—he *couldn't* go home now. His new *amigo* put a hand on his shoulder. What they said doesn't matter; what matters is the date and that business about making history. The date was March 25, 1877—the two men shook hands on their ill-omened partnership, and monumental events gathered thunderously about their heads, eager to be born. Unmindful of unleashed tragedy, the pair cantered off in the general direction of Ogallala, Nebraska, and their rendezvous with destiny.

Perhaps the seeds of tragedy were always inherent in the nature of Sam Bass, Joel Collins' new-found friend. Perhaps this chance crossing of the two men's trails did no more than set in motion the forces which were to bring to the full his life's drama—one thing is certain: Sam Bass might not be remembered today if it weren't for Joel Collins, who was never a real desperado, but simply a wild young rancher, wealthy in his own right and who joined forces with Sam because of one night's misguided orgy.

In a sort of reverse English, Bass was the Laugh-clown-laugh of the badlands. Within himself he embodied the ultimate in dramatic contradictions—he was the good badman, "the beloved bandit." Likable and friendly by nature, he stepped off early on the wrong foot for lack of parental guidance and education, became gambler, highwayman, train robber and—through quirk of circumstances and his meeting with Joel Collins—murderer. But affectionate legend fastened about him even during his depredations. There was the time when the hunt for him was at its highest, when a \$10,000 reward rode his brow, and a young Breckenridge lawman swore to bring him down.

On his way to the badlands the two-gun detective hired a horse and buggy. As they approached the outlaw's supposed hideout, the detective warned his driver the rest of the trip might be dangerous.

"That's all right, friend." The driver drove on. After a while he asked, "When you catch up with Sam Bass, what you aim to do?"

"Shoot him. I don't aim to take no chances. I got a wife an' fambly."

The driver nodded sagely. "Best thing. Would you know Sam Bass if you saw him?"

The detective shook his head.

His driver turned a wide-eyed look on him

and said softly, "Jes' so you don't take any more chances the next time—take a good look. You're ridin' with him now."

The detective froze. The horse jogged on. For a while there was a silence. Then the detective began to shiver.

Presently he said, "Like I said, Sam—I got a wife an' fambly."

Bass delivered him home safely.

SAM BASS could make a dollar go less distance than the worst black market housewife. Many a lone camper or a backwoods ranch wife could testify to Sam's encouragement of inflation by paying twenty dollars for anything ranging from a pot of beans through a pan of warm biscuits to a dozen fresh eggs. It was no wonder that at one time he interested himself in banking.

The institution that beckoned him was located at Weatherford, Texas, and was headed by a rather redoubtable figure, one Jim Counts. Counts could throw lead just as fast, if not faster, than he could foreclose a mortgage, and if there was anything the matter with his courage, nobody had ever found out about it. That was why Sam took his whole gang along when he rode into town.

Counts saw the outlaws cantering down the main street, sauntered out of his temple of finance—and sat down on the steps, right in the doorway. Sam Bass rode up, threw him a hard stare and got back a look carrying the bank's regular rate of interest. Then began one of the strangest duels in Western badman history.

Hoping to breakdown Counts' nerve, Sam had his men parade up and down in front of the bank, while he sat on a packing box to one side and whittled. Nothing happened. Counts didn't budge and for some time that afternoon no business was transacted at the bank. Convinced at last, though not a word had been exchanged between himself and the banker, that he could only enter the bank by killing Counts, Sam stood up, beckoned to his men and rode out of Weatherford empty-handed.

Sam was never one to put a price on human life; neither was Joel Collins, for that matter. Both men avoided cold-blooded killing—and neither actually fired the shot that killed the stage driver, whose death sent them into their fatal, history-making partnership. That was done by one Jack Davis, a former Collins cowboy, who decided to follow his boss to the night trails.

The final stage in the Bass-Collins drama opens at Ogallala, Nebraska, where the owl-hoot pards arrived, along with Jack Davis, Jim Berry, Bill Haffridge and "Old Dad" Underwood, to pick up supplies. Collins, the money-man of the outfit, bought a pair of

boots for Berry and, for himself, a few yards of calico. It was at Ogallala, too, that he and Sam completed plans for what the fates had decreed, on that first day of their meeting, would turn out to be the most memorable feather in Sam's headdress.

When the engineer of the Union Pacific stopped his train at Big Springs, Nebraska, two masked men jumped into the cab from track-side, brandishing guns. Jim Berry, also masked, boarded the train elsewhere and rode gun-herd on conductors and other train officials, while Collins and the rest of the gang searched the passengers and tried to persuade the messenger to open the safe. The messenger refused and Jack Davis wanted to kill him, but was stopped by Collins.

The outlaws were about to leave, with no more profit from their raid than the passengers' cash assets—when Collins happened to notice four small innocuous-looking boxes in a corner of the express car. Disgruntled with the loot, he broke one of them open, found \$60,000 in newly-minted gold pieces—and turned an ordinary crime-does-not-pay fizzle into the biggest train holdup in Western history!

Bass' men had already taken the precaution of cutting telegraph wires; they now drew the fire from the locomotive and left. The next morning found them in Ogallala, among the most interested speculators as to the identity of the train robbers. The easy-going Sam Bass congratulated himself on at last having broken the jinx his tie-in with Collins had saddled him with—but he was a little previous.

To allay any suspicion, the bandits took their ease in town for several days. Finally they rode out, blissfully unaware that one man in town had known their guilt right along. He was not a formidable nemesis by any standards, this furtive shadow that trailed them out of town. He was no hand with a gun, and in physical prowess he wouldn't have been a match for Old Dad—and his only morale was greed. The Union Pacific had added \$10,000 to the bounties already weighting the head of Sam Bass—and to the little Ogallala storekeeper who had sold Joel Collins the calico the other had used as a mask in the train hold-up, that wasn't hay.

Night and day, for hundreds of miles of tortuous trails, their unshakable shadow clung to the outlaws, risking crawling right to the rims of their encampments at night—until one night he witnessed the division of loot. The outlaws had decided to part company. Collins was ready at last to go home and pay off his neighbors; Sam and the others had enough to lay low on. The little storekeeper shivered in the shadows, stealthily crawled back, found his pony and rode hell-bent for the law.

Collins and Heffridge rode into Buffalo Station, Kansas—and came face to face with posters advertising for their capture! They rode out again, but a chance passerby had recognized them and notified the Army. A detachment of ten soldiers and an officer caught up with the desperadoes outside town, where Collins managed to bluff them long enough to go for his gun. He barely got it out when both he and Heffridge were cut down by the soldiers' fusillade.

Jim Berry reached his home in Mexico, Mo., where he was surrounded by a posse—and fought it out. He left a wife and a gang of offspring.

Old Dad was never caught.

A trusted member of his gang, Jim Murphy, finally betrayed Sam Bass, and when he sought to raid the bank at Round Rock, Texas, just about a year after he'd met up with Joel Collins, authorities were waiting for him in force. In the ensuing gun battle two deputies and one outlaw were killed. Fatally wounded, and with possemen's bullets thick as flies around him, the beloved bandit found one more friend—an unknown youngster who braved the hail of lead to get him on a horse and out of town.

Bass was found later on the trail, dead of his wounds—his would-be benefactor was never again seen in those parts.

Ever since that day men have been looking for the legacy of "the beloved bandit." They have searched caves from Austin to Red River, they've dug up tons of dirt. A gent named Henry Chapman came closest, they say. A year after Bass's death he found a pile of fresh dirt in the brush of Parker County. He dug—and came on a walnut box full of silver and gold coins. He started to fill his saddle bags and, it seemed, the more he refilled them, the more there was left. Finally something made him look up.

He saw eight burly men, guns drawn and aimed at him, watching him in silence. Something about them told him that they would not shoot—if he left the treasure and ran. Something about them told him they were Sam Bass and the men who had ridden with Sam—which, of course, could not be. But he ran. And they did not shoot. And when men came back to look at the spot where he'd reported the treasure, it was gone.

The legacy of Sam Bass? There is one. It's written right on his tombstone in Round Rock, Texas—a legacy of regret all men may share.

SAMUEL BASS

Born July 21st, 1851

Died July 21st, 1878

A brave man reposes in death here.
Why was he not true?

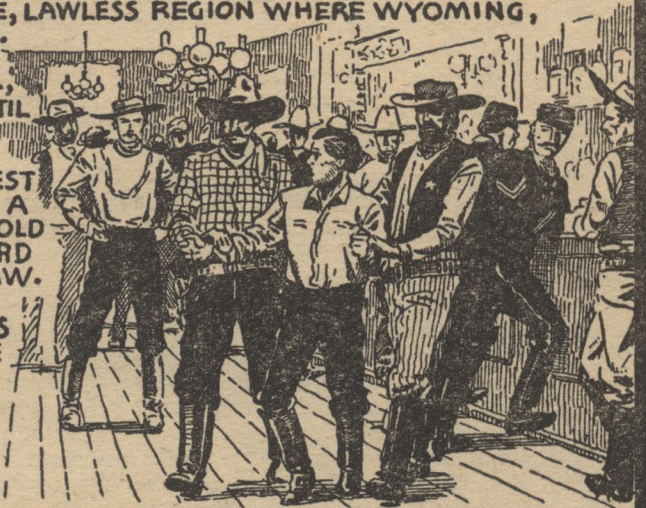
TALES "of" the

by LEE

BUTCH CASSIDY'S "WILD BUNCH"

SHORTLY AFTER JESSE JAMES CASHED IN HIS CHECKS A SUCCESSOR APPEARED IN THE DESOLATE, LAWLESS REGION WHERE WYOMING, COLORADO AND UTAH MEET. HE WAS BUTCH CASSIDY AN HONEST ROCK SPRINGS, WYO., BUTCHER'S APPRENTICE--UNTIL FATE TOOK A HAND.

HUMILIATED BY FALSE ARREST ON SUSPICION OF PICKING A BARFLY'S POCKET, 18-YEAR-OLD BUTCH RUSTLED A PRIZE HERD TO GET EVEN WITH THE LAW. CAUGHT BY 2 DEPUTIES, HE ESCAPED WITH THEIR HORSES AND COULD HAVE LEFT THE MEN, SOLE EVIDENCE OF HIS CRIME, TO DIE OF THIRST IN THE DESERT. BUT HIS BETTER NATURE MADE HIM RETURN THEIR CANTEENS.



WITH HARRY LONGBAUGH HE RECRUITED "THE WILD BUNCH", RECKLESS YOUNG DESPERADOES WHO, FROM INACCESSIBLE HIDEOUTS, RAIDED BANKS, TRAINS AND PAYROLL MESSENGERS. ONCE THEY AMBUSHED A DEPUTY TRACKING THEM WITH BLOOD HOUNDS, AND SET HIS OWN DOGS BAYING ON THE FLEEING LAWMAN'S TRAIL.



AFTER A \$32,000 BANK ROBBERY AT WINNEMUCCA AND A TRAIN HOLDUP AT WAGNER--IN WHICH THEY CRACKED THE EXPRESS SAFE FOR \$65,000--BUTCH AND HARRY "RETIRED" TO ARGENTINA, BOUGHT AND OPERATED A CATTLE RANCH.

— OLD WEST

LOCATED BY DETECTIVES, THEY SOLD OUT HURRIEDLY, SKIPPED TO PERU AND WORKED IN A MINE UNTIL AGAIN DISCOVERED. BACK IN ARGENTINA, THEY RAIDED A BANK, WILD WEST STYLE, BUTCH STANDING OFF PURSUIT WHILE HARRY MADE TRACKS WITH THE LOOT.

WHEN A STAGECOACH YIELDED MONEY BAGS FULL OF STRAW, THEY STUCK UP A TRAIN IN BOLIVIA, DYNAMITED THE SAFE AND RODE AWAY WITH A LARGE PAYROLL, LEAVING UNTOUCHED PACKETS OF PERSONAL VALUABLES BEING SENT OUT OF THE REGION BY TERRIFIED MINERS.

IN 1909 THE PAIR ROBBED A GOLD BEARING MULE TRAIN AND HOLED UP AT A SAN VICENTE INN. A SUSPICIOUS POLICEMAN NOTIFIED A CAVALRY COMPANY WHO LAID SIEGE TO THE PLACE AND A BLOODY BATTLE FOLLOWED.



HARRY, ATTEMPTING TO CROSS THE PATIO IN THE DARKNESS FOR MORE AMMUNITION, FELL WOUNDED. BUTCH RECEIVED 3 BULLETS DRAGGING HIM TO SAFETY. THE SOLDIERS, WHO HAD LOST 22 KILLED, HEARD 2 SHOTS--THEN SILENCE. THEY FOUND THE BANDITS DEAD, NEAT HOLES IN THEIR FOREHEADS FROM THEIR LAST 2 BULLETS.

Ken Burbank knew he was putting the devil on his payroll when he hired his new driver—but then he was ready to freight his next haul to hell!



Freight Line to Hell

CHAPTER ONE

High Rates—To Hell

FOR three years, Ken Burbank had waited for this moment. For three long, back-breaking years, he'd hauled freight into Castleburg for the nesters and the small land-owners who were barely grubbing out a living and who couldn't afford the high rates charged by the Jonas Caldwell Freight Lines. Now the years were beginning to pay off.

He glanced back from his high seat into the long, high-sided wagon bed that stretched out behind him. He had some real equipment now. No more of that broken down junk he'd been patching up for the last three years. This wagon was brand new.

Not only that—his full span of mules were young and healthy, their harness new and

By
JAMES SHAFFER



He put distance between
himself and the wagon. . . .

shiny. The Burbank Freight Lines had moved out of its shoe-string stage and was entering on a new era.

He was leaning out of his seat, admiring the big steel-rimmed wheels and the capable looking spokes when the other freight wagon swung out of the side street.

He glanced up quickly, noted idly that it was

one of Jonas Caldwell's wagons and that Babe Dooley was driving. He also noticed that his own wagon had the right of way, and turned his head to speak to someone on the street.

The next instant, the loud pop of a black-

snake whip jerked his head back around. Babe Dooley's whip was snaking out again over the heads of his mules. It popped and the animals broke into a trot. The Caldwell wagon lurched into the street.

"Look where you're going, Dooley!" Ken yelled and sawed on his ribbons. The mules swung obediently to one side, but the big Caldwell rig closed in on him. Dooley was swinging his long span of mules directly across Ken's path. And in Castleburg's narrow street, there wasn't room for two big freight wagons of that size to maneuver.

Ken swore and hauled back on his lines to bring his own animals to a stop and let Dooley pass. And it was then that he saw the grin on Dooley's thick lips. The blacksnake whip snaked out and stung the rump of Ken's lead mule. The animal squealed and lunged. The blacksnake cracked again and Ken's sawing on the reins had no effect at all.

The mules whipped forward, and the two wagons ground together with a crash.

Another instant and his frightened mules hit the rotten plank sidewalk. One animal stumbled and went down. Another crashed down on top of it, and Ken heard the dull thud of its hoofs as it kicked its fallen spanmate in terror. Another mule broke through the rotten planking—it reared and plunged, and he saw blood spurt as the animal tore its hocks and skinned its legs on the jagged edges of the planking.

Ken flung his lines away. They were useless anyhow, as long as Dooley continued to wield his whip. He balanced himself on the high seat, then leaped the few feet that separated the two wagons.

He hit Dooley around the middle, and they both went flying off the wagon. They broke loose as they fell, and Ken rolled to his feet. Babe Dooley was a little slower, and he started to reach for his whip as he got up. Ken kicked it away.

Babe Dooley snarled, "You got sand enough to crowd me off my right-of-way?"

A crowd was surging around now. Ken caught sight of Lyle Hurman, Caldwell's boss, and several of his men. Babe Dooley was Lyle Hurman's pet driver and he knew argument was useless. It was impossible to read the origins of the ruckus in the tangled mass of animals and harness.

He said, "Mine, Dooley. But we'll settle it with fists."

He set himself for Babe Dooley's charge. The Number One driver for the Caldwell lines lowered his head and rushed like a bull, thick, muscle-ribbed arms pumping like pistons. Ken sidestepped, and whipped a short cutting uppercut into the man's face. Dooley roared and plunged to a stop. Ken drove at him hard, throwing fast punches into the man's face.

Dooley gave ground, then rushed. Ken tried to sidestep, almost made it, when someone tripped him. Dooley's fist crashed against his head. His world spun and pain ripped clear through his body. Vaguely, he knew what was happening. The Caldwell drivers had ringed him in, now. The odds were stacked, and dimly he began to realize that this had all been planned and thought out carefully.

He moved in on Dooley, clinched with the man, driving hard, jolting blows to the other's body. He forestalled Dooley's attempt to knee him and slugged Dooley across the mouth as the man tried to get a tooth-grip on his ear and mangle it. He made Dooley gag with a blow across the throat, but sensed even as Dooley gave ground that this was not over yet.

"Lyle!" Dooley gasped.

"Anybody that fights Caldwell lines fights me!" Lyle Hurman roared, and leaped into the cleared space. Babe Dooley was swallowed up in the crowd. Ken tried to swing at Lyle Hurman, but the strength was fast running out of his arms and legs.

Hurman was fresh, and his blows broke through Ken's feeble guard and landed with bone-crushing force. Ken staggered backwards, trying to get away, but the men who worked for Hurman hemmed him in.

Ken lashed feebly at his fresh opponent and Lyle Hurman did his job with cruel deliberation, savage satisfaction. He smashed down Ken's guard and drove skin-ripping blows to face and body. Ken stumbled around the little arena in a blind, helpless daze, seeing things in a red haze as the blood streamed down into his eyes.

Then he was going down for good. He saw the ground coming up at him. His last hazy recollection was that of Hurman's boot swinging at his face. But he didn't feel it when it landed.

HE AWOKE in a hellish, swimming sea of pain. He felt as if little devils were trying to tear him limb from limb, and then as he snapped out of it a little more, he realized it was Doc Anders, trying to get his clothes off.

"Awake, huh?" the little medico grunted. "Let's have a little cooperation."

Ken opened his mouth to speak, but Hurman's fists had found his Adam's apple, and he couldn't even swallow. The little medico nodded briskly, stretched him out on the bed and began to cut his clothes off. He went to sleep, feeling the sting of the medicine doc smeared on his battered body.

It was a week before he was able to sit up.

From his window he could look down Cas-

tleburg's street, and see his wrecked wagon in the small freight yard. Another five days and he made his way down slowly and surveyed the damage at close quarters. Both axles were broken, and most of the spokes were gone from the rear wheel. The harness had stood up pretty well, but two of the mules had had to be shot. Two more were in bad shape, and Doc Anders, who doubled as veterinary, had given one of them up for good. The other one would limp for a long time, but Doc thought he would eventually get well.

He hobbled into his tiny office and stopped before the heavy gunbelt with its bulging Colt-filled holster that hung by the door, remembering the torture-filled days during which his hurts had healed—remembering, too, a girl.

Three times he'd taken her to the dances at the school house, about six months ago, and the slow carefree walks they'd had going home had become something more than a memory. He wasn't sure of what they meant, but something new had become unalterably a part of himself the last time, when he'd bent down and kissed her quickly, just before she went into the house.

Jonas Caldwell's house. She was Jonas Caldwell's daughter.

He'd gone home with his heart singing that night, thinking thoughts and dreaming dreams he'd never before dared to. They'd half made a date for next Sunday night, but they'd never kept it. Something had happened before Sunday night.

Silas Thacker, who ran the big general store in town, had come to see Ken.

"Got some glass lamps and lamp shades over at Railhead," Thacker had told him. "Wish you'd pick 'em up the next trip you make."

"Don't Caldwell haul all your stuff?" Ken had asked.

A look of annoyance had spread over Thacker's face. "He did," he said shortly, "and he'll still have to haul my big stuff. You ain't got the team, nor the size wagons to do it. But lately, he's been smashing up a lot of my glassware and other breakables. I warned him, but it's still going on. So you pick up that freight."

The first time he'd met Helen on the street after that, she'd barely greeted him. And when he'd come face to face with Jonas Caldwell in the Drover's saloon, they'd swapped stares—unfriendly as two dogs. He'd shrugged that off—but you couldn't shrug off this.

He turned from the gun and limped to his desk. The front door opened and Silas Thacker stepped in.

Ken frowned. "About that plate glass, Si—"

"Think nothing of it," Thacker said, rub-

bing his hands briskly. "It wasn't your fault—I saw the whole thing. If I can't get my money out of Caldwell, then I certainly don't want to get it out of you."

Ken nodded. He said thoughtfully, "Maybe you'd be willing to tell what you saw to a jury. I could collect damages from Caldwell."

Thacker's hands stopped their motion and his eyes slid away. "You're a good friend of mine, Ken, and I'd do anything to help you—but with the talk that's going around I don't think you'd do any good to stand up in front of a jury!"

"Talk?"

The storekeeper started washing his hands again. "It's all Caldwell talk—but then—he's been in business in these parts a long time, and folks believe him—"

A MOMENT later Ken pushed open the door to the Caldwell Freight Lines. Helen Caldwell looked up from her father's ledger. Her eyes dropped to the gun on his hip, and some of the color washed out of her cheeks.

"Where's your father?" he demanded.

"What do you want to see him about?"

"I'll tell him that."

She said steadily, "He'll talk to you. He's at the Drover's. I'll bring the sheriff." She stood up.

He shrugged, turned and went out. Over the batwing doors of the Drover's he could see Jonas Caldwell leaning against the bar. He flung the doors aside and stepped in. The saloon became very quiet as he walked across the sawdust floor and took his stance in front of Caldwell.

"I thought at first that wreck was simply Dooley's orneriness oozing out of him, Caldwell. But I've been hearing things." He paused. "Did you order Dooley to wreck my wagon?"

Caldwell was a big, spare man of about fifty. He had a square, blocky face, and a crisp, close-cropped mustache. Ken saw the muscles of his jaw ridge and bunch up, and his black eyes snapped dangerously.

"Burbank, that working over my men gave you was in the nature of a warning. Take it as such," Caldwell replied.

"A warning?" Ken rasped. "Against what? A warning that the Caldwell Freight Lines can't stand competition? I figured you for a honest man, Caldwell, but I see I was wrong. You aim to run me out by wrecking my wagons?"

Caldwell's face grew red. He brushed back the folds of his coat, exposing the ivory butt of a Colt. His hand caressed it momentarily, then dropped to his side. Behind him, Ken heard the batwings move and a man's heavy tread sounded. The man's footsteps carried to

one side and Ken could see that it was the sheriff. The lawman regarded them silently.

"I'm only finishing what you started, Burbank," Caldwell said coldly, picking up his glass, and turning his back.

"Talk sense, Caldwell!" Ken snapped. "And talk to my face. It was your men that started the hell-raising—" He caught a movement behind him, and saw Babe Dooley and Lyle Hurman belly up to the bar. He dropped his hand to his gun butt. "In front of me, you two. I'll not have you two sidewinders standing at my back!"

"There'll be no gunplay in this saloon tonight!" The lawman spoke for the first time. No one replied to that, but Dooley and Hurman sidled along the bar until they were facing Ken.

Jason Caldwell said, "Six months ago you began to get some regular freight to haul, began to develop that pile of junk you own into a real freight line."

"And you couldn't stand that?" Ken growled.

"Why beat around the bush, boss?" Lyle Hurman cut in. He turned to Ken. "You've been trying to bust up Caldwell equipment ever since you started hauling regular freight. We've had axles sawed almost through, harness cut! And a while ago a wagon of ours was burned!"

"Are you accusing me of that?"

"Why deny it?" Caldwell said carelessly. "You covered your tracks too well for us to prove anything, but you were out of town at the time and you had the motive for doing it."

Ken swore and his hand dropped to his gun. But before he could draw it, the sheriff had stepped forward quickly, and the lawman's gun prodded Ken's ribs.

"No gunplay, I said," the lawman barked. "I'll take your gun, Burbank."

Ken ignored the lawman as he lifted his gun from the holster. He turned to face Caldwell and his two men.

"Don't pass any more lies around town about me, Caldwell. I won't stand for it. And the same thing goes for your drivers. If any of them try to pull the same trick Dooley did—I'll blow holes in his guts."

"And if we catch you around any of our wagons, you'll git the same dose!" Lyle Hurman yelled after him as Ken walked out.

Ken returned to his office, weak and shaky from anger and exertion. He slumped over his desk for a little while, recovering, but he was still weak when he went out into his freight yard.

He spent two weary hours trying to get repairs started on his big freight wagon. At the end of that time he sat down and surveyed his work. At this rate, he thought

glumly, it would be two weeks before he was ready to haul freight again. But the weakness from his beating was still in his body and he couldn't handle the heavy tools. He was sitting on an anvil, getting his breath back, when a man shuffled through the gate.

CHAPTER TWO

Whipsaw

THE man was a stranger, and at first glance, Ken took a dislike to him, just on general appearance. As the other drew closer, he saw that one of his visitor's eyes was swollen almost shut.

"You Ken Burbank?" the man asked in a husky voice. "I'm looking for a job. I know freight work."

Ken looked him over. He could use a man, whether he liked his looks or not, but there was the matter of pay. His bank balance was scraping rock bottom. All his ready cash had gone into that big new wagon and those mules.

The other read his thoughts. "Don't worry about the pay—when you git it will be time enough."

Ken looked him over again. The stranger's clothes were ragged and patched, and the dirt caked in them was about all that held them together. Not the type of man who could work long without getting his pay.

"If you need a job bad, why don't you try Caldwell Lines?" Ken asked.

The man grinned, a twisting smirk of his lips, and jerked a finger toward his black eye.

"I hitched a ride on one of their wagons last night," he said. "They caught me and—" he spread his hands in a gesture. "I hear you're bucking Caldwell. That's why I'd like to hire out to you."

Ken nodded. He'd seen what had happened to men who tried to hook rides on Caldwell's wagons. This one had gotten off easily.

"Okay," Ken said slowly. "You're hired. What's your name?"

"Ed Purvis. Where do we start in?"

Ken indicated the broken wagon and Purvis shed his coat. Ken tried to engage the man in small talk, but Purvis only mumbled answers to his questions. It left Ken with a vague feeling of uneasiness, but at the end of two hours, he shook it off.

Ed Purvis knew his work. He laid out his plans for repairs to the big wagon and pitched into the job with skill and speed. By quitting time, the work was well along and, two days later, the wagon was ready to roll.

He gave Purvis orders to be ready for the road the first thing in the morning, then saddled his horse and rode out to the nester settlement. He found the first farmer in his

barn, milking. The man looked vague and uncomfortable as Ken asked about his freight.

"Had some furniture coming in," the farmer admitted reluctantly. "Kinda planned to drop by and see Jonas Caldwell about bringing it in."

"Caldwell?" Ken snapped. "A year ago Caldwell wouldn't look at your freight and now—" He stopped, sudden realization flooding over him. "You've been hearing that talk about me burning Caldwell's wagons—is that it?"

"Well, now, Ken," the man cleared his throat loudly. "I know how talk can get started. It ain't that altogether—"

Ken turned and walked back to his mount, his face set in grim lines. And the lines were deeper before the day was over. He'd covered the whole nester settlement and a number of the ranches, and a sawmill back in the hills. The net result was a scant half load of freight to bring back from the rail head.

"What the hell?" Purvis muttered as he told him that night. "It's freight, ain't it. As long as we make enough to buy grain for them mules, Caldwell can't run us out of business."

"You're right. Let's roll."

But he caught the temper of the town as the big wagon rolled out of Castleburg that morning.

Folks who'd once been wishing him well now watched his departure with cold eyes and in stony silence. The sheriff stood in the doorway of his office, watching him darkly, and he saw Helen Caldwell's face through the window of her dad's office as he rolled out.

It took three days to make the railhead city with an empty wagon; and four to four and a half days for the return trip with a load. Two of Caldwell's wagons were loading as Ken swung his mules smartly up to the freight station.

Babe Dooley grinned from the nearest wagon, and Ed Purvis muttered an oath under his breath. Purvis carried a knife, but no gun, and as Dooley's grin broadened at the sight of Purvis' black eye, the man fingered the blade of his knife.

"None of that," Ken said sharply. "We're here to load freight. Don't forget it."

But he had trouble keeping his own temper in line when Lyle Hurman swaggered down from town. He and Dooley sat on the seat of their wagon and Hurman brought out a bottle. They passed it back and forth, and made remarks about the small load of freight the Burbank Lines were carrying.

Ken and Purvis could have finished loading their wagon and pulled out that night, but Ken noticed that the Caldwell wagons were about loaded and ready to travel, and he wanted them ahead of him on the trail back.

So he and Purvis pulled out the next morning, with Purvis sending the mules along at a fast clip. Their wagon was half empty and they could have made good time back to Castleburg, but Ken called a halt.

"Take it slower," he ordered Purvis.

"How come?" Purvis grunted. "We're only half loaded. We can set a record between here and Castleburg."

"To do that we'd have to pass those Caldwell wagons," Ken pointed out. "And that might lead to trouble. We'll take it slow."

Purvis gave him a long sideways glance and grunted surly acceptance of the order. But every time Ken dozed on the seat, he awoke to find the mules moving along at a fast clip, and repeatedly he had to warn Purvis against traveling too fast.

However, when they pulled off the trail to make camp that night, there was no sign of the Caldwell wagons up ahead. Ken was tired, and as soon as the dishes were cleaned up after supper, he rolled up in his blankets.

His sleep was troubled and light. Twice slight sounds brought him awake and he raised up to listen. Each time he saw the dark form of Purvis rolled up in his blankets on the other side of the fire.

It must have been about midnight when the shot came. It brought him instantly awake. He half rose, listening for further shots, but none came. Purvis slept on. Ken rolled up in his blankets again, but before he dropped off to sleep, he heard another shot. This time closer.

He debated a moment about waking Purvis, then decided against it as he felt for his boots. That shot had been less than a mile away. He buckled his gunbelt around his waist and headed out through the darkness.

The shot had come from a knoll about a mile farther down the trail. Approaching the rise, Ken became wary, but there was no further sound in the night. He retraced his steps to camp, and was pulling his boots off when Purvis rolled over and sat up.

"What's that?" he grunted.

Ken followed his pointing finger. Up the trail shone a dull red glow!

"Looks like it's about three miles away," Purvis said, casting a meaningful glance as Ken pulled off his boots. "Or just about the spot where those Caldwell wagons are!"

There was no sleep for Ken the rest of the night. He rolled and tossed in his blankets all night, and was bleary-eyed when dawn came streaking over the hills.

But sleepy or not, he was in a hurry to get moving. Purvis seemed to sense his desire for haste and got the mules hitched in double time. The big freight wagon rumbled along the trail, and Ken found himself peering ahead, knowing what he would find.

"There she is," Purvis grunted. Ken had already seen the fire-blackened bones of the freight wagon. "One of Caldwell's wagons all right."

Ken swore. "They'll probably try to pin this on me," he rasped. "I think I know what happened. That bunch of drivers, including Lyle Hurman, were drunk. A spark from the campfire must have lit on the tarp that covered the wagon."

"Yeah," Purvis grunted. "That must have been what happened." Ken whirled around at the man's tones, and saw Purvis wipe a grin off his face. After a moment, he spoke. "Reckon Caldwell'll believe that?"

"What else would he believe?"

"Yeah, what else?" Purvis said noncommittally and gave his attention to the mules.

BUT when they pulled into Castleburg, half the town, it seemed, was lined up along the sidewalks, watching his wagon roll down the street. It was a grim, silent crowd and Ken stared into hostile eyes.

They were rumbling past the sheriff's office when the door opened and the lawman, along with Jonas Caldwell, Lyle Hurman and Silas Thacker, moved out in the path of the wagon. The sheriff waved the wagon to a halt.

"Caldwell lost another wagon last night," the lawman said. "You were on the trail behind them?" It was half question, half accusation.

"I was," Ken said through stiff lips. "Purvis and I saw the blaze up ahead."

"Hell, boss," Lyle Hurman cut in roughly. "Let's cut the palaver and drag 'im off that seat—"

"We'll let the law handle this," Jason Caldwell said sternly.

"Law!" Hurman said disgustedly. "We shoulda handled him out there on the trail, like I wanted to. The law won't do nothing."

Ken jumped to the ground. He walked up to Caldwell. "Your men left railroad drunk, Caldwell. One of them musta got careless—let a spark from the fire hit the tarp of your wagon, or flipped a cigarette on it."

Caldwell shook his head. "That won't hold water with me."

"There might be some truth in it," Silas Thacker cut in. "The way Caldwell's men always broke up my glassware, it's pretty clear his drivers're either mighty careless—or, as Ken says—drunk a good part o' the time."

Lyle Hurman snarled an oath and started for the storekeeper, but the sheriff grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him back.

"I'll get the truth of this," the lawman jerked out. "Purvis, where was you the night that wagon burned?"

Ed Purvis jerked at the question. He licked

his lips and shot a quick glance at Ken. A cold feeling of warning rippled down Ken's spine. He suddenly remembered that on that night he'd taken a walk!

Then he shook the feeling off. He hadn't been gone from camp long enough to walk to the Caldwell wagons.

"In my blankets—where you reckon?" Purvis said surlily.

"Did Burbank leave the camp that night?" the sheriff barked. Ed Purvis' eyes rolled like a trapped animal's. He shot a quick, nervous glance at Ken, then dropped his eyes to the ground.

"I'll make him talk!" Lyle Hurman roared. He sprang to the wheel of the wagon and grabbed Purvis by the shirt. Purvis was the smaller man and fought wildly to keep from being dragged to the ground. "Dooley!" Hurman roared. "Bring your blacksnake! This son'll talk or—"

"I'll talk—I'll talk!" Purvis whimpered. "I woke up in the middle of the night—Burbank was coming back to camp—was getting his boots off. It was then we seen the fire—"

"That's proof enough for me!" Lyle Hurman roared and turned loose of Ed Purvis. He dropped back to the ground and rushed at Ken, but this time Ken was waiting for him. He drove a hard, jolting right into the wagon boss's stomach and followed it up with a left to the chin. Hurman staggered backwards and Ken followed him, throwing punches with merciless ferocity into the foreman's face. Hurman's knees buckled and he went down.

The whole thing had happened so fast that it was over before anyone had a chance to intervene. As Hurman sagged downward, Ken whirled to face the others, his hand dipping to his gun. He didn't pull it. "Sheriff," he said. "My tracks'll show that I didn't go near the Caldwell wagons—and another thing. Nobody's told how I could get past the guard that Hurman claims he posts around the wagons every night, and set that fire!"

"The guard—that's right," Silas Thacker put in quickly. "Caldwell, that's right. Hurman claims he posts a guard every night over the wagons when they're on the trail. You've heard him say that, haven't you, sheriff?"

The lawman rubbed his chin reflectively. "It's beginning to sound like maybe you'd not have a case, Caldwell. I ain't sayin' you ain't, but this'll stand checkin'."

"What'd I tell you?" Lyle Hurman snarled. The wagon boss was on his hands and knees, shaking his head to clear it. "I told you the law wouldn't do nothing, boss. You shoulda let me'n Babe handle this."

"Maybe you're right," Caldwell cut in heavily. "Maybe I've been a fool. Burbank, the next time you cross me or my men, you do it with a gun!"

He turned and strode off, with Lyle Hurman and two or three other Caldwell drivers following more slowly. The sheriff swore and moved toward his office. Ken turned to find Purvis, but the driver was nowhere to be seen. He climbed into the wagon and drove on to his freight yard.

As he began to unload the freight, his mind was busy. He thought of the gunshot that had tolled him away from his camp that night. It had been close. It was strange, now that he thought of it, that a close-by shot hadn't awakened the driver, but Ken's soft footfall returning to camp had done so. Ken stopped unloading the freight and went into his office. Purvis was nowhere in sight. It was almost dusk when he stepped out onto the street and started a slow, systematic search of Castleburg.

He'd looked in three saloons, and was passing Silas Thacker's general store and finally turned in wearily at the hotel.

"You haven't seen anything of that driver of mine, Ed Purvis?"

The clerk nodded. "In his room. Number eight—second floor."

Ken's conviction grew. A hotel room didn't go with the rags Purvis had worn. He turned and took the steps two at a time, then catfooted it down the corridor. A light tap on the door brought Purvis' guarded query.

"That you, Lyle?"

"Yeah," Ken muttered, trying to imitate Lyle Hurman's guttural tones. He heard a chair being moved from the door and it swung open. He slammed his shoulder against it and catapulted into the room.

A startled oath bubbled in Purvis' throat, but it was chopped off suddenly by Ken's fist against his mouth. Purvis staggered across the room, Ken following relentlessly. He cornered the man behind the washstand, and whipped his gun out. Purvis' face was the color of fresh putty.

"I want the whole story, Purvis!" Ken told him. "The whole damn story, or I'll cave your skull in with this gun barrel!"

Purvis struggled a moment, but stopped instantly as Ken raised the gun barrel for a blow. The man sagged.

"All right, Burbank," he said shakily. "You're being whipsawed—but it ain't the kind of game you think it is—"

That was when they heard the triangle iron beating out its alarm in the street outside.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Game

"FIRE!" The hoarse cry rang through the street. The town's frame buildings were tinder dry—they'd burn as if they had gunpowder sprinkled on them. Ken

heard the noise sweep the town and the frantic gathering of a bucket brigade.

He kept his gun on Purvis. "We'll stay here—and you'll put down what you've got to say in writin'."

"That's part of it," Purvis said. "That fire—it's up toward your freight yard—"

For a mere second Ken relaxed his vigilance, a great fear ripping through him. He half stepped to the window to verify Purvis' word. And Purvis leaped for the door.

Ken whirled, but Purvis was hurling a chair. He ducked as the chair sailed over his head, then he was pounding out the door. He reached the hallway and slammed a quick shot at Purvis as he disappeared down the steps. He missed.

The lobby was deserted and he plunged outside and into a swelling mob that was converging on the fire.

"Purvis!" he yelled over the noise of the mob. "Which way'd he go—"

He started to fight his way through the crowd, but rough hands grabbed him.

"It's your place that's burning!" they yelled. "You'll help us fight it! If it gits outta control the whole town'll go. . . ."

It took the crowd two hours to bring the fire under control. The blaze had started in his barn, which was detached from the rest of the buildings, and the efforts of the crowd had confined the fire to that one building.

Ken sat on the tongue of a wagon and surveyed the damage. The last of the fire fighters were slowly drifting back to town. Ken could smell the odor of burned mule flesh. Three more of his animals had perished in the flames. He didn't have enough mules left to handle that big freight wagon.

And Purvis? He grinned bitterly. Purvis had a two hour start by now. It would be impossible to run him down. But what did it matter, anyhow? This fire had licked him, stopped him cold.

He watched the last of the fire fighters drift away, and one man came over and sat on the wagon tongue with him.

It was Silas Thacker.

"A bad break," Thacker said, mopping his fire-blackened face, and waving his other hand at the smoldering wreckage.

"The last one," Ken grunted. He laughed harshly. "There won't be any more."

"You mean you're broke?"

"That's it," Ken said bitterly.

"Couldn't you get a loan—scrape up enough money to keep going somehow?"

Ken looked at the storekeeper. Thacker seemed genuinely surprised. Ken said, "I couldn't raise a quarter on a dollar bill."

Thacker sighed. "That's bad. This sure ruins things."

"Huh?"

Thacker said bitterly, "Caldwell is raising his freight rates since that last wagon burned. It'll cut my profits down to nothing, Ken."

"Yeah, he'll have a free rein to charge whatever he likes now," Ken agreed.

Thacker leaned closer. "Just to protect myself—I'll loan you the money to get back in operation again!"

Ken stared at the man, trying to fathom his motives for this move. He'd never cared for Thacker a great deal, had never trusted him too far. But he turned the proposition over in his mind, and could find no hidden motive.

It was open and shut. Thacker wanted Ken to stay in business so he wouldn't have to deal with Caldwell. Maybe Thacker hoped Ken would some day grow big enough to run Caldwell out of business.

And then again, he thought, maybe he'd misjudged Thacker all along. He had been wrong about men before.

"It's a deal," he said.

"Then come along, I'll get the money out of my safe."

AN HOUR later, Ken stepped out of Thacker's store with a well-filled money belt tucked under his shirt. He stood under the dark awning of the post office a few moments, searching the darkened streets of Castleburg. The excitement of the recent fire had died down and the town had turned in. There were few people on the streets.

Purvis' words kept running through his mind as he stared at the darkened windows of the Caldwell Freight Lines' office. . . . *You're being whipsawed. But it's not the kind of a game you think it is. . . .*

Then what kind of game was it? He moved down the street, slipped into an alley at the back of the Caldwell office.

In a few minutes he had pried open a window. A moment later he was feeling his way through the darkened office. He found the file cabinet and, by matchlight, shielded by his hat, discovered what he was looking for—the bills of lading for the wagon that had burned the other night on the trail. The wagon had been loaded with bolts of cloth, overalls, leather shoes and boots—

A slight sound from the outside froze him. He blew the candle out quickly and tiptoed into the main office. A man was peering through the front window.

He shrank back in the shadows as he recognized the profile of the sheriff. A moment later the lawman withdrew and Ken moved toward the open back window. He'd reached it when he heard a boot crunch on the ground outside and a moment later the sheriff's head and shoulder appeared in the opening.

Ken snaked his gun out. It rasped as it left leather and the lawman's head whipped

around. He heard a startled oath and whipped the barrel down.

The sheriff sighed and slumped across the window sill. Ken pulled him the rest of the way in, climbed out the window and hurried to his horse.

He thought the sheriff had recognized him—that meant if he was wrong about his suspicions, he was finished in Castleburg, and maybe anywhere else.

He pushed his mount hard all that night and, as dawn climbed the distant hills, found the piles of ashes that had been the Caldwell wagon. He dropped to his knees and began sifting the ashes.

He found a couple of bolts of cloth. As he had expected, hardly any of the cloth had burned. Just the first top layers. Next he found a couple of blackened remains of what once had been a pair of boots.

An hour later he spread his blanket out beside the wagon and laid the entire proceeds of his search in it. He made a bundle of it and rode for the timbered hills. Deep in the timber, he spread out the blanket and studied his find. A little later he wrapped up his evidence again and buried it.

That afternoon he saw the posse, made up of the sheriff and three men. He saw them follow his trail to the burned wagon, and then turn toward the hills. He swung into the saddle and headed for higher ground, deeper in the hills. He found rock about dusk and pushed his horse all night over the hard going. In the morning there was no sign of the posse.

He got some beans, bacon and coffee from a lone trapper and spent the next three days hiding in the hills. On the second day, he saw his hunters head back for town, and the next day, he spotted a lone Caldwell wagon rumbling toward Castleburg.

From the hills, he watched the wagon lumber its heavily-laden way to Castleburg, and when night fell, he left the hills and eased down closer to the small campfire the freight drivers had built.

As he drew closer, he noticed a lot of activity around the fire. Men were moving back and forth, momentarily disappearing into the darkness, with a load of goods in their arms.

The Caldwell wagon was being looted before it was to be burned. He shucked his gun out and moved closer. This was what he wanted; the evidence he needed. He heard Lyle Hurman's raspy voice giving orders, and heard Babe Dooley growl with impatience. This was it. He got to his feet, gun jutting forward. . . .

A six-gun bellowed in his face, barely twenty feet away. Its blast stunned him for an instant and before he could fire at the flash, a man was yelling an alarm.

FREIGHT LINE TO HELL

Ken fired at the gun flashes, swearing at himself for being too anxious to sneak up on the scene. He should have known they'd have a guard out!

Other guns were beginning to blast from the wagon now. Lead cut close to him and he flung three shots at the shadowy figure of Lyle Hurman, before making it back to his horse.

"Git this freight moving!" Hurman bel-lowed. "To hell with Burbank—"

Ken clambered into the saddle. Guns were still blasting at him from the wagon, but Hurman's yell had made the firing desultory. He whirled his animal and put distance between himself and the wagon. A mile from the scene, he twisted in the saddle.

A tongue of flame was leaping from the big freight wagon. It licked hungrily over the tarpaulin and spread to the dry wooden body. In a moment the whole wagon was a mass of flames.

He could see men running around, trying to catch the terrified mules. He saw them swing into the saddle and head for Castleburg, leading the mules. He sat down on the ground and swore bitterly. Lyle Hurman and Babe Dooley had looted another wagon, burned it—and this time his own tracks would be on the scene.

And then suddenly he stopped, his eyes turning to the now glowing wreck of the wagon, far off in the distance. Then he turned toward Castleburg. He was only a few hours out of town by horseback. He could be there well before midnight.

HIS mount was stumbling with weariness when the few lights of Castleburg showed up ahead. He rode cautiously now, and pulled up behind an old abandoned shack at the edge of town. He slipped to the ground, slid saddle and bridle from his tired horse and turned it loose. It had been ridden enough for that night. For his return trip, he'd need a fresh horse.

Keeping to the shadows, he eased into town, noting with surprise and dismay that the sheriff's office was dark. But a light glowed in the windows of the Caldwell Freight Lines office. He started across the street when a soft voice hailed him. Ken whirled, his gun lifting.

"Slow down, boy. It's me—Silas Thacker."

Ken let his breath gust out slowly, as the tension within him relaxed. The storekeeper came close.

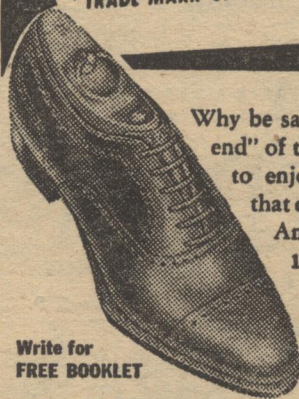
"Lordy, boy, what you been up to?"

"Been doing some detecting," Ken grunted. "Where's the sheriff?"

"Out looking for you," Thacker said.



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

"Hurman and Dooley rode in a while back. Claimed you burned another wagon. Ken, boy, I didn't loan you the money to fight Caldwell thataway. I figured you'd—"

Ken laughed, harsh and short. "I didn't burn Caldwell's wagon. But I know the whole story now. That's what I came to town for—to get the sheriff and clear myself."

"Fine!" Thacker said heartily. "I can hide you in my store till the sheriff gits back. Better stay out of sight—if Caldwell or his bunch knew you was in town they wouldn't wait for the sheriff to come back."

"This can't wait," Ken rapped out. "I'm callin' Caldwell tonight!"

"Better to give it to the sheriff," Thacker protested in a fierce, low whisper. "I tell you, Caldwell and his men will take the law in their own hands—"

"If you're worried about your money—" Ken jerked his shirt open—"here it is."

Thacker sighed with relief as he took the money belt. He said, "Dooley and Hurman are in there with Jason Caldwell."

"Don't worry," Ken grunted. "I'm walking in that office with a gun in my fist."

His boots made soft plopping sounds in the thick dust. Then he lifted a boot and set it down easily on the plank sidewalk. He was at the office door now. The shades were pulled, but he could hear voices inside. Lyle Hurman's voice was thick with anger.

"We need more guards, Caldwell!" Hurman finished up. "That dirty son is roaming the hills and'll burn every wagon you got. You got to hire more men."

"What'll I use for money?" Jason Caldwell asked bitterly.

"I think I can get you out of this cheap enough," Ken said. "Drop it, Lyle!" He stepped quickly into the office, his gun swinging like the head of an angry rattler, as it covered the three men.

Lyle Hurman's hand dropped to his side. Babe Dooley's mouth gaped in surprise, but he kept his hands in sight and well away from his gun. Jason Caldwell came half out of his chair, then sank back.

"Here to finish the job, Burbank?" he asked with a tinge of sarcasm.

Ken nodded, a tight grin on his face. "That's right, Caldwell—but not the way you think. I've found out the whole story about how your wagons are burned."

Caldwell started to laugh, but Ken waved him silent. "Shuck your guns, all of you," he rapped out. "We're riding. We'll go out back and saddle your fastest horses, Caldwell."

"Riding? Where?"

"Out to that burned wagon," Ken answered. "We can reach it in about three hours. We

FREIGHT LINE TO HELL

can reach it before the ashes cool off good."

"Proud of the job you done on it, huh?" Hurman grinned without mirth.

"No, Lyle," Ken said softly. "I want to show Caldwell what you can do."

Hurman shot a glance at Babe Dooley. The burly bullwhacker licked his lips. Ken put his back against the wall, and went on, his voice toneless.

"Your wagon was looted before it was burned, Caldwell. Hurman and Dooley are working with a gang in the hills. That gang meets them on the trail and transfers your freight to pack mules. Then the wagons are burned."

Lyle Hurman snarled an oath and his gun hand twitched. Ken grinned and invited him to go ahead and try it. After a long moment, Caldwell spoke.

"I'm willing to go along with you and see that wagon—if you think you can prove your accusation. If not, let's have a showdown here."

Ken grinned. "Your wagon carried dry goods, leather shoes and overalls, didn't it, Caldwell? And you know how many pieces of each. That stuff won't burn too good and we ought to find the remains of everything that was in that wagon!"

"By hell, you're right!" Caldwell exploded.

"And I'm taking you out there before that hot bed of ashes cools off!" Ken went on. "That'll prove that the wagon was looted before it was burned—and that I didn't—"

Somebody said, "I reckon you've found out too much, Ken."

Something hard bored into Ken's back. There was a slight breeze on his neck as the door opened wider and a man slid into the office.

"It's about time you got here!" Lyle Hurman snarled.

"Take it easy, Lyle," Silas Thacker chuckled at Ken's back. "Wasn't any use spoiling the setup unless we had to." He heaved a gusty sigh. "But hell's ridin' tonight for fair. I guess it's time to call the whole thing quits."

"So you've been behind the whole thing, huh, Thacker?" Jones Caldwell grunted. "I should have known—"

"You wouldn't know now if it hadn't been for Burbank," Silas Thacker snapped. "But then—it's just as well. I know how you're fixed for money. The whole town expects you and Burbank to shoot it out. You'll do it now—or we'll save you the trouble. Your daughter won't be able to carry on the business and we'll buy her out for pennies."

"Got to hand it to you," Ken murmured. He felt the pressure of Thacker's gun high between his shoulders and bent forward quick-

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ly, flung one hand back between his legs and grabbed Thacker's ankle.

Thacker bellowed in surprise. His gun blasted wildly into the ceiling. Then he was down and Ken was scooping up his own gun where he'd dropped it on the floor.

Lyle Hurman's gun blasted then, and he felt a slug burn along his shoulder. He dropped flat on the floor and fired at the man's belly. He saw Jonas Caldwell's hand sweep out and knock the lamp off the desk.

The office rocked with gunfire. Ken rolled and came up solidly against the wall as the front door flung open.

"Let's go!" Lyle Hurman yelled.

"Go—hell!" Silas Thacker snarled. "We'll play this out here—"

His gun blasted and Ken's leg jerked. Then he was triggering at Thacker. The man was flung back against the door jamb. His gun thundered again, but it was merely the reflex action of a man in his death throes. Lyle Hurman's boots thudded down the street.

Ken dragged himself to the door, brought his gun up and squeezed off a shot. Hurman staggered two more steps, then sank into the dust.

And then Ken remembered Babe Dooley. He whirled around, gun lifting, and Jason Caldwell spoke slowly from the floor.

"I got Dooley the first shot."

"Probably saved my life," Ken said. "I'd forgot him clean."

"We saved each other," Caldwell answered.

Ken crawled over and looked at his wounds by the light of a match. He thought Caldwell would live.

People were pouring into the office now. Somebody lit the lantern. The doctor was bustling around, opening his little black bag, laying out bandages.

And then someone was pushing through the crowd, and Ken looked up at the tear-stained face of Helen Caldwell.

Jonas Caldwell waved to her and grinned at the doc.

He said, "One way or another, I reckon I got to quit fightin' Burbank. Be like stealin' from myself, now all the freight in town's gonna be in the family. . . ."

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ON THE TRAIL

(Continued from page 8)

were good for a surprise as the trail was not over two hours' old.

There was some difficulty in picking up the trail on the morning of January 29, but by putting their faces close to the ground the Pueblo scouts discovered a trail leading north along the crest of the mountains. Shortly after, the Rangers saw the Apaches' campfires not over half a mile distant.

Leaving a guard of five men with the horses, the Rangers advanced stealthily on foot. By taking advantage of the mountain's crest, they approached within two hundred yards of the camp on the western slope. The Apaches, however, had been cautious enough to put one tepee on the eastern slope, overlooking the approaches from that direction.

Captain Baylor immediately ordered Sergeant Caruthers of Lieutenant Nevill's company to take seven men, make a detour to the left and attack the lone tepee while the lieutenant and himself, with the remaining seventeen men, advanced on the main camp.

Advancing in Indian file behind the protection of some large Spanish dagger plants, the attackers got within one hundred yards of the enemy, who were apparently just out of bed, as it was shortly before sunrise. The Rangers deployed to right and left, then kneeling, gave the astonished redskins a deliberate volley. This was quickly followed by another. At the second fusillade the Apaches fled, the Rangers charging after them with blood-curdling Tex-ass yells.

In the meantime, Sergeant Caruthers had executed his orders with courage and skill. The Apaches on his side of the crest, alarmed and surprised, huddled together in a daze. Three were killed within twenty yards of their campfire. The others fled, several of them dripping from wounds.

The Apache women suffered with the men. As it was a cold, windy morning, and the Indians all wore blankets, few of the Rangers could distinguish braves from squaws. In the confusion two women were killed and another mortally wounded. Two children were killed and a third was shot through the foot.

The Rangers recovered considerable stolen property, including seven mules, nine horses, two Winchester rifles, one Remington carbine, one United States cavalry pistol, one .40 double-action Colt's and six United States Cavalry saddles.

The victorious Rangers, having had nothing to eat since noon the day before, breakfasted on the battleground. Some of them found the horse meat good. Others feasted on venison and boiled mescal. Water was scarce, but they managed to get enough to wash down



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

their food. Their forty head of stock, however, had to wait for water until they returned to Apache Tanks, thirty miles away.

It was this scarcity of water that prevented their following the few Apaches who got away.

The return march was begun at once. At Eagle Station the forces of Baylor and Nevill separated, thankful that there had been no Ranger casualties. The captured Indian women and children were sent to Fort Davis for medical attention.

As the Rangers neared their headquarters at Ysleta, the three Pueblo scouts who had accompanied Captain Baylor, halted about a mile from their village, unsaddled their ponies and went into camp, as was their custom after a successful campaign against their sworn enemies, the Apaches. This was done so that their tribesmen might come out and do honor to returning heroes.

That night the Indians executed the scalp dance, and the Rangers were invited to participate in the festivities.

It was the final scalp dance for the Pueblos, however, as no Apaches ever visited that region again—and soon had been driven completely out of Texas.

With this last fight between the Texas Rangers and the Apaches, another tragic chapter in the taming of the Southwest was closed.

(Continued from page 108)

"Mister," the old man laughed, "now take your gall!"

THERE was good news in Saldero on that week-end. The governor, citing "deplorable lawlessness and disorder" in Scrub County, had appointed a sheriff to serve until election time. The valley settlers, strengthening their position and the association Jim Vance had helped to organize, had named a citizen as its permanent leader and advisor. Both of these jobs fell to one man.

And one of the new sheriff's first acts was to obtain the legal release of one Pretty Sam Sleeper from his calaboose.

"Now," Bide Winthrop proclaimed at the first regular meeting of the settlers' association, "we got somethin' to be proud of! 'Course Jim Vance ain't hardly got no time to handle all his jobs, but I see no reason why all of us can't pitch a little hay fer him and herd his cows. And mebbe—"

"Take keer of his new wife, too?" somebody laughed.

Bide blinked and yanked his beard. "Got a sorta notion," he opined, "that jedgin' by the looks of things—my Katie's goin' to run Jim, us, and the county, too!"

RIDE WITH THE DEVIL

(Continued from page 93)

looked across at her husband. Captain Conover turned at that instant. His face paled.

"Ruth!" he cried. "My—"

Ruth Conover's face turned away from him. Pushing past Steve, she ran across the sand and flung herself down on her knees beside Jeff Blane's body. She did not touch the dead man. She just knelt there for a moment on the sand. Steve did not wholly understand. A tribute. He could feel that. He didn't know if it was more.

Troy Conover had dismounted; he was on his feet, waiting, when his wife reached him. Oblivious to the troopers watching, he opened his arms wide. The woman pressed her face against the lapel of his dusty tunic.

"Troy—Troy, what have I done?"

"Something quite wonderful," Troy Conover said with a strange softness. His head tilted toward the prisoners. "You've helped us capture Pequeno." Then, even more softly: "And you helped straighten a couple of men up on a crooked trail. I think we're both grateful, Ruth—" Conover paused. He looked out across the torn sand to the banner in the dust. "Jeff Blane and I."

A weight slid from Steve Trent's shoulders. He heard a murmur of astonishment among the troopers near him. Troy Conover was kissing his wife. Without restraint, without formality, with hunger and pride. His stiffness was gone, along with the hard impersonal sheen which had kept him apart from friendships and love alike. His head rose above the woman's for a moment. He grinned at the nearest trooper, and bent again. A better woman had come back to Troy Conover. A better officer would return to Fort Hondo.

Steve halted in front of the squat, defiant figure of Pequeno. He grinned.

"It is my duty," he began, "to advise you that you are a prisoner of the United States Government—"

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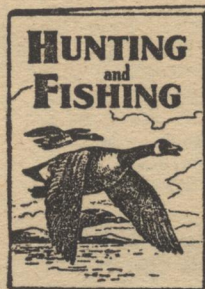
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 47)

Tod Bellew, the ramrod, loomed up out of the darkness, and Dillon caught a glimpse of his hard face as he raced by, gun in hand.

Dillon said quietly, "Over here, Freeman." Miles Freeman dropped down beside him, anxiety in his voice. "They get you?"

"See if you can find Drummond," Dillon said. "Over in the bushes." He nodded toward the spot where Jack Drummond had been standing a short while before.

Freeman stepped away. He came back a few moments later. He said, "Two slugs through his chest—dead center. He won't cash in on Lamonte's deal."

Farther back up the slope they could hear the deep bass of Tod Bellew, and then the shrill cry of young Sam Grayson.

"They're clearing out," Freeman said. "How bad you hit, Dillon?"

Ed Dillon lay there, not wanting to get up. He said, "I can be patched, Freeman." He saw Karen Grayson coming out of the darkness then, running. Miles Freeman called to her.

"All over, Miss Grayson. They've skipped." She came over and saw Dillon then, still reclining on the ground.

"He took a piece of lead, Miss Grayson," the sheriff told her. "We'll get him back to the house. I'll send a boy out for Doc McGuthrie."

They got Dillon to his feet, and he felt the pain then, driving through his right side, taking in the area from the shoulder down to the waist.

Miles Freeman said, "Can you walk all right, Dillon?"

"I'll get by," Dillon told him.

Freeman darted off, shouting for Tod Bellew. Karen Grayson put her arm around Dillon's waist. She said firmly. "Lean your weight on me."

Dillon looked down at her. He grinned despite the pain. "Now, Miss Grayson—" he started to say.

"Do as I say," Karen said.

Ed Dillon rubbed his long jaw with his free hand. They started down the slope that way toward the ranch house. Dillon saw three young nesters running up the slope toward them, and one of them stopped when he made out the figure of the tall man.

He called quickly, "You all right, mister?" Dillon looked down at Karen Grayson's head. He said softly, "I've been worse."

Karen smiled up at him then as they started to walk again, very slowly. The lights were going on in the ranch house below and, as they went down toward them there was a curious happiness inside Ed Dillon.

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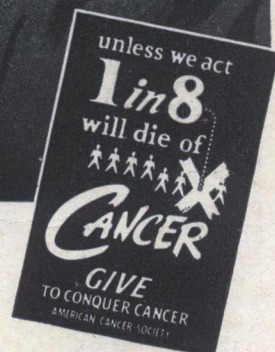
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