

25¢

FIFTEEN JAN.



WESTERN

**15
STORIES**

TALES

**25
CENTS**

**JOHN STARR
E.M. WEBBER
PHILIP KETCHUM
*MANY OTHERS***



**THREE GRAVES
HAVE I...**

A NOVEL OF HUNGRY GUNS
by **ART LAWSON**



For once they actually agree!

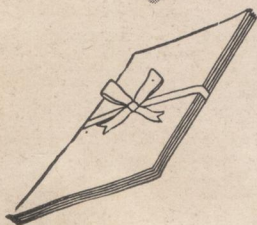
Hope and Crosby, in the movies, seldom see eye to eye.

But there's one thing they really do agree on —they both think U.S. Savings Bonds make wonderful Christmas gifts!

SAYS BOB: "They're swell for *anybody* on your list. You couldn't pick a nicer, more sensible, more welcome present. Even Crosby knows that."

SAYS BING: "I hate to admit it, folks, but Hope is right. And remember this—you can buy Bonds at any bank or post office in the U. S. A."

BOB AND BING (together): "This Christmas, why not give the finest gift of all—U.S. Savings Bonds!"

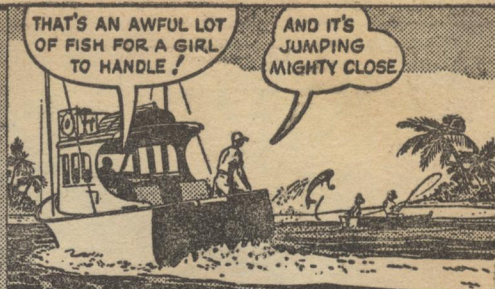


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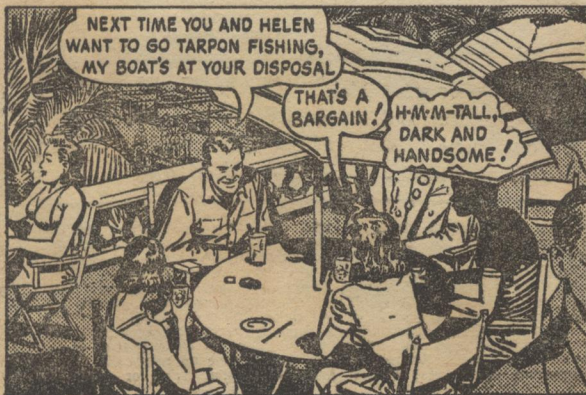
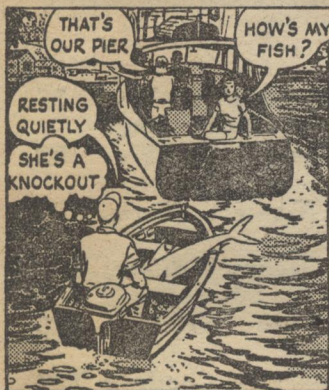
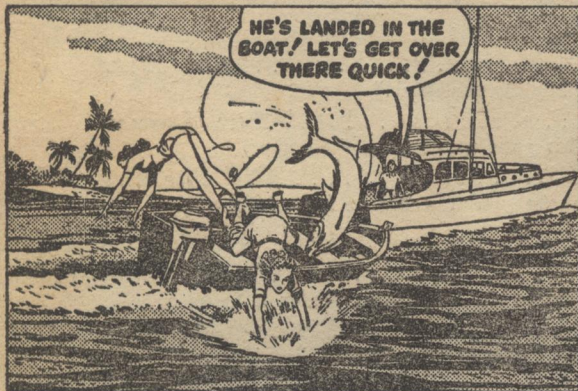
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LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



ALL STORIES NEW—NEXT ISSUE OUT JANUARY 2nd!

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 14, No. 4



JANUARY, 1948

Three Big Novels

1. **THE LAST FRONTIER**.....*John Starr* 6
"Peace that is bought with guns, mister—is kept by the dead!"
2. **THREE GRAVES HAVE I**.....*Arthur Lawson* 36
Kid Chapin had had his fill of killing—but his guns would have their say!
3. **THE DEVIL'S GULCH**.....*Giff Cheshire* 60
Before they hanged Dryden—he wanted to make sure it would be for a killing!

Novelette—Short Stories

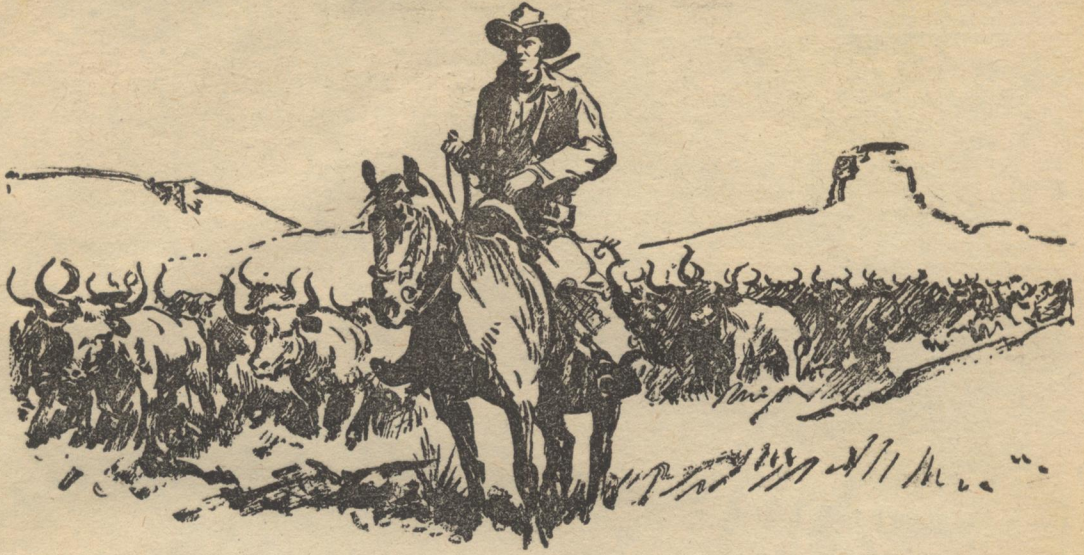
4. **NEXT STOP—HELL!**.....*Lee E. Wells* 110
"Welcome to Colona, stranger—hell's just yonderly. Most folks prefer it to here!"
5. **HOT LEAD HERITAGE**.....*Thomas Thompson* 22
"You mean to live like your father, Dan. Have you got the guts to die like him?"
6. **BULLETS' PAWN**.....*C. William Harrison* 30
Kildene sold himself to the town as a hero—even if it killed him!
7. **SHOOT THE MAN DOWN**.....*David Crewe* 50
A man who lives to kill has got to be good—even if it's only as good as dead!
8. **LAW OF THE DOUBLE ROWEL**.....*Everett M. Webber* 75
For a girl's kiss and a million looted acres, Beasley was ready to die—but die fighting!
9. **THE DEATH RIDER**.....*Wallace Umphrey* 82
Cass Carlin had come too far to kill a man—to spare his own life!
10. **THE NINTH NOTCH**.....*Kenneth Fowler* 90
Ross Dako found himself young again—young enough to die!
11. **MANHUNT**.....*Robert Moore Williams* 102
Northy was through as a manhunter—but a barber finds a lot of law in a razor!
12. **HUNGER RANGE**.....*Philip Ketchum* 105
Nothing for Christmas—but bullets!
13. **SHOOT—OR SHOW YELLOW**.....*James O. Goodwin* 122
A man has his choice for his last meal on earth—all except eatin' crow!

Departments and Features

14. **CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ**.. "Sage hen"—or wise chick ..*H. McCord* 35
15. **TALES OF THE OLD WEST**..... Sutter and Marshall.....*Lee* 88
16. **BADLANDS BARGAIN**.. Third of Four Parts ..*Raymond S. Spears* 96
17. **ON THE TRAIL**..... "Ere death embraced her"*The Editors* 5

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● ON THE TRAIL ●



ON A night in the late Fall of 1849, the men of Downie's Flat, newest and most remote gold camp on the north fork of the Yuba River, were gathered in Bill McGhee's tent saloon, drinking a mixture of raw cornmeal, brandy and water—commonly known as "cornmeal fixin's"—stirred in a pan and served hot at one ounce of gold dust, or \$16 per pan.

It was a gritty drink, this concoction of McGhee's. It took real men to down it.

Among the boys who thus stuccoed their interiors against the promise of a hard winter swooping down the gorge, were William Downie, addressed as "Major" for no reason whatsoever, for he was a Scotch sailor who had jumped his ship in San Francisco Bay; "Cut-eye" Foster, horse trader and packer from Bullard's Bar down the river; Jim Crow, the Kanaka, who boasted that he was a cousin of King Kamehameha of the Sandwich Islands; and five "free darkies" whom Downie had attached to himself.

Out of the gorge came a stranger, crusted with ice and gaunt with hunger, who, when fed and warmed, gave his name as Robert Stoddard of Philadelphia. He told a startling tale that made the eyes of his listeners fairly pop out from excitement.

While hunting with a companion he had discovered a lake, the bottom of which was lined with gold nuggets. Filling their pockets and knapsacks, Stoddard and his friend had started back to the settlements, marking their trail so they could retrace it. Jumped by Indians, Stoddard lost his partner and his way, stumbling at last after many hardships onto the yellow ball of light that glowed through the

canvas walls of McGhee's saloon. To prove his story he had a handful of water-worn nuggets as big as pigeon's eggs. The rest he had thrown away in his flight, unable to carry them because of an arrow wound in his leg.

Far into the night the little party in McGhee's saloon discussed Stoddard's news pro and con. Was Gold Lake the fabled "Source of Gold?" Was it the lake whence came the dust and pebbles that colored most of the streams of Northern California? And—could Stoddard find his way back?

Stoddard thought he could and soon left for San Francisco to get backing for his trip. He interested twenty-five men in the venture.

In the meantime, Downie and his friends had talked, making secrecy impossible. By the time Stoddard and his party took the trail, at least 500 pop-eyed dreamers were in their train, unasked and unshakable.

They pushed to the crest of the Sierras and there wandered and back-tracked and floundered through snow water, while Stoddard searched vainly for landmarks. The ranks grew mutinous. Someone whispered that Stoddard was planning to lose them all and then come back to the precious lake alone.

An impromptu jury found him guiltless. Nevertheless a certain element served notice that if Stoddard did not lead the way to Gold Lake within forty-eight hours he would be strung up.

That night the condemned man slipped out of the circle of campfires and lost himself in the wilderness. He was never heard from again. And Gold Lake, if such a body of water really existed, was never found.

(Continued on page 126)

"I want that safe open—and
without delay. . . ."

THE LAST *Frontier*

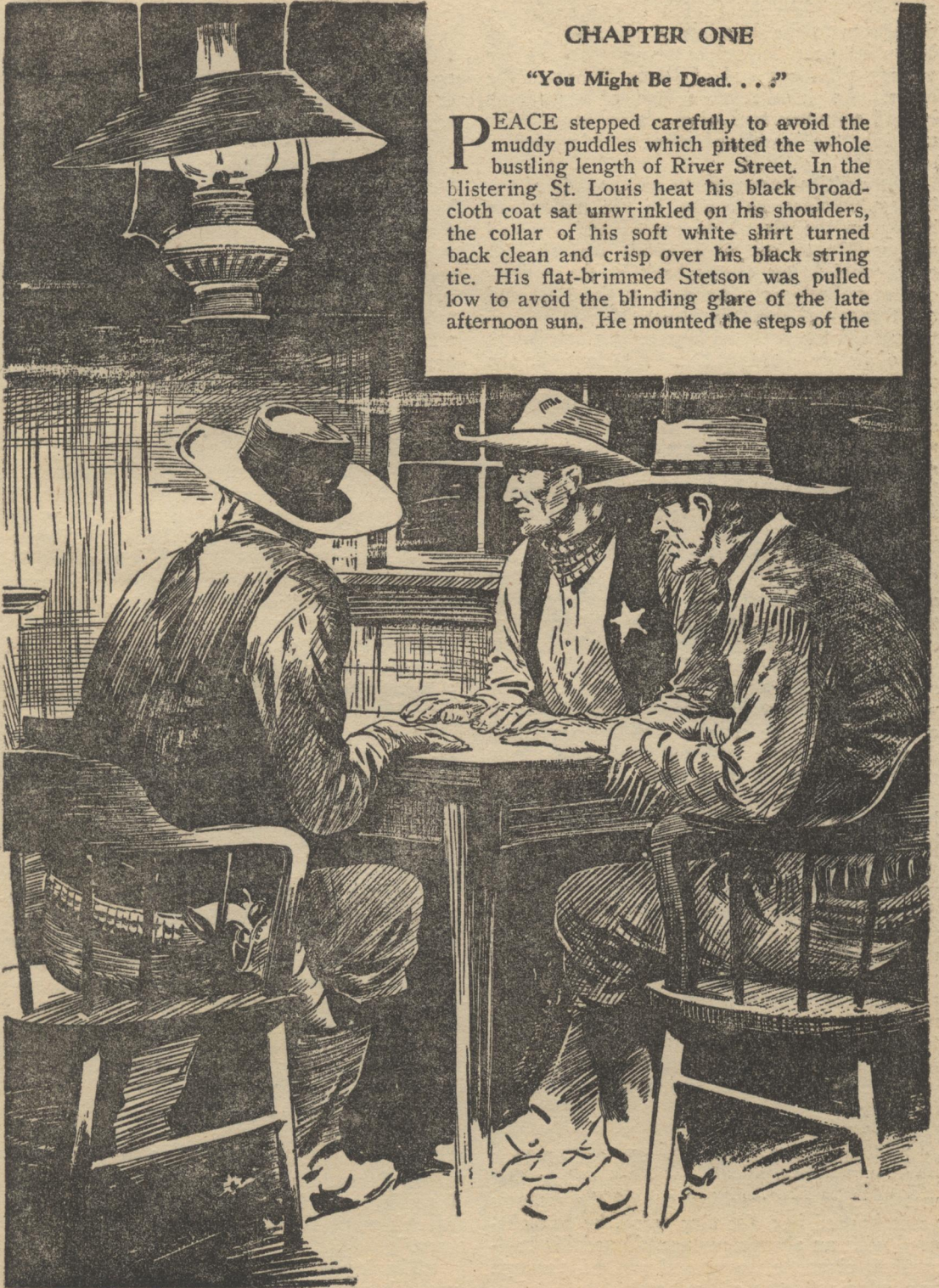


—
"Peace that is bought with
guns, mister—is kept by the
dead!"
—

CHAPTER ONE

"You Might Be Dead. . ."

PEACE stepped carefully to avoid the muddy puddles which pitted the whole bustling length of River Street. In the blistering St. Louis heat his black broad-cloth coat sat unwrinkled on his shoulders, the collar of his soft white shirt turned back clean and crisp over his black string tie. His flat-brimmed Stetson was pulled low to avoid the blinding glare of the late afternoon sun. He mounted the steps of the



Palace Hotel and paused in the partial shadow of the porch to roll a cigarette. He remained, watching and smoking.

Before him was the teeming, boisterous riverfront. The heat of the day made no difference to the Mississippi rivermen. Flat-bottomed open-decked batteaux crowded the wharfs from one end of River Street to the other. An inexhaustible line of stevedores lugged countless tons of goods up gangplanks and into the bowels of great paddle-wheeled steamers.

The multitudinous smells and sounds of the busiest commercial center in the nation lay heavy on the air. Men cursed and sweated and fought to get their goods out, so that they could bring others back in the endless exchange between merchants of the East and the traders of the new West.

In 1875 the railroad was only a few years out of its birthpains and for a little while the river was still king. The cattlemen, the wholesalers, the freighters who moved the ceaseless stream of goods, even the river itself, seemed to feel that the day of the thin steel rails was at hand. The muddy brown stream was swollen and thick with rain, moving at an ever faster pace as if in frantic answer to a challenge.

Peace watched all this with a strange detachment, the certain knowledge in him that all things new must age; the knowledge that this young, vibrant lawless town was growing up. In a few short months the march of westward progress had passed St. Louis by in its space-devouring surge. The signs of maturity were apparent everywhere and Peace knew a certain sadness he could not define, a restless discontent which manifested itself in a vague contempt for everything about him.

He knew only that he would be glad when his job was done and St. Louis was behind him.

His attention quickened as he watched a whiskey van rumble down the road. The driver jerked his horses to a stop and leaped to the ground, yelling for the stevedores to unload him. A dozen negroes moved unhurriedly from the wharf, deaf to the driver's abuse. The sun gleamed on their rippling muscles and turned their black backs to glistening ebony. They sang as they worked, a nameless chant whose rhythm rose and fell with the easy, effortless swing of their powerful arms.

Carefully Peace looked for the government seal which should be plainly stamped on each cask. When the blacks unloaded a keg that was bare of any marking except the maker's name burned into the new wood, he straightened with an abrupt gesture, flipped his half-smoked cigarette away and pushed through the swinging doors of the hotel.

HE STEPPED immediately to one side and stood for a moment, relaxed and motionless, accustoming himself to a comparative dimness. In the far corner of the ornate lobby a man lowered his paper and looked up. Peace nodded his head imperceptibly and the man folded his newspaper, stood up and walked unhurriedly to the broad staircase which led to the upper floors. Peace waited where he was until the man disappeared.

The tumultuous clamor of River Street was blurred and indistinct in the cool deep room. From his left—from the Gentlemen's Bar—came the intermittent clink of glasses and the lazy rumble of voices. He moved toward the sound, his muscles relaxing in pleasant anticipation.

The doors swung open and a woman came out, wiping her hands on a bright gingham apron and laughing over her shoulder. Peace stepped aside and said, "Careful, Molly."

She stopped and turned toward him, instantly serious, the faint flush of laughter still warm on her face.

Molly Ames was one of those rare things, a successful woman in a time when women in business were scarce and successful ones almost nonexistent. She had built the Palace Hotel from less than nothing into a paying proposition. Her house was well known. Famous men had put up there, men who made the times and helped to make the nation.

Peace looked at her small serious face and let his slow smile come.

"What terrible thing have I done to make you look like that, Molly?"

"I wish I knew, John." Her brown eyes searched his for a moment. Then she said in a flat voice, "Colonel Babcock has asked for you."

Startled, Peace said, "Who?"

"Colonel Babcock, the president's secretary."

She laid her hand on his arm. "I don't know what you're up to, John, but I know this—if those men you've gone to so many pains to cultivate should ever find out that you knew Colonel Babcock or that you had any connection whatsoever with the government—they wouldn't like it one little bit."

"Cultivate," Molly?"

"What else?" she challenged. "The whiskey crowd aren't your breed of men."

"H'mm," Peace said. "Perhaps you're right. You see a lot, Molly."

Still she held him. He could feel the warmth of her fingers through his coat sleeve. "What I see is there for others to read as well. I haven't many friends. Those I have I like to keep."

"Thank you, Molly," Peace said softly, "I'll remember."

Abruptly she dropped his arm and turned away. "Colonel Babcock is in the suite on the second floor."

For a moment he watched her trim, sure figure move toward the desk, reluctant to let her go, then with a shrug he turned toward the stairs.

In the second floor corridor the man with the newspaper waited for him. He was tall, almost as tall as Peace, with long sloping shoulders whose breadth stretched his buckskin jacket. He smiled humorlessly.

"Hello, John. I hear you got a seat with the mighty—the president's secretary, no less. Calling for you the minute he pulled in."

Peace gestured impatiently. "How many other people heard him, George?"

George Quist shrugged, lifting his pale eyebrows quizzically.

"The man is either a fool, or he doesn't know what he's doing."

"He's no fool, John. I served under him for a time in the Valley of Virginia. Right nice feller, in his way."

"I can't understand why Bristow would tell Colonel Babcock about me in the first place. I'm useless to Bristow if anyone connects me with his department."

Quist chuckled softly, "Worse than that, John—you might even be dead." His voice was broadly ironic. "Don't you fret, though. You ought to know that when people get to be secretary of the U. S. treasury like Benjamin Bristow, you got to forgive 'em, for they know not what they do. Sort of an occupational disease. They hire people for special hushed up jobs—and then they tell the first nabob that comes along. Don't seem to make much sense, do they?"

"Well, it's done." Peace pushed both hands outward in a gesture of dismissal. "How did you find things up country?"

"Just like we knew they'd be; the same as down here. Every distiller in the biggest whiskey section in the country is shippin' all the liquor he can beg, borrow or steal—an' paying taxes on about one third of it. The government revenue officers in each and every plant are hip deep in the fat of the land. They're getting paid off both ways an' through the middle—and they'll fight like a she-wolf to keep things the way they are." Quist smiled wryly. "If U. S. Grant fought a war like he runs a government, Jeff Davis would be sleeping in the White House right now. Man seems to have a knack for pickin' the wrong horse every time."

"He was a great man, George." Peace was silent, remembering.

Quist looked at him closely and said nothing.

Abruptly Peace said, "Well, keep in touch. I've got to see Babcock."

Quist watched him go down the corridor and sighed deeply, concern pulling at his lean face.

PEACE, annoyance still ruling him, knocked perfunctorily and pushed the door inward. A tall girl standing in the L of the deep bay window turned without haste to look at him. Her face was small and exact, her features clear. The strong light behind her outlined the matured curves of her body. She gave him a straight look, full of interest.

"Forgive me," Peace said.

Her voice, low and vibrant, stopped him as he stepped backward. "Don't go. Colonel Babcock will be here in a few moments."

"Thank you," he said. "If I may." He went to stand at the other side of the window looking out into River Street.

She considered him a moment and then took a high-backed chair and sank into it. Her interest was frank and without subtlety and he felt faintly uncomfortable under it.

"I'm John Peace," he said abruptly.

A slow smile lighted her face as her eyes went past him. He was unaccountably annoyed as her attention switched so abruptly.

A voice said, "Peace? Good! I've been anxious to meet you!"

The warmth in the other's tones surprised Peace and increased his irritation at the whole situation. He took longer than necessary to turn, his manner studiously reserved.

The man who stood in the doorway was of medium height, with a figure slim as a boy's. His blue eyes were startlingly bright under a heavy thatch of prematurely white hair. His mouth was firm and generous and now his even teeth flashed as he smiled.

"You've met. I'm glad. This is my ward, Mrs. Rhys Ormond." He swung again to Peace. "Captain John Peace of the Twenty-seventh New York."

His bright warmth was contagious. Peace felt some of his resentment receding. "That's past, I'm afraid. I've been a private citizen for sometime now."

"You look like a soldier," Rhys Ormond said. "I like soldiers." Her voice was soft and reserved without archness.

Babcock laughed. "That's quite enough, my dear. We've things to talk about. Perhaps you'll join us later."

"Yes," she said simply, and moved past him to the door. But her mind was not yet finished with Peace. She turned her head and gave him a deliberate glance as she passed into the hallway, leaving behind her a fragrance and the echo of her skirt's faint rustling.

Peace rolled a cigarette thoughtfully, re-

membering how this woman had appeared as she swept through the doorway. The color of her eyes was the color of green sea foam, her hair the deep red of autumn leaves.

He turned to find Colonel Babcock looking at him, his mobile face highlighted with faint amusement. It angered him to realize that this man had read his thoughts so plainly.

Babcock said, "You'll join me?"

He poured brandy into thin full-bellied glasses on a small stand by the window, brought a drink to Peace, and stood before him warming his own glass in his long graceful hands. After a moment he sniffed deeply of the fumes.

"Tell me, how is it progressing here?"

Deliberately Peace lifted his glass and drank it down, savoring the dry, warm bite of the liquor.

"Much as usual," he said.

Babcock frowned. "Come, man, you don't think I'd be here unless I had talked to Mr. Bristow?"

"You might," Peace said flatly.

Babcock's body was stiff, bent a trifle forward. "You doubt me?"

For the first time since he had entered the room Peace felt easy. Babcock's obvious touchiness served to lighten Peace's annoyance. He relaxed in his chair and crossed his legs, holding his empty glass in both hands.

"Not you, Colonel Babcock," he said, "but I confess to a wonder about your motives."

Babcock drew a long breath. His body lost its rigidity; his bright blue eyes began to twinkle.

"As secretary of the treasury," Peace went on, "Benjamin Bristow knows when to talk and when to be silent. As a man, Ben Bristow talks only when necessary. In either capacity he has too much good sense to tell even the president's secretary of my mission here."

Babcock threw back his head and laughed his infectious laugh, lifted his hands and shrugged humorously.

"Quarter! I know when I'm licked. All right, we'll leave Ben Bristow out of it. Suppose we say that I learned of your errand—well, through a mutual acquaintance. At any rate, I know that you're here to gather enough evidence of tax evasion to break up the Whiskey Ring." Babcock paused.

PEACE got the makings from his coat and rolled a cigarette with deliberation. He applied a match to it and inhaled deeply, letting the smoke rise lazily about his head. He knew Babcock had more to say and he saw no reason to make it any easier for him.

"I don't need to say that I'm firmly in agreement with what you're doing." Again Babcock paused. Peace looked steadily at the glowing tip of his cigarette.

"I wonder if you've considered the consequences if you break this scandal at this particular time. Surely you must realize that President Grant's administration would be seriously embarrassed by the burden of still another unsavory mess!" Babcock's voice was full and eloquent, his eyes impassioned.

"A thing like this coming on top of the forced resignation of Vice-President Colfax over the *Credit Mobilier* exposé of the monumental graft-taking in the building of the Union Pacific, and Mr. Richardson's loss of his post as secretary of the treasury and the subsequent prosecution of the members of his department for outright thievery, might do untold harm."

"Harm to whom?" Peace interrupted. "Harm to that pack of silk-hatted road agents who run the government? Surely, not to President Grant. Elections are less than a year away and Grant is through. Whom could this harm, Colonel Babcock?"

Babcock looked at him thoughtfully, his eyes serious and intent. Without answering he walked to the window and stood with his back turned to the room gazing out into the street.

The sun had gone and shadows had begun to fill the room. The busy bustle of River Street was stilled and in its place came the muted sound of music, crockery clinking, the bang of a door, a shout, and farther away the sound of a woman singing.

Peace sat motionless, relaxed, and at last Babcock began to speak. His voice when it came was low and distant, as if he spoke more to himself than to Peace.

"I have watched the men you speak of grow fat in these last years. Grant is helpless. One man can't stem an avalanche. His hands have been tied by the men around him. Greedy, lustful men, clutching at every penny, bleeding the whole nation without shame. I have wondered, in the face of these thieveries and hypocrisies in high places, how my country has been able to keep herself decent. And I have answered myself that there is always a majority of honest, just and well meaning men and women. Because of them the grafters and the politicians sit uneasily in their places. We, the people, are often befuddled and led astray because at bottom we are not splendidly endowed with good common sense." He paused and shifted his weight to lean against the window.

"But there is always the possibility that one man may capture the imagination of these people and, with them behind him, there is nothing he can't do. Nothing!"

He swung abruptly from the window and strode to Peace to stand tensely over him, his blue eyes blazing in the half dusk.

"Think, man! Think! Is Grant through?"

Suppose that Grant, already a hero to the people, should ask for a third term—should ask the people to stand with him and throw off the yoke of crooked politicians. No parties, no primary; his only platform—honest government for the people and by the people!

"Do you see now why I want this thing stopped? You might ruin him—and with him, you might ruin a nation—at least during our lifetime. He is the one man who can save this country—and now is the one time it can be saved!"

There was a long moment of silence. At last he straightened and shrugged his shoulders with a quick nervous gesture.

Peace sat weighing what he had heard, more than swayed by the eloquence of the man. There was a chance that he was right. The nation was heartily sick of the administration and its trickery. While it was common knowledge that Grant was surrounded by thieves, his own integrity was never doubted. The firm, clear honesty of the man was apparent.

Peace's common sense told him that Babcock was a visionary, that his scheme was impossible. Yet he wanted to believe, and his struggle was in his face. Babcock watched him intently, waiting for his answer.

There was a light knock and the door opened inward. Babcock swung about with an ill-concealed gesture of irritation.

"I got tired of waiting," Rhys Ormond said simply. She moved into the room, and Peace rose, glad that her presence dissolved Babcock's spell.

"Forgive me," he said. "I've wasted far too much of your time. I'll be going. Perhaps I shall see you at dinner downstairs."

Rhys Ormond turned her head to look at him.

"Perhaps," she said, and held his eyes with hers.

There was an awkward silence and then Peace stepped toward the door.

"Until later, then," he said and closed the door behind him.

Inside the room Babcock waited motionless in the dusk until Peace's footsteps died away. Then he laughed softly, triumphantly.

"I've got him!" he said, "I've got him!"

Rhys Ormond moved to the table. She took a long wax taper from the drawer and stood on tiptoe to light the gas chandelier. The soft light, flickering radiance, threw a thousand dancing points of flame into her dark red hair. Over her shoulder she said, "I wouldn't be too sure, Peter."

"I'm never too sure," he said. "I've taken precautions, don't worry."

She smiled slowly at him. "And I never worry, Peter."

He looked at her curiously. "No, by God,

you don't. I honestly believe, if I ever once failed you'd leave me like a shot."

"Umm," she agreed tranquilly, and poured brandy into one of the pot-bellied glasses while he watched her, his face pulled awry with bafflement.

CHAPTER TWO

A Man of Peace

PEACE walked thoughtfully down the corridor, sorting in his mind the implications of Babcock's words. There was a plausibility and an eloquence in the man that lulled the senses and distorted judgment. He realized there was a good chance for Babcock's plan to succeed. It would need the most careful planning and timing, but if it were properly handled Grant might again capture the heart of the nation and ride into the presidency on the same overwhelming wave of popular approval which had first placed him there. Once elected, if Grant were given a free hand, he would do his best to clear out the politicians who held the real power in the present administration. There was no doubt of Grant's honesty, yet in Peace's mind there was grave doubt of his judgment. Time and again he had made signally ill-advised appointments to his cabinet, appointments which had discredited his whole administration. Then when his men had been exposed as either bumbling fools or dishonest men, Grant had refused to credit the facts which lay before his eyes and had remained loyal to his friends and his opinions until the end.

For Peace there were but two courses, either he accepted Babcock's plan, halted his investigation and resigned, or he carried it through and saddled President Grant with still another harmful scandal—for his investigations had proven that the graft-taking went right up the line as far as the department of internal revenue itself. Neither choice held any satisfaction for him, and his irritation with the whole situation increased.

He tried to think. His inclination was to leave St. Louis as quickly as possible and head West, but his strict sense of loyalty to the man who had commissioned him held him here until he could reach some decision. There could be no waiting. His job was almost finished. There was little to do except touch the match to the train and let the treasury department handle the resultant explosion.

Peace descended the stairs, preoccupied with his problem. The tense stillness of the lobby didn't reach him until he turned toward the desk.

Molly Ames stood there, her face flushed and furious, her body bent back against the

wall, rubbing the back of one hand against her lips. Near her was a tall man in a black broadcloth coat and fawn colored trousers. He stood straight, hands clasped under the tails of his coat.

Beyond him George Quist crouched, his long arms hanging, fingers brushing the butt of his gun. His heavy-jawed face was ashen, wide mouth twitching, his pale eyes blank with concentration.

Peace quickened his pace and stepped between the two men. "Not now, George. Not now."

Quist's expressionless eyes went past Peace and held the other man. His left hand moved gropingly toward Peace to push him aside.

"He had his hands on her!" he barely whispered.

"It doesn't signify. I will not have blood shed over such a thing. Stand back!"

"Please!" Molly Ames said sharply. "It was nothing, George. There is no need for fighting."

Quist moved deliberately to one side to clear Peace's body.

Peace gripped him just under the armpit and slammed him against the counter. He lifted Quist's gun from its smooth holster and tossed it on the desk.

"So long as you work for me, you'll do your fighting at my wish. Do you hear me, George!"

He held the big man pinned against the counter. For the first time Quist looked at him, his eyes wild, his face suddenly suffused with color.

"Don't, John! Don't!" he begged and shook his head from side to side slowly, helplessly.

"Stay out of sight until I need you, George." Peace pushed him steadily toward the staircase.

Quist took a step and hesitated. He glanced once wildly at Molly Ames and then headed for the stairs at a half run.

Peace watched him for a moment and then turned. The man behind him was tall, taller than Peace. His thin handsome face was split by a well-kept Guard's mustache, as jet black as his tightly curling hair. His dark eyes were hot, his full lips contemptuous. Only now did he take his hands from behind his back to grasp the lapels of his coat.

"There was no need to bring your dog to heel. I am well able to take care of myself."

"A man who is too foolish to be afraid," said Peace shortly, "won't live very long in this country. Take my advice for what it's worth. Stay out of George Quist's path."

The tall man smiled and then laughed. "Thanks, I'll take your advice." He turned toward the barroom and laughed again. "For just what it's worth."

PEACE watched his tall graceful figure shoulder through the swinging doors and then he felt Molly Ames' hand on his arm.

"Thank you, John. I—I was afraid. No, it wasn't what happened," she added quickly. "I'm used to having men pawing at me in this business. He wasn't as bad as most. It was George's face. I've never seen a man look like that before."

"And I hope you never will again. It is not a good thing to have a man's blood on your hands."

She stared at him, wide-eyed at his implication.

"Where else would the blame lie," he said harshly, "if George Quist were dead this moment?"

Color flooded into her cheeks; her eyes began to snap.

"What damn fool things men will die for! What damn fools men are!"

Abruptly he took her by the shoulders. "Why do you leave yourself open to these things, Molly? This is no place for a woman. Surely you have been successful enough. Why don't you give it up? Sell out and do as you please. What are you waiting for?"

She looked at him closely, still faintly flushed and a little breathless, her eyes searching his. At last she said slowly, "I'm not sure of what I'm waiting for, John. But it hasn't come to me—not yet."

He dropped his hands from her shoulders and she watched the effect of her nearness on him, wanting to feel the touch of his hands again.

Abruptly he swung away. "We'll talk later, Molly. I must see to George."

She watched him move toward the stairs and felt pride in his high angular carriage, his supple, muscular sureness—and at that point she was sure of what she wanted, and terribly afraid.

In his room Peace stripped to the waist and shaved carefully before a long glass mirror. Cold water from the bed-stand pitcher stung his face as he sponged off the lather. He selected a soft, pleated linen shirt, attached his ruffled cuffs and laid the shirt on the bed. He waxed his boots until they shone and strapped his pants more tightly under the arches.

In his pacing he passed the small writing desk in the room's corner and paused thoughtfully. After a moment he sat down, drew the quill pen toward him and began to write.

The door opened abruptly behind him and without turning he said, "Sit down, George. This will interest you." He wrote for a few more moments before the continued silence made him turn.

Quist stood braced against the wall, his

head hunched forward on his wide shoulders, his eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. The smell of liquor was strong on him.

Peace got unhurriedly to his feet and moved to the far side of the bed. Whiskey made Quist unpredictable and doubly dangerous.

"I'm through," Quist said. "I'm telling you, I'm through right now."

Peace looked at him closely for a moment and then shrugged. "All right, George, you're through." He paused. "If it helps any, the man had a derringer in his coattails. You'd have been dead before your gun cleared leather."

"No," Quist said flatly. "It doesn't help. A man can stand just so much—and then something breaks and he's got to be different from there on in."

"It's as well," Peace said. "The job's through, too."

He held out the paper he had written and after a moment Quist accepted it. He took his time in reading, his lips soundlessly forming each word. Peace picked up his shirt and began to get into it.

"So you're quitting too," Quist said sharply. "Or did they get to you at last?"

"Explain that, George."

"You got the whole thing sewed up. All the evidence is there to hand. All that's left is to confiscate the records of the whiskey boys to find out just how high up the graft is goin', and then your case will stand up anywhere against anybody, any time. So you spent half an hour with the president's secretary and then hand in your resignation. How does that smell to you?"

"No," Peace said harshly. "No."

"I don't give one little damn," Quist said. "Not one—but don't expect a payoff on this job because the boys have stole a march on you. They beat you to the gun not half an hour ago. They confiscated the records of every whiskey dealer in St. Louis. Walked right in and took 'em without a finger raised to stop 'em. Seems as if they figured things would be better all around with the evidence in the right hands."

"Who did, George?" Peace said softly. "Who did?"

"A special U.S. deputy marshal, with authority direct from the president. Man by the name of Ravenal. Ever hear of him?"

Peace shook his head.

Quist laughed bitterly. "You just kept me from killin' him a little while ago! Remember?"

He tossed the letter on the bed and abruptly made for the door.

"George—" Peace hesitated, the pull of this man strong upon him. "George, if anything I've done—"

"Done!" Quist grated. Peace saw the tor-

ment in his eyes. "Done! Why, before God, man, did you have to make your play in front of her?"

The door slammed behind him. Peace stood there, head bowed, realizing for the first time that Quist meant what he said—that the thing he had done was to Quist unforgivable—and realizing also the futility of what Quist felt.

THE pressure of his emotion showed on his face. He felt harried and beset by the things which were happening around him. His surety was gone. The feeling was new to him and his impotence angered and worried him. He forced himself to think of his own immediate problems.

If the men higher up had persuaded Grant to appoint a special deputy it was only another example of the president's misplaced trust. The records which might serve to convict guilty men would most certainly disappear somewhere between St. Louis and Washington and the Whiskey Ring would flourish even more flagrantly than before. Peace's duty was clear. He should recover those records—after that he could decide what to do with them. To let them be irretrievably lost would be to betray a trust imposed on him by Bristow.

He reflected that Colonel Babcock would be pleased at the turn events had taken. As long as a scandal was averted Babcock wouldn't be too particular as to how it was done. That thought suggested another. Why should he himself be particular? He had already decided to suppress the evidence, at least until such time as it could be used to aid Grant rather than hinder him. Why not leave things as they were, shake the dust of St. Louis from his feet and yield to the pull of the Westward trek which was so strong in him? And yet he knew that even if he were free he could not go. Something held him here and he wasn't sure what it was.

Again his indecision angered him and he moved his head impatiently. He felt a sharp stinging sensation in his ear, and a fraction of time later, he heard the sharp flat crack of a rifle. He dived headlong for the floor beneath the window and flattened himself against the wall. The whole city seemed to cease breathing. There were timeless seconds of silence. Then, gradually, the night came alive again. Somewhere a man shouted. Just beneath the window a restless horse chattered at the hitching rack. Down the river a steamer hooted.

Peace reached up and jerked the heavy curtains shut over the window. He wiggled to one side and stood up. Across the room he could see his reflection in the long pier glass. A small red trickle ran down his neck and formed a rapidly widening stain on the soft white collar of his shirt.

Still looking at himself he began to remove his frilled cuffs and then his shirt. He used the shirt to staunch the flow of blood.

After a moment he walked to the bed, picked up his letter of resignation and tore it absently to fragments letting the bits of paper flutter to the floor unheeded. He selected a clean shirt, donned it, tied his narrow black tie, slipped into his coat and vest and walked over to his portmanteau at the foot of the bed. From it he took a small sawed-off .38 revolver that fitted comfortably into the palm of his hand. This he tucked in the waistband of his trousers and went again to the mirror to rearrange his vest.

The small blood clot on the lobe of his ear stood out against the pallor of his face. With the back of his hand he rubbed some color into his cheeks, smiling wryly at his reflection. Worries no longer beset him. His vacillation was gone. As simple a thing as the pressure of a finger on a curved bit of metal had made his decision for him.

He stepped into the corridor and walked lightly toward the stairs, whistling beneath his breath. In him were an excitement and an expectation that he was too exhilarated to analyze.

CHAPTER THREE

Bullet Bargain

THERE were few people at the tables in the dining room. It was a cool and restful place, pleasantly lighted by the great crystal chandelier whose flickering gas jets cast a soft radiance over the snowy white tables. The muffled clink of china and silver and the subdued rustling of the waiters were the only sounds to disturb the rich stillness.

Peace made his way toward a table where Molly Ames sat alone. In the soft gaslight her face was reposed and serene. Her shoulders rose gracefully white from her low cut gown. He stood for a moment smiling down at her.

"It's an unforgivable waste for such loveliness to dine alone."

She nodded without smiling and motioned matter-of-factly to a waiter. Peace sat down and accepted the wine which the waiter poured for him.

"Your health, Molly—and your happiness."

"Stop it!" she said sharply. "It's your health we should be worrying about. You're in a dangerous position."

Instantly serious, he reached forward and took her hand. "I meant what I said. Your happiness is important to me."

"Is it, John?" she looked steadily at him. "It wouldn't make me happy to see you—harmed. You are concerning yourself with

things in this town which are better left alone. Your appointment with Colonel Babcock is being discussed openly. The things that are said are not pleasant to hear."

"Leave it alone, Molly," he said gently. He released her hand and lifted his glass again. "I've always been a trouble to my friends."

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find Colonel Babcock smiling at him.

"My ward asks that you and Mrs. Ames join us for dinner." And as Peace hesitated: "It would give me great pleasure."

"No," said Molly Ames decisively. "You must be my guests, if you please. I will make arrangements."

Peace got to his feet as she rose. He saw George Quist come through the door of the dining room and stop as he saw them. Quist looked about him casually and turned to leave.

"Forgive me," Peace said. "I have some business. It won't take long."

Quist was standing in the lobby, idly reading the notices on the news board when Peace came out.

"George—I'd like one question, if you will."

Quist looked at him without answering and then shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"I don't suppose it could poison me."

"Where did they take the records they confiscated?"

Quist glanced up sharply, his whole expression quickening. His eyes searched Peace's face.

"What's in your mind, John?"

"I wondered," Peace said softly. "Somebody with a Sharp's repeater had a try for me. It was a long shot from the sound of it. It makes a man wonder."

He smiled at Quist and Quist dropped his eyes.

"You weren't that mad, were you, George?"

Quist let his breath out in a long sigh. "No, I wasn't that mad. Maybe they thought you'd scare easy."

"No, it was too close for that. It was business. Ravenal's business, maybe."

Abruptly Quist's head lifted. "They took those record books to the town marshal's office," he said rapidly. "There's four men in there sittin' on 'em." He hesitated, holding Peace with his eyes. "There's a raft of those records—a lot more than one man could carry."

"Thanks, George," Peace said. "A drink later, perhaps?"

"We'll see," Quist said uncertainly, "we'll see."

Peace made his way to the little group in the corner of the dining room. Rhys Ormond smiled up at him. Colonel Babcock and another man, whose back was to him, rose as Peace approached.

"You've not met Mr. Ravenal, I believe." Babcock's hand rested familiarly on Ravenal's shoulder.

"Oh, yes," Peace said, "I've had that dubious pleasure some time since!"

There was a tight little silence and then Ravenal grinned. "Mrs. Ames has agreed to forgive me. I trust you will too."

Peace glanced once at Molly Ames and sat down. "In that case it signifies little what I do."

"Yes," Babcock said hurriedly. "Yes. Suppose we dine. I have some business to attend to later."

Peace nodded blandly. "By all means," he said. "By all means."

Peace ate deliberately, immersed in his own thoughts, paying little attention to the conversation around him, fending deftly all attempts to draw him into discussion. The meal dragged on until Molly Ames suggested that the gentlemen be left to their coffee. Peace rose at once and felt Rhys Ormond's hand on his arm.

"I'm going to walk on the veranda. Perhaps you will join me, Captain Peace?"

"With a good deal of pleasure. You'll forgive me, gentlemen, I know." Without waiting for their acquiescence he led her from the room, sharply conscious of the tension behind him.

As they crossed the lobby Rhys Ormond laughed. "You have a singular aptness for offending, Captain."

"I'm not a captain, Mrs. Ormond," he grinned down at her. "And they who are offended easily—must have had a good deal of practice at it."

Again she laughed and he felt the slight pressure of her hand on his arm.

The veranda was cool and dim as they walked to the end and stood against the railing, looking out over the wharves. The river mist was rising in a ghostly silver curtain dimming the outlines of the silent jetties. From somewhere nearby came the sound of a banjo and negro voices singing a lonesome song. The river mist seemed to cushion and soften the night sounds and the acrid, exciting smells of River Street. A team pulling a Conestoga wagon rumbled by. Two men in the buckskin jackets and wide sombreros of the plainsmen rode on either side. Peace watched the outfit until it was lost in the darkness and felt again the urge to shake St. Louis from him.

"You envy them, don't you?"

"A little," he said, "I'll follow them when I can. There's a lot out there I haven't seen—a whole new land waiting for men to make it live."

"You're a strange man, John Peace. I could almost wish—" Abruptly she turned to

face him. "I wonder if you know what you're meddling with here?"

He was silent, feeling her nearness, disturbed by the faint perfume of her hair.

"Are you conscious of the forces against you? Do you realize you can't win—that nothing you do will change anything—in the end?"

"I'm not sure," he said slowly. "I will do the things I must do and play the cards as they lie."

"And after that you'll follow the wagon tracks Westward. Tell me, what is it you see out there?"

"New faces, new places, new smells, laughter, adventure, danger perhaps—I don't know. The other side of the mountain, I suppose. It's always greener there."

"It pulls you, doesn't it," she said softly. "Perhaps we'll meet some day out there."

He laughed harshly. "Colonel Babcock might have other plans!"

She held him steadily with her eyes for a long moment.

"I don't know that I should care."

Peace pulled her to him roughly—held her close against his body. Her head tipped back and he kissed her, the emotion in him shaking him as he ground his lips on hers.

"Rhys!" Babcock's voice was shrill with anger.

Neither of them moved for seconds; then Peace released her slowly, conscious of the rapid agitated sound of her breathing.

Babcock and Molly Ames were framed in the open doorway to the lobby. Behind them Ravenal grinned in frank enjoyment.

Rhys Ormond swept forward, the rustle of her skirts clearly audible in the silence.

"Come, Peter, take me to my room. Captain Peace has business elsewhere, I believe." Her voice was cool and assured.

Babcock turned reluctantly as she went past him. As the door closed Peace saw Molly Ames take Ravenal's arm with an angry gesture. Ravenal bowed slightly and laughed aloud. The sound of his laughter lingered in the darkness.

Thoughtfully Peace rolled a cigarette and lit it. He inhaled deeply and watched the smoke drift in the misty air. The night was cooler now. He shivered slightly and abruptly flung his cigarette away. The tiny red ember curved gracefully and landed in the dusty street with a sudden shower of sparks. He went rapidly down the steps and around the corner of the hotel toward the livery stable in the rear.

GEORGE QUIST sat alone at a small table in the bar. From time to time he filled his glass from the bottle before him. The pressure of his thoughts twisted his

wide mouth awry. Occasionally he ran his hand through his thick sandy hair in a slow deliberate gesture.

The long bar was gradually filling up. The pleasant clink of glasses and the undulant hum of conversation began to bring the room alive. A piano broke into a low lilting melody, scarcely audible above the familiar, warming sounds which fitted so exactly this time and this place.

A laugh, louder than the rest brought Quist from the close, tight world of his thoughts. He reached for his bottle and filled his glass exactly, anger ruling him because he could not be a part of this and might never be again. Quist was trapped in his own private hell. He knew, too, that he was powerless to change it. What was in him would burn with a slow helpless inexorability until it exploded into something he could control no more than he could control the beating of his heart. This was what Quist knew about himself and the knowledge quietly filled him with a bitter despair.

He got to his feet, feeling the pull of the whiskey strong in him, and walked deliberately toward the lobby.

Standing in the doorway, his big body loose and relaxed, he watched Molly Ames take leave of Ravenal at the entrance of her office. The door closed behind her and Ravenal stood before it for a moment, thoughtfully. Then he turned and walked toward the staircase throwing Quist a long careful look as he passed.

Quist went to stand in his turn at the door to the office, knowing closely what thoughts had twisted through Ravenal's mind, and waited to let that knowledge feed the slow smouldering something inside himself.

The door opened abruptly and Molly Ames said, "Why, George—come in, won't you?"

He began to shake his head. Then let her draw him into the room, feeling his own helplessness.

She stood by the low secretary, one hand resting lightly on its dark polished surface, the flickering light from the chimney of the desk lamp framing her vibrant face in its softness.

"George, there's something I want—"

"Wait!" he said harshly. He felt the words damming up in him and knew the inevitability of what he had to say. He drew a long, shuddering breath.

"I'd go to the ends of the earth for you, Molly. There's nothing, nothing. . . . But I've got to know—"

He made an abrupt, violent gesture. "I want you more than anything in this life. It's like a crawlin' pain—and I've got to get it out, Molly. I've got to know—"

She came swiftly forward and reached to take his heavy face between her hands.

"George," her voice was tender and infinitely understanding. "Oh, George—"

They stood there for a long moment, caught in time. Then her hands dropped to his shoulders while his big body gradually lost its tension.

"It's John, I guess," he said dully.

"Yes, it's John. I think it's always been John—and it always will be."

"I suppose I knew—I suppose I knew all the time," he said. "A man knows a thing an' he won't look it in the eye, because his guts turn to water an' he gets to be afraid—" He shook his head from side to side.

"He's quite some man, Molly—but he's hard, rock-hard, steel-hard—" he paused, watching her carefully—"an' maybe dead, by now."

He winced at the quick terror in her face and knew then surely, once and forever, what he had had to know.

"George!" her hands were tight on his arms, shaking him a little in her intensity. "George! What is it? What do you know!"

"Nothing it would help you to know," he said quietly. And then in answer to the entreaty in her eyes, "I know where he is and I'll go there, Molly, an' see what I can do."

She pulled him down and kissed him quickly on the lips and then turned and pushed him urgently toward the door.

Quist knew she stood there watching him cross the lobby and take his wide brimmed hat from the rack. He knew her hands would be clasped together, her eyes wide and cloudy with anxiety. He smiled without humor as he left the veranda following Peace's steps toward the livery stable.

IN HIS suite Babcock went immediately to the cellarette and slopped brandy into a bell-glass with unsteady hands. Rhys Ormond stood by the window looking down the dim-lit length of River Street, hearing the night sounds faintly through the closed glass.

"I suppose you'll say you did that for me—to make sure of him." Babcock said harshly, and then as she turned, "And don't lie to me, damn you!"

A small secret smile played about her lips. "No—I don't think I needed that to make sure of him. I did it because it pleased me."

"Pleased you!" Babcock's voice rose uncontrollably. "By God, you'll please yourself no more with him. I've made my own arrangements for Captain Peace!"

"I wouldn't like that, Peter. If anything happened to him—I'd see that you didn't like it either. And I can, Peter, you know I can."

Her voice had a quality that sobered Babcock immediately. He stared at her, his hands slightly raised, his white-haired handsome head jutting forward.

"What does this man mean to you?" he said slowly.

"I'm not quite sure," she moved forward to stand directly before him. "But this I know. We've come a long way together and now I think you begin to weary me. I begin to wonder if you haven't gone about as far as you'll ever go. Perhaps you are too sure of yourself, Peter—and of me."

His hand shot out and clamped on her wrist. The force of the gesture jerked her toward him until her body pressed close to his. He held her that way putting his strength into the grip on her wrist until he saw the whiteness of pain spring out around her lips. "I think I'd kill you if—" he whispered.

She looked at him steadily, without struggling, her breath coming a little faster now. "I don't believe it's in you, Peter."

Abruptly he released her and she went immediately across the room to her own door, as he watched her, hands clenched tightly at his sides.

She paused there and said without turning, "Remember something you said earlier this evening? Something about if you ever failed. Well, think about it, Peter, think about it. Perhaps the time has come."

He stayed for a moment his eyes fixed on the blank, closed door. Then he poured himself a brandy and went to stand before the window. He tossed down the liquor and with an abrupt gesture smashed the fragile glass against the casement. His fist beat a slow regular tattoo on the wall beside him. A small muscle began to twitch uncontrollably in his cheek.

QUIST kept a steady pressure on the reins. His horse moved restlessly under him, breaking from time to time into short prancing steps, anxious to stretch itself in the coolness of the night.

He passed the numerous waterfront saloons and dance halls on the inland side of River Street, acutely conscious of their sounds, holding a careful picture in his mind of what they looked like inside, the sparkling bottles behind the busy bartenders, the pretty dancing girls with their brightly spangled dresses, the jangle of an upright piano, the conversation and laughter of men who were relaxed and easy, the friendly pressure of a hand on the shoulder.

Quist knew why he didn't hurry and hated himself for it. He knew that he wanted to hear the sudden sound of shots from the end of River Street. To know that it was all over, that he himself could no longer be held responsible for anything that happened, Peace alive or Peace dead. Perhaps then. . . .

Hope dies hard in a man.

He reached the last of the honkytonks and dismounted there, hitching his horse to the

rack. In the dim light from the windows he checked his Navy Colt, spinning the cylinder once and letting the heavy weapon drop back into the holster, lifting it once more and settling it gently. Then, keeping to the shadows of the unlighted office buildings, he made his way down the street toward the one lighted building which was the town marshal's office.

Almost immediately in front of him was a buckboard. He could hear the restless stamping of the horses and the jangle of the harness. He skirted it carefully and stopped when he heard the low mutter of voices.

"How long you reckon he be?"

"Don' you worry, boy, we jus' do lak he tole us an' stay put right wheah we is til' he call us."

He could see the indistinct shapes of boxes piled in the wagon but the two black boys were invisible in the darkness, and he grinned at Peace's thoroughness. He went on toward the building, rising on the tips of his toes as he neared it, conscious of the slithering sound of his boots on the rough board walk.

He removed his hat as he reached the window and lifted his weapon from its holster. He hugged the shadows near the wall, careful to stay clear of the light, and peered in, keeping his body well to one side. The room was small and bare, without decoration. A large plain desk filled one wall, next to it in the corner was a heavy iron safe. Three men sat at a square deal table. The light from the hanging lantern pinned them in its circle of brilliance. All of them had their hands pressed flat on the table, white and rigid against its stained surface. Their eyes were fixed on a point beyond Quist's vision. He craned forward a little until he could see an arm slightly extended, at its end a snub-nosed revolver. Evidently Peace was standing with his back to the wall just to one side of the doorway. He could hear Peace's voice distinctly through the closed glass.

"I assure you, it's not my purpose to harm any one of you, unless you make it necessary. I want that safe open—and without any further delay."

The three men stared at him without moving and without speaking.

"I have a wagon outside and two helpers. I could take the safe as it is, except its weight makes it awkward. I intend to have it opened here.

"Don't misunderstand me, gentlemen. I mean what I say!" His voice was sharp and deadly, spacing each word.

Quist was conscious of a movement in the darkness outside the door and pulled back sharply. He could see the vague outline of a crouching figure against the lighter background of the house. He waited motionless, holding his breath, hearing the sound of

Peace's voice inside the room, but no longer understanding the words. He caught the faint glint of metal and in that instant he fired and yelled at the same time.

"Watch it, John!"

The heavy slug from Quist's .44 drove the body of the man against the door, bursting it open. Quist ran forward during the instant of silence. There was a sustained roar of firing from inside the building. As he lunged through the doorway Quist collided heavily with a man coming out and fired again as his gun jammed against the hurtling body. The man slid away and Quist leaped to one side through the doorway.

One man sprawled across the table, a slowly widening pool of blood seeping from under his head. Another sat propped against the wall, his gun between his legs, holding his shoulder with his left hand. The five-pointed star on his vest gleamed dully in the dimness of the room. The last man Quist had shot lay on his face in the doorway moaning softly and rocking his head from side to side.

"I wondered if you'd show, George."

Peace hadn't moved from his position by the door. His short-barreled revolver covered the man propped against the wall, who stared back at him dully, his face white with pain and shock.

The room was dim with smoke. It eddied and swirled about the light like a river of mist. The acrid tang of gunpowder hung heavy in the air.

"Thanks for siding me," Peace said softly. "But there's hell to pay here. I had hoped to handle it without shooting. These men are only taking orders. They are law officers as well as we are, you know." He sighed wearily. "It's a nice point of jurisprudence, that. Well, I suppose it can't be helped."

"No," Quist said shortly. "Not now it can't." He stepped forward and stood over the man against the wall.

"All right, let's have it. Open up that box."

The man stared at him dumbly, his tongue moving slowly over his ashen lips.

Deliberately Quist lifted his weapon and raked the thin steel sight across the pale face beneath him. The man cringed and hitched himself over the floor to the safe and frantically spun the dial with his good arm.

Peace leaned from the door and called, "All right, boys. Come an' get it."

He looked thoughtfully at Quist. "Thanks again, George," he said dryly. "You do things with a heavy hand."

Quist swung the door of the safe open and leaned across its top, watching silently as the black boys filled two wooden crates with the books and ledgers it contained. From time to time Peace lifted a ledger and thumbed rapidly through it.

"This is it, George. This is everything we needed—and more."

"All wrapped up," Quist said. "You just take 'em away, put 'em in a safe place, hold on to 'em for a while. Then you get 'em to Washington a couple of thousand miles away. An' all this with nothin' but the heat of the day to bother you."

Peace grinned at him, "You make it sound harder than it is." And then seriously: "I want you out of here, George, before people start to investigate. There's a reasonable certainty that my authority can cover me in this. You I'm not too sure about. You'd best be out of it."

Quist hesitated, held by the promise of action he knew would come, any action to dampen the urge which still ruled him—the desire to hurt, to maim, to smash something with his fists.

"You could be of use at the hotel, if you will. It would help to know what our friends are doing. And I plan to put our loot in the hotel safe for the time being."

Quist looked at him sharply. "That could be dangerous, John—dangerous for Molly."

"In that case, George, it's where you belong. I couldn't arrange better protection for her." He smiled casually and turned back to watch the board top being nailed to the heavy crates, dismissing Quist as if he had never been there, secure in the knowledge of his own judgment.

Still Quist hesitated, wanting to stay. Yet the habit of obedience to this man was strong in him. Abruptly he made up his mind and the decision showed in his face. He left without speaking.

Peace stared at the blank doorway, thoughtfully pulling at his chin, thinking of the careful pattern each man must follow and that George Quist's pattern was more distinct than most.

QUIST lifted his horse to a hard gallop, enjoying as always the release which any action gave him. The wind whipped the brim of his hat flat against his head and brought the blood to his face.

He stabled his mount and went at a fast walk around the hotel, pulling himself down at the last moment to make his entrance casual and unconcerned.

Across the lobby Molly Ames was visible through the door of the office, seated at her desk. Her head came up at his entrance. He nodded twice in reassurance and then, as she started to rise, raised his hand to hold her where she was. Casually he hung his hat in its accustomed place and cut across the lobby to push open the doors of the barroom.

He had his drinks at the end of the crowded bar, taking time enough to savor the whiskey

and to make sure that the men he was looking for were not there. He tipped the bartender and went once more to the lobby. Picking up a discarded newspaper on the way he crossed toward the row of easy chairs near the wall and settled in one on the end, commanding a clear view of both the bar and the main doors.

A little later a man came from the street, pausing a moment to extinguish a cigar in the sand box near the door, while he examined the room. What he saw seemed to reassure him, for he took a chair at the far end of the

He saw Ravenal draw a gun and take deliberate aim. . . .



row and he, too, became immersed in a newspaper.

Quist found the waiting difficult. He rolled a cigarette and smoked until the stub burned his fingers. The tension was mounting in him again. He debated whether to go to the bar once more and decided against it. He didn't know Peace's plans but he knew Peace well enough to know there were plans. The situation worried him. Babcock and his gang couldn't afford to let those records get to Washington. The stakes were too high—a lot too high—to let a few lives stand in the way. When the news of the business at the marshal's office got to Babcock, or the whiskey dealers, there would be hell to pay. The dealers could get together a lot of men in very short order. Time was running out fast.

The street doors opened and Peace stood there holding them while the two black boys filed past him, each carrying one of the heavy crates.

"Across the lobby, into the office," Peace said. He glanced once at Quist and once at the man in the other chair near him, and followed his boys.

Quist forced himself to be only casually interested. He saw Molly Ames get to her feet as Peace entered. The roustabouts disappeared from sight in the office and a few moments later Quist heard the clang of the heavy door of the safe. There was the muffled sound of conversation and the black boys came out and crossed the lobby, chattering to themselves.

The office door closed and Quist went back to his paper. He hadn't long to wait. The man who sat near him hurriedly dropped his paper, got to his feet and went at a run toward the staircase. Quist waited until he had made the turn on the stairs and then went across the lobby to the office.

The door was cracked an inch or two, and the voices inside were clearly audible. He put his hand on the heavy brass knob and stood motionless, knowing that he would stay right there to listen and feeling the hot blood mount to his face at the knowledge.

"Oh God, John, I was so afraid—"

"Why, Molly," Peace's voice held a faint surprise. "There's no need for tears. Eggs will be broken in any omelet—even a rotten one like this."

"Don't make light of it. How can you make a casual thing of it? Don't you see what you've done to me?"

"Why, Molly," Peace said again with real concern.

"I've no defenses left, John. I love you—and I'm afraid. My heart breaks inside me with fear for you."

"Don't, don't," he said agitatedly, "You mustn't, Molly—"

"I know, John, I know," her voice broke with a little hopeless catch.

"I'd hurt you, Molly, I'd hurt you more than you know. The kind of thing you want isn't in me—and never could be."

Quist flung the door violently inward to crash against the wall.

"You'll take her, John! By God, you'll take her if she wants you!"

He was crouched in the doorway, rocking slightly on the balls of his feet, his face worked spasmodically, his fingers were extended claw-like over the butt of his gun.

"You'll take her—or I'll take you!"

Peace moved a little to one side. "George!" he said sharply. "George!"

He knew this wild ungovernable fury that swept Quist. He had seen it tear at the man before. He knew that Quist meant what he said, and that while it lasted he was as dangerous and vicious as a mad dog, and as unreasoning.

"George!" he said again, and moved once more. Molly Ames made a small inarticulate sound and started forward. Quist steadied on his feet and his hand dropped to his gun.

There was a sudden rush of feet and an explosion of voices.

"Fire! Fire!"

The cry rang out above the noise and was taken up and carried on in all directions. Quist turned uncertainly and Peace knew this crisis had passed. He brushed past him into the lobby.

Smoke billowed down the wide double staircase from the upper floors. Men fought to get through the barroom's swinging doors and at the doors to the street. A man appeared out of the smoke from the upper floors carrying a woman in his arms. He stumbled down the stairs.

"There's people up there! The whole thing's blazin'—it's all over upstairs!"

Peace yelled over his shoulder, "Get Molly out!" and went up the stairs at a run.

He reached the top and stumbled along the corridor, blinded by the smoke. He could hear screams in front of him, toward the rear of the hotel.

Dim figures hurried past him, blurred and indistinct in the murk. The hot smoke blistered his eyes and tortured his lungs. The end of the corridor was a roaring holocaust and tongues of flame licked rapidly along the thick carpet, eating up the wooden walls as though they were paper. His coat began to smoulder and he beat at the embers along his sleeve. The heat drove him back toward the stairs. There were no more figures now and no more screams. He stumbled and fell, landing in a tangled heap of rags. He could smell the raw grain whiskey saturating the waste and knew that the fire had gained such devastating headway because the walls and the rugs had been soaked in volatile alcohol.

The handrail guided him down the stairway. He heard Quist's voice calling to him and felt Quist's hands on him, helping him as he staggered across the lobby and through the doors. Then the blessed cool air hit him like a physical shock and he sucked great gulps of it into his aching lungs.

The smoke cleared from his eyes. Behind them the hotel blazed, long towers of flame shooting high into the dark sky, lighting up the scene before him. Across the street the crowd milled and eddied in a weird ballet of flickering shadows and twisted grimacing faces. Some people were half-dressed, others lay on the ground, still others bent over the prostrate figures.

In front of the crowd stood a small group of figures and Peace recognized Ravenal a little apart from the rest.

Quist was in front of him now, holding his arms and yelling something that was lost in the roar of the fire. Over Quist's shoulder Peace saw Ravenal draw a gun and take deliberate aim. He tried to shout,

The report of the gun was sudden and crisp, distinct from the crackling of the blazing building behind him.

Quist yelled once sharply and sagged against him, his face shocked and incredulous. Peace tried to hold him but Quist's body seemed to turn to fluid slithering through his arms to the ground like quicksand. He straightened and fired with the same motion, feeling the buck of the gun against his palm. He watched Ravenal crumble in slow motion, firing deliberately now, following the man's body with his shots until the gun no longer jumped in his hand. There was an ominous crackling behind him and for an instant the fire roared louder than before. A shower of sparks fell around him. He bent to lift up Quist and something struck him between the shoulders, driving him to the ground on top of Quist's body. Quist's lips were near his ear.

He thought he heard him say, "Take care of her John," before everything about him dimmed and, for Peace, the fire went out.

PEACE came to all at once, without gradation. One moment there was blackness; in the next the pale dawn was in his eyes. He pushed a covering away from him and sat up, and saw that he was on an improvised litter on the ground. He was one of a dozen other figures stretched out in a row. People moved back and forth along the line.

Molly Ames said, "Lie back, John, you'll be all right now." He looked up to find her standing beside him, her hair hanging about her shoulders, a long smudge of soot along one cheek.

"No," he said, "I'm all right now," and got unsteadily to his feet. He was grateful for her quick grip on his arm.

"George?" He knew the answer from her averted face, and felt a quick sense of loss, a loneliness as sharp as the cut of a knife.

"He wasn't—alive—when they got him out."

Wearily he looked about him. The Palace Hotel was a smouldering mass of charred and smoking debris. Here and there flames still licked at the wreckage. From time to time a dying ember cracked loudly in the soft morning air. Curious onlookers still stood about in bewildered groups. On the wharf side River Street was coming alive again. Stevedores carried the same bales and boxes aboard the same flat-bottomed river boats. The endless business of barter and exchange would not stop because a hotel had burned or because a man had died—or many men.

"How many?" Peace asked looking at the charred mass.

"We think eight," Molly said slowly. "It's difficult to tell." She made a forlorn little

motion of her hand toward the line of litters and their burdens.

"Yes," Peace said aimlessly. He found that he was bare to the waist, his smoke grimed chest criss-crossed with bandages, white and clean against the darkened flesh. He shivered uncontrollably in the cool air.

"I'll get you a covering of some sort."

"No, wait." He checked her with a gesture, his eyes following an open *calèche* which picked its way through the early traffic on River Street. He walked out as it drew opposite them and motioned the driver to stop.

"Good morning, Colonel Babcock—and you, Mrs. Ormond. I'm sorry to see you're leaving us."

Babcock's face was white and drawn, his lips bloodless and compressed. Rhys Ormond leaned comfortably back, traveling robes tucked snugly about her, cool and clean and crisp against the dark green upholstery of the carriage.

"At least you're taking something to remember us by," Peace waved his arm toward the hotel. "Eight deaths confirmed—and possibly more. We won't be able to tell for some time."

Babcock licked nervously at his lips. "I had nothing to do with this, Peace," he said rapidly. "Nothing. Nothing whatever."

"Perhaps not—but you'll remember it for the rest of your life. It won't be an easy thing to live with, Colonel."

"I—I don't understand your attitude, Peace. I bear you no animosity. On the contrary, I shall tell Secretary Bristow how well you performed your mission—that its failure was no fault of yours."

"That is very generous of you, Colonel. I am grateful. And you, Mrs. Ormond, will you add a good word for me?"

Rhys Ormond smiled coolly. "Of course I will, Mr. Peace—the very moment we get to Washington."

"I had thought to see you traveling westward," Peace said softly.

"No." her green eyes held his steadily. "I tossed a coin—East or West—and the East won. I have a failing for a winner."

Peace laughed shortly without humor, and stepped back as Babcock motioned to the driver. He stood watching as the carriage joined the River Street traffic once more.

"Is it so hard to lose, John?"

Molly Ames stood beside him and he smiled down at her.

"I think it will be—for them," he said. "Those boxes in your safe were decoys. I put the real records on the river steamer last night. They should be halfway to Chicago by now. And Colonel Babcock is implicated right up to his stiff neck. It won't be a pleasant surprise for him."

She stood very close to him and he slipped his arm about her waist.

"And what now, Molly? From the looks of it you're out of business. What will you do now?"

She moved against him, turning slightly to face him. "I think perhaps I'll go West now, John."

His face was serious and faintly frowning. "You're sure—you're sure of what you want?"

"I've been sure for a long time. Yes, I'll go West—with you, if you'll have me."

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked steadily into her eyes. The noise and bustle of River Street faded out until there was nothing for him but her small resolute face.

"It's a bad bargain, Molly," he said slowly. "There will be hardship and privation and danger—" he smiled bleakly, knowing himself and what he was—"and perhaps another Mrs. Ormond along the way—"

"I know," she said softly.

He leaned down and kissed her, conscious of the closeness of her body, the warm softness of her lips, and feeling a great gladness welling up inside of him.



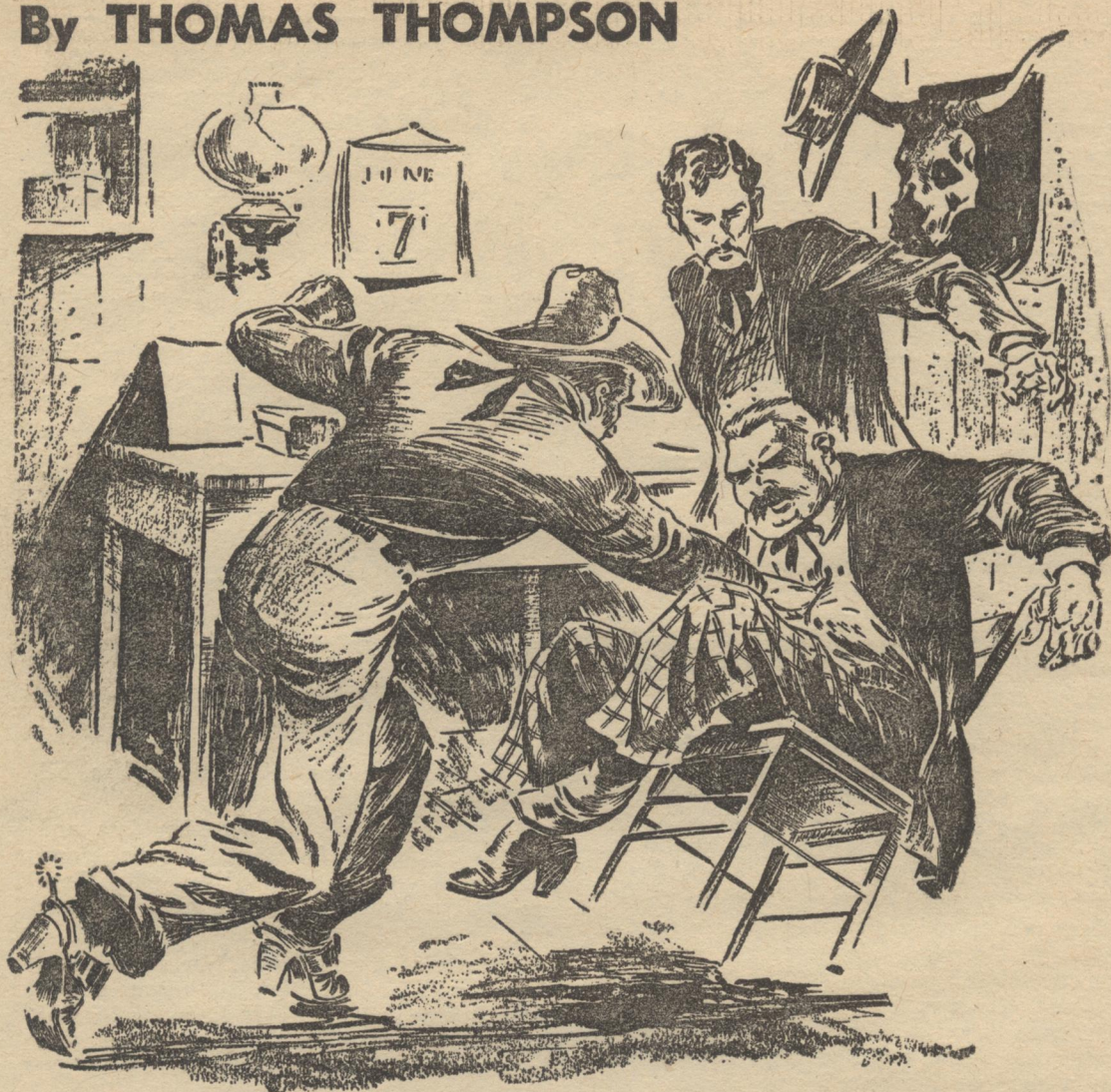
DONALD COLE*

has switched to Calvert because Calvert is smoother

*of 1221 Whitney Bldg., New Orleans, La.

CALVERT RESERVE Blended Whiskey—86.8 Proof—65% Grain
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By THOMAS THOMPSON



Everything inside Dan Wilbur let out at once. . . .

HOT LEAD

AT FIRST it didn't mean much, what Vance Krupke was saying, and young Dan Wilbur stood there letting the words strike against his hide without penetrating, the way other words had been doing all day. Sometimes a man's grief makes a shield that protects the deepness of his own feeling. It was like that with Dan. People said the same things over and over; well meaning things that in themselves were devoid of meaning. Like the rest of the town, Dan Wilbur had loved his father.

But now he began to hear the words Vance

Krupke was saying, and they weren't the same words Tim at the livery stable had used; they weren't the same words anyone in town had used. Vance Krupke was saying that there'd have to be a new sheriff now and he was saying young Dan could be that man. Those were the words that had rolled off Dan's shield; it was the way Vance Krupke was saying them that made them work through.

It wasn't as if Dan had a man to run down and kill. The drunken breed who had killed Sheriff Dan hadn't lived five minutes. A dozen guns held in the hands of men who respect-

"You've got the hankering to live like your father, Dan. Have you got the guts to die like him?"

ed the sheriff had seen to that. The breed had never known what struck him three seconds after he fired the shot that killed old Dan Wilbur. It was the town's way of showing what they thought of the sheriff.

Outside the heat stood fallow and sere against the land, rippling some on the rim-rock of the buttes, lurking in a sullen mass here in the bottom of the coulee that ripped a two mile wide gash across the high plateau of eastern Washington. The heat seemed to be a part of the sudden deadening of motion that had gripped the town since old Dan's death. The saloons were closed; the stores were closed. Horses stood head down and motionless and the dogs sought shade and stayed there. There was some activity at the church, but it was a slow and silent activity. They would bury Sheriff Dan in another hour. Vance Krupke's voice had an unwelcome rasp. It was as if the first rip of the winter wind had come from the snow fields of the Cascades three months too soon.

Vance Krupke said, "I don't want to rush you son. I know how it is."

For a second young Dan stood there looking at the man who ran Coulee Butte. For some reason it was the first time he had ever seen Krupke, though he had known him all his life. Now he saw that the saloon keeper was no more than three years older than himself. It was the penetrating steadiness of Krupke's black eyes, the certain droop to his thin lips that made him seem older. That and the fact that Vance Krupke had killed a man. People said little of that, but they hinted of it at times.

There were a dozen things Dan Wilbur would have said. Like "Thanks," for example. Those dozen things caught in his throat somehow. He said, "I guess it's up to the voters of the county to decide that, Vance."

"I don't worry about the voters," Vance Krupke said. He didn't say it in a bragging manner, he didn't say it as a threat. He was making a flat statement with no reservations. "I thought maybe your dad had told you that."

"He kept his business to himself," young Dan said. "I've been away some to school the last couple of years."

"Being sheriff in this country means playing the cards right," Vance Krupke said. There was more to it in the way he moved the cigar, the way one eyebrow suddenly arched.

"Dad never took orders from any man in his life," young Dan said softly. "Take a look at this town and the faces of the people and you can see that."

"The people in this town are stupid, Dan," Vance Krupke said. "The people of the whole damn coulee are stupid. They'd have to be to live in this God forsaken hole. They haven't got sense enough to know what's going on. There are angles on the side for a smart man like your dad."

IT STILL wasn't getting through the shield; not all of it. It was a bunch of words. A muddle of sounds, just as the roar of six-guns and the blast of a sawed-off shotgun had been sounds. Just as the silence of a town in grief is a sound; just as the thud of rocky

HERITAGE

Dan said, "I'm sorry, Vance. I guess I didn't hear you right."

Vance Krupke took out a silver cigar cutter and snipped the end off a cigar. He fumbled in the pocket of his white shirt for a match, found it, lit the cigar and inhaled deeply. The expression in his eyes did not change, but he flicked them quickly over the tall raw-boned frame of the younger man.

He said, "I said I'd like to see you take over your dad's job, Dan."

soil on a coffin would soon be sound. But some of it was getting through and there was a tightening inside Dan Wilbur that was different from the grief lump that had laid solidly in his belly all morning. It was a tightness now that seeped into his arms and played along the stringy muscles of his legs. He said, "Say it plain, Vance."

"Sheriff pays one hundred a month. Taxes, when a man can collect them, make up for a little more. There hasn't been a man able to

pay his full taxes for three years. Plain enough, Dan?"

Dan Wilbur looked at the well furnished room that still held so much of his father. He thought of Mary, the Spokane Indian woman who had kept house for his dad the last few years. Old Dan ran a hundred head of white-faces up on the bench and he had talked some of wheat land since young Dan came back from school.

School. Dan ran his mind quickly over the two years and the realization that he had had more to spend than a lot of men's sons did not give him the satisfaction that was automatically a part of such thinking. Instead it left a quick jerk of fear. It seemed that his heart beat faster but the blood in him flowed less swiftly. He thought maybe his face had paled some.

He saw Vance Krupke smiling. Krupke said, "That's right, Dan. It's harder than hell to do on one hundred a month."

Dan didn't realize that he had hit him until he saw Krupke there on the floor, a trickle of blood running out of the corner of his mouth. The cigar lay off to one side and it was slowly burning a hole in the carpet. Dan left it there. He kept rubbing the knuckles of his right hand, feeling them knobby and raw against the smooth palm of his left. The church bell began to toll and he went to the closet and got his coat, putting it on automatically. He didn't look at Krupke, still lying there on the floor. He just smiled and said, "I've got to pull myself together."

They were all there at the church, every man and woman of the coulee. Wind-raved and sun-blistered men, women with far seeing eyes born of watching a dust cloud that marked the slow moving plows of their husbands. These were old Dan Wilbur's people in life and they had come now to pay him homage in death. Young Dan knew them all and loved them all and yet looking at them there were only four faces that he could recognize. Those faces, somehow, did not belong.

Mangren, the bartender. A soft flabby man with square-rimmed silver glasses resting against the sweat of his face. LaVerne, who ran the faro bank at Vance Krupke's saloon. A small man, dark, soft-spoken, quick of movement. And then there was Dakota, the drifter who had come to Coulee Butte on a jaded horse and stayed. He broke horses sometimes. He had been known to work in the hay. But mostly he hung around Vance Krupke like a dog expecting a bone from a master's hand. The other was Vance Krupke himself, the smear of blood gone from his face now, his lips puffed and discolored. Dan Wilbur couldn't say why it was that these were the only men he saw.

The preacher was one of the people. He had a small place up the coulee in the shade of Ship Rock. A place where a stagnant marsh let him water the four milk cows and the willows laid shade enough for the two dozen chickens that constantly fluffed themselves in the half alkali dust. With that and the Sunday collection a man could live if he believed in what he was doing. The preacher did.

He spoke sincerely and directly now, the only way he knew. "God made this a big land," he said. "He made it a hard land and sometimes we have been sorely tried but we have stuck with it and God has blessed us. He blessed us with the land and He blessed us with a rock like Dan Wilbur. I am your humble shepherd here and you have come to me in time of sorrow and I have done what I could to counsel you and comfort you. But I am only human and there were times when I needed a strong arm around my shoulders. It was then I thanked God for a man like Dan Wilbur."

The voice droned on and the church became increasingly sticky and hot. Young Dan, from his place in the curtained off mourner's room, could see the faces out there. Hard lined faces; faces of men and women defying the land itself. Faces that were not ashamed to show grief at the passing of a friend. And yet he really saw only the four who sat on the last bench and he saw that there was no real grief in those four faces. The calculating hardness of Vance Krupke's eyes seemed to lay across the group. He tried to focus his attention on the words of the preacher but his own thoughts drowned out the sound. *Vance Krupke is lying. Vance Krupke is lying.*

There is little to remember of a burial except the finality of the thing. It was like that with Dan. Once he caught himself thinking that someone would have to dig a grave someplace for the breed, and the thought was completely impersonal and without emotion. It was the way a sheriff might feel about a man he had to kill, Dan thought, and that brought him back to the present. He realized then that Jane Compton was standing by him and he knew that she had been standing there all the time.

He touched her hand and said, "Thanks, Jane." She didn't try to say anything. Her being there was enough.

They filed back into the town then and women broke their step when they came alongside Dan. Some touched his arm; some started to speak and then their eyes filmed and they went on. Two men stopped him and gripped his hand silently. One said, "You can be proud to be his son, Dan." These were the things and the sounds he had felt and heard since it had happened. These were the people who had loved his father, trying to put

into words the things that no man can say. He walked away from them and when he came to the saloon he saw Krupke and the others standing there on the porch.

Krupke came forward and offered his hand. He said, "You were unstrung, Dan. Let's forget it."

HE LET time trickle by. Time in which he did not eat the food Mary, the squaw, set out for him. Time in which he neither knew nor cared what went on around him. And finally the grief had run out of him and he went to the bank and talked to Jeff Knight.

"Not much, Dan," Jeff said quietly. "Your dad had a way of stretching his money, but not that far. It took all he made accumulating the few head of stock he has and keeping up the house and sending you to school. But it was the way he wanted it," the banker hastened to add. "It was his way of giving the rest of us faith in the country. There's many of us would have given up if it hadn't been for your dad."

It reassured him, finding that there was no surplus of cash in the bank. A man, frugal enough, could learn to stretch a dollar. Vance Krupke had been guessing and he had guessed wrong. And now there was the quick rage that comes to a man who has known too much grief. It was the rage that makes brothers and sisters turn bitter at the time of death, each one accusing and mistrusting the other. He went to the saloon and found Vance Krupke. Mangren, the bartender, peered through his glasses and nodded when Dan came in. LaVerne, the faro banker let a smile run across his lips.

Dakota was in the office with Krupke. He sat sprawled in a chair, his lumpy frame hanging over the edges, his close-cropped head drawn low into his bull like neck. He blinked his thick-lidded turtle eyes slowly when Dan came into the room and his right hand moved sluggishly and shifted the weight of his gun.

Krupke stood up and offered his hand. Dan ignored it. "I'm ready to talk now, Krupke," Dan Wilbur said.

For some reason Krupke remained on his feet, there behind the desk. The expression in his eyes told nothing; he spoke directly, without preliminary. "Let the town cool off a day or so," Krupke said. "It's a big county, but it will go the way the town goes and if we say we want you for sheriff, you'll be sheriff."

"That's not what I want to hear," Dan said flatly.

Krupke's mouth twitched slightly and his eyes shifted to Dakota. "Your dad was smart, kid," Krupke said. Dan remembered the slight difference in their ages and the word "kid"

stayed with him and rankled him some. "Your dad knew who held the winning hand and was smart enough to string along."

"Meaning?"

"There's stages hauling payrolls at the other end of the county. There's supply trains and goods are not hard to sell if a man gets them cheap enough. Sometimes Indians get blamed for things and sometimes the Okanogan Bunch gets blamed. It don't make much difference who gets blamed, just so they don't get caught."

Dan stood there, letting it sink in. He had heard his dad cuss the sheriff of the next county a dozen times for not running down the Okanogan Bunch. They were out of old Dan's jurisdiction, if rumors were correct, so there was little he could do about it. And now, for the first time, Dan Wilbur wondered if any man had ever seen one of the Okanogan Bunch or was it a convenience invented by Vance Krupke. He forced the fleeting suspicion out of his mind.

"There's always someone stealing a horse or a couple sacks of wheat," Krupke said. "A sheriff can keep himself busy and his jail occupied now and then and it's all folks ask for. Especially if the sheriff is smart enough to get people to lean on him."

Dakota started to laugh. It was a thick throaty laugh that somehow seemed to be unclean. He said, "I thought I'd bust a gut when that gospel slinger said how he used to go lean on old sticky-finger Dan. Why old Dan—"

It exploded then. Everything that had been inside young Dan Wilbur let loose at once. All this accusation, all his grief, all the fears that had been growing and growing. He lunged at Dakota and sank his fist wrist deep in the big gunman's belly. Dakota went over backwards and as he hit the floor his hand went toward his gun. The weapon was out, blazing, and then Dan crushed his boot against Dakota's jaw.

Blood gushed from Dakota's ruined face but he managed to roll to his feet, swinging the gun up as he did. Dan, in a low crouch, butted his head into the big man's stomach and as Dakota went down Dan followed, both hands clutching at the gun. He wrenched it free and brought it crashing down against Dakota's head.

Dan stood up then, dazed, and he let the gun slip from his hands. Behind him Krupke said, "You've got a hell of a lot to learn, Dan. One thing is not to drop a gun once you've got your hands on it. Turn around." Dan obeyed the command and looked into the barrel of a derringer. The door opened a crack and Mangren, the bartender, stuck his head inside.

"Everything all right?" Mangren asked.

"All right," Vance Krupke said.

"What'll I say?"

"Tell 'em Dakota was likkered up and went loco." He looked at Dan a long time and a thin grin touched his mouth. "Tell 'em young Dan here man-handled Dakota and took his gun away from him. It'll make good campaign talk."

Dan's voice was tight against his teeth. "I'll do my own talking, Krupke. You and that gun and your damn gunhawks can't stop me."

Vance Krupke shrugged. "All right," he said. "You go tell 'em, Dan. Tell 'em you just found out your old man was a crook and the shock of it made you slug Dakota."

"Maybe I will, Vance. They'll fry you in hell."

"Would they?" Vance Krupke said, smiling. "Those stupid clodhoppers? They'd probably want to talk things over and while they were talking I'd have three scatter guns turned loose on them. They're no damn use to me, Dan. I'd like to see 'em kick. You still want to do your own talking?"

He knew as well as he was standing here that Vance Krupke would back up his threat. Nothing would be accomplished now by destroying the image these people had built of old Dan Wilbur and any revolt against Krupke would only end in blood. Dan said lamely, "If you've got things so sewed up why do you need me?"

"I don't, provided you get the hell out of the country," Krupke said. "I don't know where I can get another Indian drunk enough to gut shoot you, so the only out is for you to leave. Go on if you want. Your dad was a good man until he started to get ideas. It was a nice setup. I just thought maybe you'd like to play it the way he did and you're a natural for the job as far as the people are concerned. But don't get the idea that I need you, Dan. I don't need any man. You get the hell out of the country and I'll burn out this damn coulee and run things the way I want. Maybe it won't be so soft as I've had it but I won't have to split with a crooked sheriff, either."

Dan started toward the desk and the deringer tilted sharply. For a swift second Dan's eyes met those pit black orbs of Vance Krupke and he could see the deadliness of the man. "It's a damn lie," Dan said hoarsely. "Dad never took a two-bit piece from you. I checked the bank and—"

Krupke's eyebrow had arched and there was a mocking sneer on his lips. "I told you your old man was smart," he said. "Do you think he'd put extra money in this bank where every damn fool for miles around knows everybody's business? Did you check the Walla Walla bank under the name of Dan Martinson?"

The perspiration was standing out on Dan's forehead now. Somehow he knew he was cor-

nered as far as establishing his dad's innocence was concerned. There were too many things pointing to the truth of Krupke's statements. Krupke laughed shortly and lowered the weapon.

"Get the hell out of here, Dan," Krupke said. "You make me sick to my stomach seeing you standing there. You might check that deal in Walla Walla. After that make up your mind and make it up fast. If you come back here, you know the rules, and I won't hold this against you. What the hell, I like to sleep in a bed and have whiskey handy as well as the next one. With the right set-up I can have it and you can have gravy on your bread. But I don't have to have you, Dan, remember that. If you don't come in, you better go a hell of a ways where Dakota can't find you. So long, Dan."

HE DIDN'T say he was going to Walla Walla. He just took a horse and left town, not even saying good-by to Jane Compton, yet somehow wishing he could. He hadn't thought of her after the funeral. She was something like the people and the land around here; a man got to taking things for granted.

There was a three-day growth of beard on his face and a gauntness not wholly of hunger when Dan Wilbur rode into the old fort town. He wanted a bath and a shave, but the thing that was inside him kept nagging and growing until there was room for nothing else. He mumbled an apology about his appearance when he found the bank he wanted, then sat back to study the round middled little man who sat behind the desk. The name sounded thick on his tongue when he said it.

"Dan Martinson?" the banker repeated. He became cagy then, cocking his eyes with the importance of a man not often in a position of power. "We don't usually give out information about our depositors."

"Dan Martinson is dead," Dan said then. He watched the banker closely, hoping to find some opening that would get him the information he needed. The little man seemed more thoughtful than surprised.

"I was a relative of his," Dan said.

He had hit the spot with that. The banker rubbed his hands in a way that made a soft whispering sound. "You wouldn't be Dan Wilbur, his nephew, would you?"

"That's right," Dan said, fighting the sickness that was in him, rebelling against the fatigue that stung every muscle of his body. "I'm Dan Wilbur. Dan Martinson was my uncle." In his attempt to sound casual he said more than necessary.

"I'll need proof," the banker said importantly.

The banker was satisfied finally, and he laid

the envelope and the ledger sheet in front of Dan Wilbur. The man wanted to talk now, and he rambled on and on from his chatter. Dan pieced out the story he had never known. "Mining man, wasn't he?" the banker asked. "Silver mines in Idaho?"

"That's right," Dan said, his voice wooden.

"Spoke highly of you," the banker confided. "Said he'd educate you in spite of yourself. Fact is, seldom talked of anything else. Strange man, your uncle. Came and went without warning. Wouldn't see him for months at a time then he'd come in and make a deposit or draw out some money. Strange man."

"Thanks," Dan said. "I'll take the letter then and be going. I'll let you know about the balance later."

The banker was willing to prolong the conversation, but Dan batted aside the swinging half gate and went outside. In a narrow alleyway between two buildings he ripped off the end of the envelope and pulled out the single sheet. He recognized his dad's handwriting immediately. The letter began, "I hope you will never read this."

It was crisply direct and honest, much like the man the people of the coulee thought they knew. It made no complaint about the lingering sickness of young Dan's mother nor of the never ending and hopeless expense it had been. It said merely, "I wanted to give her the finest, even if I had to steal to do it."

The rest was between the lines. Once over the border old Dan had been unable to turn back. He had gone on, keeping out of the way of the operations of Vance Krupke, getting paid for doing it, hating it but unable to stop because of what it would do to young Dan and the people of the valley. It was the last of the letter that said, "I'm trying to break it off, son, and that is the reason for this letter. If you read it at all you'll know I didn't make it." There was a balance of five thousand dollars at the bank and it was a recent deposit.

He rested a day before starting back across the miles of plain and desolation and he rode as much as the horse would stand, leading the animal part of the way, ripping his boots on the jagged caprock, hating the never ending gray of the sage and the never lessening distance of the snow capped Cascades. Across those mountains was a sea of green and the life giving rain. Here was only the glare of sun and the vastness of space and the turmoil inside him. He looked like a gaunt and wind-parched old man when he rode into Coulee Butte. Men put down their drinks when he entered Vance Krupke's saloon.

But he was calm and sure of himself now that he knew what he would do and the weariness left him when he saw Krupke there be-

hind the desk. Krupke saw the calmness and said, "A man needs time to think things over. I'm glad you're back, Dan. It will be easier this way."

"Yes," Dan Wilbur said softly. "It will be easier."

They talked of little things then, like two friends who have not met for some time. "They want you for sheriff all right," Krupke said. "I've got the ground work in. The preacher is pulling for you. I thought once of getting rid of that damn gospel slinger but he has his use, I guess."

"Everybody is useful to you, aren't they, Krupke?"

"You learn fast," Vance Krupke said,

His father's .45 bucked
against his palm. . . .



The steady hardness came back into Vance Krupke's eyes. He took the cigar from his mouth and spoke softly and easily. "That Banks wagon train that the Okanogan Bunch held up," he said. "The merchandise brought top prices in the Idaho mines. Maybe your dad couldn't stand seeing so much money in one lump. Don't make the same mistake, Dan."

"I won't," Dan Wilbur said. "You've got an hour to get out of town and take Dakota and LaVerne and Mangren with you. Don't go for that derringer, Vance. I've got dad's belly gun here in my coat pocket."

He got up then and backed out of the room, his hand gripping the short barreled gun. Outside he turned quickly and walked through the barroom and Mangren saw him and grinned. LaVerne looked up from his faro layout and nodded. Dakota was not in the room.

DAN went back home, feeling the presence of his dad strongly now in every room. From the deer horns where he had thought it would remain he took his dad's .45 and belt and strapped it around his middle. After that he went to his own room and got the 12-gauge shotgun he had owned since he was a kid. Mary, the squaw, watched him with muddy eyes, saying nothing, thinking a lot. She had said little since old Dan's death and in her silence young Dan had read a tribute. He went outside and took a chair on the porch where he could watch the main street of the town. He saw Jane Compton a block down, but he did not call her.

He didn't need a watch. Somehow he knew when the hour was up. He got up from the porch chair, put two shells into the shotgun and then walked down the street toward Vance Krupke's saloon. Halfway there he caught the movement at the corner of a building. He whirled, fired one barrel of the shotgun and then rolled to the ground. Dakota came out from behind the building. He was holding both hands over his stomach. The blood had already soaked through his shirt and now it was running down the fronts of his legs. He never seemed to stop walking, but he leaned more and more and finally he was stretched out there in the middle of the street. Not until then did a woman scream. The sound was backed up by the startled curse of a man, then running feet. He saw that the street was empty now.

The blank glaring windows of the town were no longer sightless. Behind those sun splashed panes he knew eyes were watching, and they were the eyes of men who had respected and trusted his father. They were watching another Wilbur now and he knew that even though it meant his death he would

have to be the man they expected him to be. He'd try for Krupke first, for with Vance out of the way the fangs would be pulled from the snake. He kept close to the buildings on the same side of the street as the saloon. He could expect no help, for no man here knew what this was about. He stood close to the door of the saloon and called, "Come on out, Krupke."

There was a silence at first, then Krupke's voice, toned with a laugh. "Do you think I'm a fool, Dan? Come on in if you want to see me. Or maybe you'd just rather wait there until somebody asks you what it's all about."

He inched closer to the swinging double doors, making sure that he kept hidden behind the door jamb. He strained his ears, trying to figure out where LaVerne and Mangren were placed, finally guessing it. At that moment he saw the preacher come out of a store across the street.

The man was walking with his hands spread before him. His voice sounded strangely loud in the now silent town. "Wait, Dan," the man was saying. "Whatever your quarrel is this is not the way—"

"Parson! Get down!"

Dan's voice lashed out, but even as he yelled the warning he knew the little preacher would not react fast enough. Forgetting the guns there behind the door Dan made a dive at the preacher's legs, spilling him in the dust. At that instant Langren's shotgun roared from inside the saloon.

The bunched shot plowed a furrow in the dust of the street and a scatter of it drew blood through Dan's shirt. He got up, ran to one side, and a rifle bullet from LaVerne's corner of the saloon ripped the flesh of Dan's leg. He could think of only one thing. He knew where they were.

Ducking low, his legs pounding, he threw himself at the double doors of the saloon. A rifle bullet ripped the louvers an inch from his face but he was not looking in that direction. He jerked the shotgun up, hip high, and fired toward the bar just as Mangren's head appeared. From the back of the room he heard Vance Krupke's cold voice, "Get him, LaVerne!"

Dan had dropped the shotgun now and it was his father's .45 that bucked against the palm of his hand. He was unfamiliar with the gun and the first shot went wild. He could see the smile on LaVerne's face, see the bore of the rifle. Dan fired again, spoiling LaVerne's aim, and the rifle bullet burned past his head. His next shot caught the faro banker in the center of the chest, knocking him backwards against the wall. From the tail of his eye Dan saw Vance Krupke duck into the office.

Dan dropped behind an overturned table then, keeping flat on the floor. A thin trickle of blood seeped out from LaVerne's body and spread slowly across the boards. Dan inched out, looking for Krupke. A bullet smashed through the top of the table. He hammered one shot toward the doorway where Krupke was hiding and knew that he had missed.

Minutes went by. Minutes more dangerous for Dan than for Krupke, he figured, because soon the shock period would be over and the men would come out of the buildings and demand an answer. He shifted his weight and Krupke wasted another shell. The man was getting nervous.

Dan waited as long as he felt he dared, then, reaching back, he gripped the rung of a chair with his left hand. With the cocked gun in his right he raked the chair across the floor and crashed it into another table. With the same movement he jumped to his feet and fired at the doorway. He saw Vance Krupke go crashing back into the office. After what seemed an hour he knew that Krupke was dead.

They came in from the street then, after they knew the shooting was done, and when they saw him standing there they bunched up and stared at him and licked at their dry lips.

The preacher said, "You saved my life, son. But shooting is not the way to settle things. We'll have to know and we'll have a trial—"

"Dan found out that Vance Krupke and the others were the Okanogan Bunch. Krupke had him killed. When I found out I went after them."

There was a long strained silence, and he walked through it and out onto the street. His answer hadn't been planned; he hadn't known what he would say. And yet he had told them the truth and they would accept it as that.

Later that day he went to the preacher and talked a long time. "You said people come to you with their troubles," he said. Then he waited.

The preacher was thoughtful for a while, then he said, "I do the best I can, Dan, and I hope it's the right thing I do. If your dad left this money as you say he did I'll accept it and return it to the Banks people to partially cover their loss. I'm not a talkative man when I feel there's no explanations needed. People will say your dad recovered part of the money, I suppose. In a way that will be right. I hope you'll run for sheriff, Dan. The coulee needs a Wilbur."

"Thanks, Parson," Dan Wilbur said. He had trouble forming the words.

He walked up the street then and a breeze came in from the Columbia and lifted the heat out of the coulee. High above the Cascades, there to the west, dark clouds were piling and spilling down the east slopes. He looked up and saw Jane Compton there on the other side of the street and crossed over and took her arm. They walked along together silently for a while and he thought of her and of the parson. The clouds tumbled around, way off there on the slopes, and the breeze freshened some. He looked at her and smiled and said, "We may get some rain soon."

"It will be good for the valley," she said.



The One Punch Kid Can't Wait!



He leads off our January lineup of headliners in W. H. Temple's heart-stopping story of the prize-ring—and here's something ELSE that can't wait!

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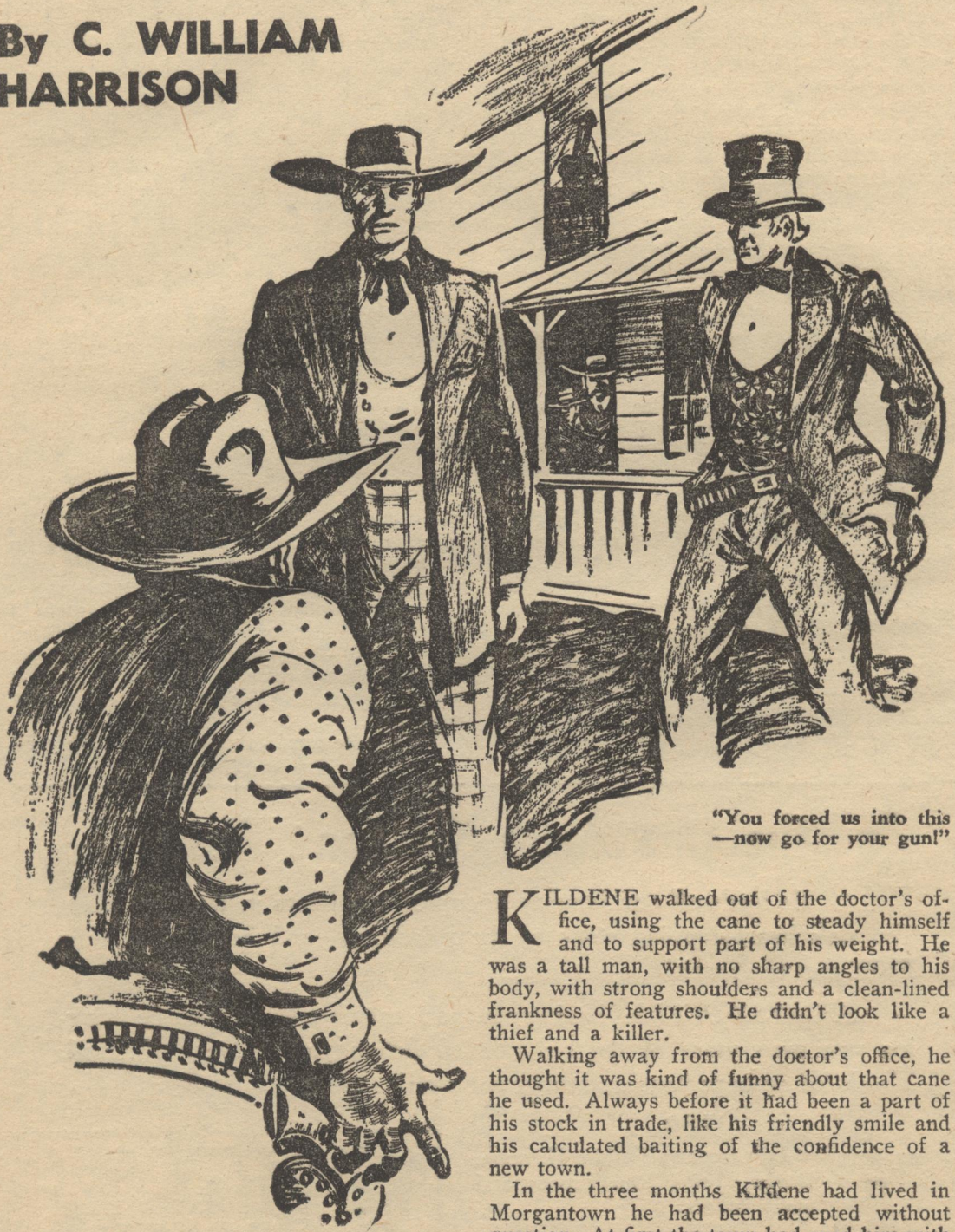


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By C. WILLIAM
HARRISON



KILDENE walked out of the doctor's office, using the cane to steady himself and to support part of his weight. He was a tall man, with no sharp angles to his body, with strong shoulders and a clean-lined frankness of features. He didn't look like a thief and a killer.

Walking away from the doctor's office, he thought it was kind of funny about that cane he used. Always before it had been a part of his stock in trade, like his friendly smile and his calculated baiting of the confidence of a new town.

In the three months Kildene had lived in Morgantown he had been accepted without question. At first the town had eyed him with a certain amount of polite reserve, but that was no more than any stranger could expect.

PAWN

It had been easy for him to break that down. It was a part of his long and carefully laid out plans. When a cane was used by a man of Kildene's strong body, sympathy came quickly. And with sympathy came the town's trust and confidence.

But now the cane was no longer one of the tools of Kildene's trade. It was something he depended upon and needed.

Dr. Overmile's words still burned with ironic reality in Kildene's memory, a quiet voice that carried the friendly sympathy that Kildene had so carefully cultivated.

"You've led an active and strenuous life in the past, haven't you, Mr. Kildene?"

Kildene had answered that truthfully. "Yes."

But he had filled in none of the details. A strenuous life? Yes, he had had that. A full, hard life. He knew the smell of a hot running iron burning a new brand in a rustled cow, he knew the strain of long night rides pushing a stolen herd to a new range, he knew the kick and roar of guns and the bitter cries of dying men when a bank was rushed by a gang and robbed. He knew all those things because they had been his life.

Dr. Overmile had said quietly, "You haven't told much about yourself since you came here, Mr. Kildene. But a town can figure a stranger pretty close. If he's a crook, the town knows it. If he's honest, the town knows that. Most of the people here figure you were a lawman some place. That gun you wear has had plenty of use."

Kildene smiled as he remembered the seven notches filed on the inner butt plate of the Colt. He could consider those men he had killed objectively, with but little regret. Three of them had been possemen, two were bank clerks who had foolishly ignored his warning; two were crooked gamblers. They'd all had their chance and they had failed.

Dr. Overmile said, "You've done a lot of good for Morgantown since you came here, Mr. Kildene."

The tall man shrugged that off. Everything he had done had been with the single purpose of promoting the confidence of the town.

"You donated money for the school. You've been active in the church, and you've been instrumental in putting pressure against the crooked gambling dens. You've made enemies doing that, Mr. Kildene. Gus Romaine and Johnny Deuce will kill you if you ever give them a chance that will keep them clear of the law."

Kildene smiled against the doctor's warning.

Kildene had sold himself to the town as a hero and they were going to see that he stayed that way—even if it killed him!

He had studied Romaine and Johnny Deuce, and he had measured the potential danger of the two gamblers down to the last split second. If it came to an even draw he could kill either or both before a single slug could be loosed at him. Kildene knew his speed.

He said, "What does all this have to do with the way I've been feeling lately, doc?"

Overmile spread his small round hands. "What I'm trying to say is that this town likes you and wants you around for a long time."

Kildene listened without expression. "Is it that bad with me, doc?"

"Do you want it straight?"

Kildene nodded. "I wouldn't like it any other way."

"All right—it's your heart, Mr. Kildene. It's gone bad on you. You've lived in too much strain and excitement, and you've got to slow down. What you need is complete rest for several months."

"That's one thing I've been getting a lot of, doc."

"No, you just think you have. You've had something on your mind ever since you came here."

Kildene's eyes narrowed slightly. Had his planning been as obvious as that?

"You helped raise money for the school," Dr. Overmile said. "You've worked for the church, and now you're campaigning to clean out the crooked gamblers. It's too much for you in your condition. Gus Romaine and Johnny Deuce will fight back, and I don't think you could live through it."

"I'm pretty good with a gun, doc."

Overmile tapped Kildene's chest. "I'm talking about your heart," he said quietly.

THE sun was high, but there was no heat in it. Yesterday's storm had capped the mountains with snow, and the clouds were still piling up darkly against the high-flung crags. Wind was coming down from the peaks, scouring the desert with its biting chill and whipping dust up from Morgantown's wide street.

Kildene looked at the clouds and measured the path of the coming storm. Most of the snow would fall on the mountains again, but by nightfall the foothills and desert would be

white. In weather like this a man could ride a long fast trail without fear of leaving any tracks behind him. The coming snow would obliterate the marks of horses' hoofs in the earth, and by mid-morning the next day the sun would melt the snow and erase the tracks a rider had made during the night.

Kildene looked at the bank, and thought, *There will never be a better time.*

But he wondered if he could hold up under the strain. It would be easy to crack the bank, but not so easy to make his escape. Sheriff Floyd Brinstead was an alert, hard-bitten man who made an outlaw trap out of his town. He had trained a few hand-picked townsmen and merchants to act with deadly teamwork on an instant's notice. Kildene knew he could take the bank without any unusual difficulty, but breaking through Sheriff Brinstead's staked-out vigilantes was a different matter. That would take steady nerves and a quick gun—and it would take a strong body and swift action.

Kildene paused, leaning against a hitch rail, and wondered if he had it in him to pull off the job. There was no pain, only that weak emptiness in his chest when he exerted himself. A bad heart. It was worth a laugh. Pretending to have a bad heart had always been a part of his campaign to win the sympathy and trust of a new town. He wasn't pretending now. What had before been a role to play was now a grim and unescapeable fact.

His mouth tightened, and he looked at the bank, again checking his plans. He had to have money—there was nothing for him to do but take a chance on his heart and go through with the job.

He was walking slowly toward his hotel when he saw Johnny Deuce come out of the Cattleman's Saloon. A tall thin man with pale features and tawny hair, the gambler paused on the plank walk and glanced toward the Lucky Strike. Kildene shifted his eyes, and saw Gus Romaine push his short thick shape through the winged doors. Kildene smiled. The pattern of their action was clear and plain to him. He had stirred up the town against the crooked games they ran, and they had been crowded too far. They had their backs to a wall, and now they would fight.

The two gamblers met and waited in front of Kildene's hotel. Johnny Deuce had a good face for poker, but not for hatred and the lust to kill. His faded gray eyes betrayed him, cold and malevolent in their impact.

There was no expression in Gus Romaine's dark eyes and features. A cheroot was clamped between his full lips as he tried futilely to light it in the chill whipping breeze.

He said in a slow, barren voice, "Do you have the time on you, Kildene?"

Kildene nodded. He took out his watch

without entirely relaxing his vigilance. "Fifteen until twelve."

"Think you can remember checking your watch for three o'clock?" Romaine asked.

Kildene shrugged. He said nothing.

"Three o'clock is when you are going to be out of town," Romaine said tonelessly. "You've worn out your welcome in this place, Kildene. If you're still in town at three o'clock I'm going to kill you."

Kildene smiled aridly. "All by yourself, Gus."

Johnny Deuce said with hot malice, "I'm in this too, Kildene. You've stirred up too much trouble for us. You're through, finished. Get out."

Kildene shifted his weight. Excitement was running through his nerves, it was whipping up the action of his heart, and the doctor had warned him against this. Now he knew how right the doctor had been. But he had a hard stubborn streak in him, and he wouldn't give ground.

"Why wait, boys?" he said contemptuously. "You've got your nerve up now, and you might not have it later. Why not try me now?"

Johnny Deuce's eyes flared hot and bright. But Gus Romaine spoke with patient virulence.

"Three o'clock, Kildene. Don't crowd your luck past that time." He touched Johnny Deuce's arm, and the two turned stiffly away.

In his hotel room the excitement drained out of Kildene and took all his strength with it. He lay across the bed with his heart throbbing and bitter certainly clogging his mind. He would rob the bank as he had planned, but he knew how the day would end.

At two o'clock he was on the street again. He went to the livery stables, called for his horse and had it saddled. Limpy Jacobs was a thin stooped man with dry cold-chapped lips.

"You ain't planning on riding, are you, Mr. Kildene?" he said with a frown. "There's a storm blowing in, and a ride wouldn't be good for you. A man in your condition—" He broke that off and glanced away.

"What about my condition, Limpy? Has Doc Overmile been telling tales about me?"

"Overmile never talks out of turn," Jacobs said. He brought his eyes back to Kildene. "But my Missus knows about such things. Sara says you've got a sick heart, but I reckon that's no more than the rest of the town knows."

He said suddenly, as if the idea had just occurred to him, "Why don't you come over to the house tonight and have dinner with us? Sara has a hen she's been saving for Christmas, but I figured on going up in the hills and getting a deer for the holiday. Sara can kill the hen, and we'll have ourselves a feed."

"I'll let you know, Limpy. And thanks."

Kildene turned quickly away. Limpy Jacobs

was a poor man who couldn't afford to take a couple days off to go deer hunting. If Mrs. Jacobs cooked the hen now their Christmas dinner would be one of beans and side-meat. It gave Kildene a strange, bitter feeling to know this.

He left his horse at the hitch-rack in front of the bank, and was turning toward old Sam Ashley's barbershop when Mrs. McCanles met him on the plank walk. She was a small gray lady who had been widowed by the war and supported herself by selling socks and gloves and sweaters she knitted. She was half blind from age, but her voice was bright and cheerful.

"Howdy do, Mr. Kildene. It's a mighty nice day."

Kildene smiled and touched his hat. "Looks like a storm blowing in, though, Mrs. McCanles."

"A storm doesn't keep a day from being mighty nice, Mr. Kildene. A storm is the work of the Lord. He gives us bad weather so we can appreciate the good."

She fumbled in her bag with thin dark-veined hands. "I've got something for you." She took out a pair of hand-knitted socks. She laughed brightly. "It took a little doing to get your size, Mr. Kildene. I got Tom Greer to let me into your hotel room so I could get your size. I hope you don't mind too much."

"Shame on you," Kildene said. He took the socks she handed him, and wondered if he dared risk offering to pay her. He decided not. Yarn was hard for her to come by, and with her age-feeble vision her work was slow and tedious, but this little lady had had a pride that she valued higher than money.

He said quietly, "Thank you, Mrs. McCanles."

She blinked her faded eyes at him. "After all you've done for this town I ought to thank you for being able to knit you a little gift, Mr. Kildene." She turned quickly, and hurried on her way.

THE bank was empty at this hour, just as Kildene had known it would be. He loosened his guns in their holsters as he walked slowly through the door. Harvey Carlyle was seated in his office and got out of his chair quickly as he saw Kildene. He was a short round man with a soft face and eyes that saw only the dollars that came into his bank, and he smiled as he unlocked the iron gate.

"Come on in, Mr. Kildene. It isn't every man I'll let come back here."

Kildene smiled slowly. "I was hoping you'd invite me in," he said quietly. His hands brushed his guns as he went through the gate and he thought grimly, "This is going to be easy."

He took the chair the banker offered, and settled his weight into it. It was good to rest for one last minute. He was beginning to feel the strain, and it was kicking up his heart. His glance shifted briefly to the open safe, and he saw how simple this job would be. He would throw his gun on Carlyle, force the man to empty the safe, and if he knocked the banker out he could get out of town before Sheriff Brinstead's vigilantes got the alarm. But the long hard ride to the mountains was another matter. He would make it somehow.

Harvey Carlyle picked up a box of cigars. He started to offer it to Kildene, smiled and shook his head. He put the cigars down.

"I don't think you ought to smoke too much, Mr. Kildene," he said. "I'll be frank—I tried to pump Doc Overmile. He wouldn't talk, but I've got my ideas about you. You're not a well man."

"Everybody in this town," Kildene said, "seems to know as much about me as I know myself."

Carlyle chuckled. "It's that way in a small town." His smile faded. "But you've still got the town fooled on one thing, Mr. Kildene. The way you've donated to the school and church, the town thinks you've got money. But I'm a banker, and you can't fool me about

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money. You have less than a thousand dollars deposited with me, and that's not a whole lot for a man."

A wariness crept into Kildene and he waited silently. He remembered another town and another bank. The banker had asked him to rob the bank and split the profits. Kildene had agreed to a point—he had robbed the bank. He had never gone back to see the banker again.

Harvey Carlyle said quietly, "I've got a proposition for you, Mr. Kildene. This town needs men like you, and we want you to stay. You can't stay without money, and in your condition you aren't going to be up to every kind of a job."

He paused, lit his cigar. Kildene looked out the window, and saw the school door bang open. There were shouts as the kids spilled across the barren yard to the swings and teeter-totters. If Kildene had been near the school those shouts would have invited him to join in the after-class games.

The banker was saying, "It isn't easy for me to make this offer, Mr. Kildene. Several years ago I hired a cashier who later cleaned out the bank and skipped. I had to make all the money good, and ever since then I've gone alone. But I'm not offering you that kind of a job. I'm asking you to come into the bank as my partner. I've watched you, and you're the kind of a man I need."

Kildene looked at the banker in surprise. He felt a certain amount of dark pride in listening to the banker's proposition. This was the town he had promoted, and he had done his job well.

He had done it too well.

Kildene stood up slowly, let his hands drop to his gunbelts. It would be easy now to finish this part of his job.

He said quietly, "Mind if I leave these guns here, Mr. Carlyle? They're heavy to pack around, and I don't need them." He glanced at his watch. "I appreciate your offer," he said gravely. "I'll let you know. Right now I have an appointment outside."

IT WAS funny the way things had worked out. It was worth a laugh. But Kildene didn't laugh. He walked to the bank's door, and found Sheriff Brinstead waiting just outside. Uncertainty was in Brinstead's leathery face, a trace of regret and grimness. He had a folded paper in his hand, and his voice was low and gray.

"I got this in today's mail, Mr. Kildene. I'm sorry as hell to have to—"

"Later, Jeff," Kildene said. "You'll see me around, I promise."

He went past the lawman to where Gus Romaine and Johnny Deuce waited in the

middle of the street. He was aware of all the little things that rounded out this end of the day.

The storm clouds were closer, steel gray and lumped low on the horizon, cutting off the mountain tops. But below was the drab spread of the desert range, and in another two months the rains would come and the flowers would burst into brilliant life. Then would come the roundups, the bawling of cattle and the whoops of cowboys, the dust and heat and stench rising from branding irons.

But today was cold and gray.

It was Gus Romaine who built up the gamblers' private alibi for the killing yet to come.

"You've called us a lot of names, Kildene. You've hurt our business with your lies. We gave you a fair warning to leave us alone. We don't want trouble, but you've given us no choice. You forced us into this fight—now go for your gun!"

Kildene's clear, steady words reached along the silent street. "I left my guns in the bank, boys. I'm not armed."

Johnny Deuce cursed harshly. "Don't give us that lie, Kildene. You're packing a hide-out under your coat. What are you waiting for—to gun us from behind?"

Kildene said, "They lynch murderers in this town, boys."

He studied them narrowly. They were cocked and ready, their nerves keyed up to that death-loaded pitch when the slightest move would send their hands plunging gunward.

Kildene saw these things out of the memory of his past. It was another town and another fight, but this time there was no clenched excitement in him. There was no strain or uncertainty. He knew the outcome as he smiled and slowly reached his hand in under his coat.

He saw their hands plunge, rise, jump at the spurt of smoke—but he saw no more than that. His coat fell open as he sank to the ground, and he wore no gun.

Sam Ashley, the barber, and Limpy Jacobs and all those other merchants spilled out into the street with their guns ready, and the two killers dropped their weapons and waited in horror, with the dead man's last words rushing through them.

This is a town where killers are hanged for murder. . . .

Sheriff Brinstead was standing near Kildene's body when Harvey Carlyle presently joined him.

"Did you have something to see him about, Jeff?"

Brinstead shook his head. "No—nothing." And slowly he tore up the wanted dodger that had come to him in the day's mail.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 59)

HOW sharp is your cattle country savvy this month? Pretty sound? Then try your hand at answering the twenty western brain twisters listed below. Answer eighteen or more of them correctly and you could be right-hand-man on our ranch any time. Answer seventeen, and you're still good. But answer not more than fifteen or sixteen and you're still in the phildoodle class. Good luck to you!

1. If a Western friend of yours told you he expected to be "Pecosed," you would: Run for the sheriff? Offer to lend the friend your gun? Congratulate him? Lend him your slicker? Suggest that he take up poker?

2. True or false? "Peewees" are short-top boots.

3. In the language of cowpuncher, what is the meaning of the expression, "reading sign?"

4. "Redcoats" is the term which the old-time cowpuncher used to use in reference to: Sioux Indians? Canadian Mounted police? The British army? A species of fox having bright red fur?

5. What is the meaning of the expression "riding line?"

6. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "rib wrench," you would return with: A tool used in putting together water barrels? A device used in tightening bolts on farm machinery? A spur? A wide leather belt of the type worn by some cowpunchers? A device used on the range to help set a broken rib?

7. True or false? "Sag" is the Westerner's term for "slope."

8. If a cowpuncher friend jokingly said he was looking for a "sage hen," you would know he was: Seeking a girl? Planning to go hunting? Trying to find a gentle, old horse. Trying to shoot a skunk which had lodged itself under the barn?

9. What is "spur leather?"

10. True or false? A "buck hook" is a part of a spur.

11. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "stew ball," you would return with: A pot of food from the kitchen? The camp cook? A spotted horse? A type of Western dessert?

12. In the old days, for whom would a "stock detective usually work?

13. True or false? The expression, "too handy with a rope," is one that old-time cowpunchers used to apply to the flashy, show-off type of cowboy.

14. True or false. A "trail blazer" is one who goes ahead and marks a new trail.

15. True or false? The "wagon boss" in the old days used to be the individual in charge of the roundup.

16. The Western slang expression "walking sheep" refers to: Sheep which do an abnormal amount of walking? Any sheep? The occupation of herding sheep?

17. What is a "Colt quarantine?"

18. In the language of the Westerner, a "white-water bucko" is: A cow which likes to wade in the river? A cow having a peculiar milk-white shade? An individual who is clever at driving through a river? A desert water buck once found near oases?

19. True or false? "Wrango" is another name for "wrangler."

20. True or false? "Yak" is a term which the cowpuncher used to apply to hairy chaps.

THREE GRAVES HAVE I...

Irby said, "Turn
around and start
shooting — or put
up your hands..."

CHAPTER ONE

Gun Ghost

WHEN IRBY TEAGUE first came to Horse Thief Canyon he cleaned the brush from the three graves there on the knoll overlooking the river. He set up new wooden crosses to take the place of those that had rotted and put in a small planting of wild flowers. After that he began working on a shelter for himself.

Irby wanted a cabin with its back to the canyon wall, handy to water, handy to the high plains where he was going to run his herd and sheltered from the wind. He began building it of stone and log. He was working on the foundation when a bullet ricocheted off the mason's trowel he was using and knocked it from his hand. Irby went over the edge of the wall in one leap. A second bullet kicked up a spurt of stone dust and a third flattened itself in the far wall. Then Irby heard the sound of the three shots.

He stayed there for a long while, watching.



Kid Chapin had had his fill of killing—but his lightning guns would have their say about who would fill the fourth grave he was building on the hill he called his home!

By ARTHUR LAWSON



He had not been expecting anything like this. His holstered pistol was hung by the belt over a saw-horse outside the cellar, fifteen yards away. His carbine was with his gear where he had stretched a tarpaulin for shelter. Even his axe was outside by the peeled logs. Only his whittling knife was handy. It rested in the pocket of his levis, hard against his thigh. But a man could not put up much of a fight with that.

Nothing moved. The river lay broad and placid between the wide drifts of sand. A huddle of buildings yonder across the blue water gleamed white in the afternoon sun. A thin spiral of smoke reached skyward from the chimney of the Curtis Ranch, the Circle C—Irby Teague's neighbors. The shots had come from over there somewhere. They had come from so far away they might have been lucky—but the fact that there were three precluded the possibility that they might have been accidental.

Irby would not tempt fate by sticking his head too high. He had often watched the smoke from the Curtis chimney, the sun flashing on the windows, the lamplight at night—and had felt good that he had a neighbor. He wondered now what they thought of him.

When the long shadows covered him, he got up and brushed the dirt from his shirt and levis. He buckled his pistol about his waist, saddled his horse, shrugged into a brush jacket, and headed for the river. He carried the broken trowel in the pocket of his coat. Some of the lead from the bullet seemed to have become fused to the steel blade.

Gingerly, Irby's horse picked its way across the bed of the river. Here at all seasons a crossing could be made. It was a tricky ford because of the quicksand beds that never remained long in one place. But at high water, even, only a short swim would take you across the deepest part. Today Irby did not even have to lift his feet to keep his tapaderos dry.

A girl waved to him from the porch of the Curtis ranchhouse. Her eyes were blue, and her hair the color of cornsilk that is ripening. She had a sturdy little figure and a big grin.

"Hi, stranger!" she called.

Irby grinned back at her. A man on the porch stood up as Irby turned his horse toward the house. Irby did not know him. He was lean and dark, a little older than Irby, probably about thirty-two or three. His benchmade boots carried a dustless shine. His white teeth showed in a controlled greeting.

"This is Phil Hewlett," the girl said. "Irby Teague. Irby's taken up the old Rupp place."

Irby stepped from the saddle to shake hands with Phil Hewlett. The man's grip was as controlled as his smile. There were no rope burns on his hands, no hard calluses. Yet there was strength.

"Glad to know you, Teague," he said. "Any friend of Sarah is a friend of mine."

"Thanks," Irby said.

"Glad to see somebody's taken up the Rupp place," Hewlett said. "One of the best spots in the state—even if folks do say there's a jinx on it."

"Jinx?" Irby asked.

Phil Hewlett laughed in his mannered way. "Hell, Teague—nothing to worry about. Old wive's tale. Hardly the kind of thing that would bother you or me or anybody else who's dry behind the ears. I often thought of buying the place myself, but ranching's hardly in my line."

Irby wondered if he should ask what was Hewlett's business. It seemed that the man expected it of him. Hewlett might also be trying to worry him by this talk of jinx. Irby had already heard of the hoodoo on the Horse Thief Canyon Ranch, but it didn't bother him. Politely he said, "Glad you didn't settle there, Hewlett. I like it." He turned to Sarah. "Just broke my trowel, Miss Curtis. Hoped I wouldn't have to go all the way to town for a new one. I was wondering if—"

"Pa'd be glad to lend you one," she said. "You still planting flowers?"

"Making a foundation for my house," he said. He took out the two bits of the broken tool. The fused lead was plainly to be seen on it, and the strange indentation where the bullet had struck it. "A mason's trowel," he said. "Not for gardening."

The girl got up, "I'll see."

She ran into the house. Irby looked suddenly straight into the eyes of Phil Hewlett. The man with the strong, soft hands had a perfect poker face.

"You must be putting up quite an establishment," Hewlett said. "Most shacks in this country just set on the ground on cedar poles."

"I figure on staying there for the rest of my life," Irby said evenly. "Until I'm old man. And when I'm an old man I want to be living in a house that's nice and solid."

"Good," Hewlett said. "Don't let them booger you off."

Irby already hated this man. He wondered where Hewlett's horse was. He wanted to check up on the kind of rifle Hewlett carried. The girl came back. To Irby she seemed always about to break into laughter. She walked as if she were dancing.

"I forgot," she said. "Silly of me. Some antelope came up the river this morning, and pa's out after one. I looked in the shop, but I guess we don't have one of those."

"Sorry I troubled you," Irby said. "I'll be riding into town. Anything you'd like me to bring back."

The girl seemed embarrassed, but only momentarily. "Why, sure," she said. She ran

into the house, was out again in a second with a small bit of ribbon. "Could you bring me a couple of yards of this?" she asked. "Charge it at Moody's."

Irby felt the tiny bit of fine silk between his forefinger and thumb. He was embarrassed, too, and felt a little foolish.

"Be back tomorrow," he said. He shook hands with Phil Hewlett and swung aboard his horse.

THE last half of the trip was made after nightfall. Phil Hewlett did not overtake him on the way. Moody's store was open, one dim lamp glowing yellowly at the rear of the establishment. Old Robber Moody carried just about everything man, woman or beast could want. Irby Teague bought some groceries first. Moody waited on him nervously, as if he did not like to do so. Every time the old storekeeper passed an unlit lamp he would touch a match to it and turn the wick high. Pretty soon he had the place as bright as Christmas. Big-hatted, gunhung men began to gather. The first to come in wanted to know what was up.

"What's goin' on, Robber?" he asked jovially. "What you celebratin'."

Robber Moody said, "Just fillin' this gent's order, Adam."

The man glanced at Irby Teague, then took a second look, and his mouth opened.

"Jus' wonderin'," he said. "Evenin', stranger."

He beat it. After a while he came back with two other men. They greeted Irby and Moody, and sat down at the old stove that was getting rusty with the summer's neglect. Half a dozen men were hanging round outside. Irby finally finished his grocery order. He did not want to carry much. Just some extra tobacco, coffee, and some fresh meat. Irby had been too busy to do any hunting. He packed his purchases in his saddlebags. Then he produced the trowel.

"You got one of these here trowels, Moody?" he asked.

The old man studied it. "Mason's trowel," he said. He ran a gnarled thumb over the spot of fused lead, but made no comment on it. "Ayah," he said. "I got one."

"I busted this one," Irby said. He was talking too fast and too loud, but he could not keep his voice down. "Buildin' a stone foundation for my shack. Building it all stone to the windowsill level—then logs. I'm using logs eight inches thick that I hauled down from Piny Hill."

The men around the stove were careful to act as if they had not heard Irby Teague. Old Moody shuffled off to fetch a new trowel. It was rusty. There was little demand for tools like that in Moody's Corners.

Irby had only one more chore to do, and the men about the stove insisted on staying there. Irby got red near the ears. He could not put it off forever. He fumbled in his jacket pocket. The bit of silk seemed to burn his fingers.

"Wonder if you might have two yards of this stuff?" Irby blurted.

"Might," Moody said. "Only I can't guarantee to match colors in this light. You better come back tomorrow."

"Okay," Irby said.

"You can match ribbon better in the daylight," Moody said.

Irby knew that Moody was stalling him. Moody had to report to someone not present that Irby was running errands for a girl. The man named Adam put a booted foot on the stove rail and tilted his chair. He spat carefully into the sand box kept there for that purpose.

"Didn't know you had a woman out there, Teague," he drawled.

They were pulling something on Irby that he did not quite savvy. Irby decided to throw it back at them by making a joke.

"Just got her," he said. "A squaw."

The face of the man who had spoken darkened with anger. Irby picked up his bundle.

"I'll be in early, Mr. Moody," "Be seein' yuh, gentlemen."

He walked out of there with a straight back. The men, gathered before the brightly-lighted windows, backed into the shadows. Irby hesitated on the rickety boardwalk. He was in town, and he wanted a drink. He wanted to sit in at a poker game and hear the latest stories. There were people all around him, but he was alone. He remained that way.

He untied his horse's reins and walked slowly down the street leading the animal. He stopped at Moody City's Wagonyard and Livery Stable. It seemed that no two people in this settlement used the same name for it.

Old Mike, the ancient gnome with a yellowish-white beard, the stable-boy, was very unpleasant.

"You got to pay in advance, kid," he said.

Irby tossed a silver dollar at the old man's feet.

"If you were eighty years younger," he said, "I'd take down your britchers and give you a licking."

He led his horse to a stall.

IRBY TEAGUE slept in the hayloft. He was a tall, lean man who stretched out on his makeshift bed to well over six feet. He took off his boots, but he kept the six-shooter handy. There was a mean undercurrent running through the men in this town that he did not like. Moody's Corners, Moodyville, Moody City, the town of many names, was a town that had been left off the main

trails. Once it had been a promising settlement. Now it was only a weather-beaten worn-out village that had little excuse for continuing its existence.

You would have thought the town would welcome a new and enterprising young rancher who intended making something big and important out of the old Chapin place.

Irby Teague did not have to think very deeply, or very long, to figure out why old Robber Moody had lighted all the lamps to-night, why the men had gathered there, or why the one stove-sitter by the name of Adam Speers had asked about the woman at Irby's. The ancient stable boy at the wagon yard had given him the answer when he called Irby, "Kid."

There had been four Chapins, the father and three sons. If there had ever been a mother she had disappeared long before old Rupp Chapin built his shack at the edge of the river and began running horses. In those days Mexico was having a revolution and either side would buy any horse that could stand up. Rupp Chapin had made a lot of money. He had neglected to put it in the bank or to check it in Moody's store, and eventually the vigilantes had raided him. The two older Chapin boys, big, husky and tough youngsters, had been killed in the battle. The father died soon after. Only the youngest, known as the Kid, got away.

The Kid had been only ten years old. Nobody knew where he had gone, but there were some in Moody City who knew that the Kid's father had been beaten to death. He had not died in a clean fight. The vigilantes who had started out to rid the neighborhood of a horse-thief, had ended up by trying to find out where his take was hidden. He had died without telling, and the Kid had gotten away.

Nobody in Moody City ever heard of the Kid again. In fifteen years he had been almost forgotten. Then Irby Teague rode into town on a dusty horse. Irby had bought the Chapin Ranch in Horse Thief Canyon—and the first thing he did was clean up the graves of the Kid's father and two older brothers.

Irby Teague did not have to look into a crystal ball to learn why the people of Moody City trod soft and easy while he was around.

He slept badly. Rats in the grain, a drunk tottering up the street numbling to himself, a cat-fight, the creaking of the old barn, all magnified themselves. Mostly he lay awake in the fragrant hay until dawn. Then he rolled out, dropped down to the ground floor and went in search of the pump.

He filled the trough with clean water, stripped to the waist and washed up. Irby Teague liked to splash in the water. He had made plans to put a tub in his house, a real tub hitched up to a water system run by a wind-

mill. The neighbors would think him crazy, but Irby liked the idea, and he enlarged on it this fine morning as he doused himself with the cold water. He had no towel along, so he rubbed himself dry with his hands and let the dawn breeze finish him off. His skin tingled and he forgot that he had not slept all night.

He was at Moody's store when the old man came down to open up. Moody was in a nightshirt and Chinese straw slippers. The store-keeper's ankles looked purple in the chill morning air. Moody brought out his entire stock of ribbon. He took it to the boardwalk in front of the store and laid it out there on a loafer's bench.

"Women is finicky," he said. "You got to match these ribbons exactly. Now take this one—"

Moody was stalling again. Irby came right out with what he supposed was bothering the storekeeper.

"The old boy down to the wagonyard seems to think I'm Kid Chapin come back from wherever the Kid's been all these years," he said.

Moody made a big pretense of being surprised. "The Kid. Kid Chapin. Forgot all about him," he said. "Be about your age now, Teague. Probably hanged long since. Natural-born rustlers, horse-thieves. Wouldn't give it a thought, was I you."

Irby knew that Moody was lying. Moody thought the same of Irby. Irby said, "That's good country out there above the Horse Thief. Good grass and water. I figure on running a high-class spread once I get organized."

"Sure thing," the old man said. "Absolutely. You can do it, Teague."

He always emphasized Irby's name. Irby was deeply annoyed with him. He knew that he was up a box canyon. He saw a piece of silk that matched his ribbon.

"There," he said. "I'll take that."

Old Moody went to the edge of the walk where there would be no shade from his awning. He pretended carefully to study the two bits of silk. In a very low voice he announced, "Folks around these parts think mighty well of Sarah Curtis."

It was a threat, an order for Irby to keep away from the Curtis girl. Irby was furious. But he knew that once they got him on the run they would never let up. They would keep him going until they ran him clear out of here.

"We think mighty high of her, too," he said. "My squaw and me. I'll take two yards of this ribbon, mister."

The old man went into the store to wrap it up. Irby followed. Inside this dark room that was still warm from the sun of yesterday, Irby felt crowded. He was glad to pay for his purchase and get away.

CHAPTER TWO

Last Chance

IRBY delivered the ribbon to Sarah Curtis. Sarah was in a cotton house dress today. She wore a bandanna around her head and was barefooted. She looked very warm and desirable.

"Been house cleaning," she said. "Look!"

She pointed out the living room. It was spotless. The floor of plain waxed oak shone with a warmth that seemed to come from the sun. The few bits of furniture, old and sturdy, gleamed with polish. There was a settee before the whitewashed fireplace, and an old rocking chair. The room was brightened with Navajo rugs and Texcoco serapes. Irby had never known a place like this, but he immediately recognized it as his notion of what a home should be.

"You sure did a fine job," he said. "This sure is cozy." He wondered if his house would ever be as comfortable as this. He wondered what the rest of the house was like. The girl led him into the kitchen. It was as clean as a freshly scrubbed dish. A pitcher pump stood by an old slate sink. An iron cookstove simmered in the corner. This was homey, too, cozy, made cheerful with curtains and a checkered tablecloth. Irby would have improved it, though. He had been to the city.

"When I get my house built," he said, "I'm going to put in regular plumbing. Hot water and everything—not just out of a cistern on the stove. I figure I can pump it by windmill into a tank up-canyon, and bring it into the house by gravity."

The girl's face had suddenly gone blank. Irby did not know what he had said to upset her. She scurried across the room to a cooler.

"I baked some pies this morning, Mister Teague," she said. "I had some extra dough, so I made one for you."

Irby asked, "What's biting you?"

"Nothing."

"Just a minute ago when I told you about my plumbing—"

"It was nothing."

She had broken out the pie. It was still warm from the oven. Irby would have enjoyed sitting down right then to eat, but the girl's manner worried him.

"I didn't mean anything was wrong with your kitchen," he said. "I just like the idea of not having to pump water every time I wash up."

"Of course," she said a little archly. "And you like stone walls up to the level of your windows. Are you going to put in gun ports as well?"

So that was it. She thought he was building a fort, and that the fort was somehow designed against her.

"I might," he said.

"When we were just children—" she broke off.

"We?"

"Me, I mean," she said hastily. "I mean—when I was just a kid—well—those Chapins used to live across the way. The night the old man and two boys were killed—the Kid hid under my bed. He was about ten, I guess, and I was going on six. We swore—if he ever came back—well—we were real friends, then. He wasn't like the rest of the family."

"You mean you wouldn't stand by him now?" Irby asked.

"I didn't say that," she said.

"What did you say?"

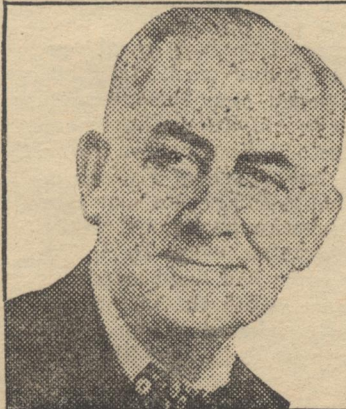
"That was fifteen years ago," she said. "Times have changed. We have law in this country now."

"That's a fine thing," Irby said. "Too bad you didn't have law fifteen years ago."

The girl ran up to him. He was still holding the pie. She took a grip on his vest with each hand.

"Why don't you settle somewhere else?"

"I like it here," Irby said. He felt foolish holding that pie. It was between him and the girl. It stood between them like some huge and



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immovable body. As long as he held the pie he could not put her away, and he could not take her into his arms.

"You think I'm the Kid," he said.

"I didn't say so," she said. "I never said so."

He said, "I picked out that place across the river because I liked it. Everybody thinks I'm the Kid. Everybody thinks I came back to get even with the killers who beat the Kid's old man to death." He waited a long while for the girl to confirm this. She only licked her lips and stared at him in terror. He saw behind her fear a definite concern for him. It warmed him. But she would not say yes or no. It made him more than ever perverse. He made a grin. "I never was one to fancy pie," he said. "If you'll let go of me I'll set it down and be on my way. Thanks for thinking of me."

She dropped her arms. He put the pie on the table and walked out of the room.

His camp had a nervous air to it, as if it were alive and had just been bothered and worried. He could not tell exactly what it was. His tarpaulin was as he had left it. His few clothes were still folded neatly under it. His bed was rolled, and he could not point to anything that was wrong. But he had the feeling that his outfit had been carefully examined while he was in town.

He unsaddled his horse, unwrapped his purchases and put everything into order. Because there was still a good deal of the day left he mixed a fresh tray of mortar and set to work finishing off the foundation. He worked steadily until dark. He kept his carbine close at hand, and his six-shooter was inside the stone wall where he could get to it if he had to jump to safety. But nothing happened, and when the sun set he was pleased to sit back and observe his southern wall. That side had been finished. It was level, ready for the timbers that would form the sills of the big windows he expected to have looking out on the river. In two or three days he would finish the masonry. After that his house would go up quite speedily.

Irby began to feel good. The Chapin place had a hoodoo on it, so Irby had gotten it at a favorable price. He could run his beef here, a herd he had built up on shares and that was waiting for him down on the Brazos. He could have a real spread. And in the evenings he could watch the smoke rising from the chimney of the Curtis ranch or late, like now, when the sun had left the canyon but was still on the river, he could see the flash of it on the windows yonder. It was like the heliographs, he thought, like when he was in General Crook's Army. In those days they were chasing Geronimo as often as not. That Apache chief just could not be licked, it seemed. They

chased him all over the territories. Crook gave up and Miles took over. But even then they would not have caught the wily Indian if it had not been for the heliographs, this system of signaling from the high mountains, up on the mesas with the sun telegraph. *Dot—dash—*

A cold shiver swept over Irby Teague, and the sun left the river. Now the water was red and strange, and the sky was a deep blue with only a few fluffy clouds that seemed like bits of cotton that had been dipped in the bloody river. There were no more bright flashes from the Curtis ranch-house.

Yet Irby had a disturbing feeling that someone had been talking to him. He felt that somebody had told him not to stay there that night. It was as if a ghost had come up and whispered to him.

The red was turning to gray. Irby climbed out of his foundation and walked up the canyon the few dozen yards to the small corral where he kept his horse at night. The animal shared his restlessness. Irby wished he had a dog—or even the squaw that he had told old Moody about. He didn't want to be alone.

Here the canyon was more than a mile wide, and much of the bottom had turned to meadow. A well-defined road ran down it to the ford. Irby looked down that road, but nothing stirred. On the south bank the lights of the Curtis ranch began to flicker into life.

Irby went up to the point where the three Chapin graves stood. The flowers he had planted were doing well. They were so bright and cheerful they kept the place from looking like a burial ground. It was hard to believe that a man and two boys had died a violent death and were buried there under the new crosses that Irby had hewn from everlasting cedar logs.

Suddenly he had the answer to the problem that had been bothering him. Fifteen or twenty years ago a type of photograph called a *Carte de Visite*, had been the rage. These were small photographs pasted on hard cardboard, about the size of a playing card. Irby had one of these, an unusual one, because there were four people in it, old Rupp Chapin and his three tough sons. Ordinarily you would have expected only one figure in a *Carte de Visite*, but Rupp Chapin had been a man who always wanted the most for his money. When the traveling photographer came by in his mule-drawn studio, Rupp had lined up all his kids for one exposure. With the picture developed and printed he chased the professor off the ranch. That was the way with Rupp Chapin.

The picture had been in Irby's war bag. In

the last of the sunset's light he went back to look for it. It was gone.

HE KNEW then that they were not going to let him stay here without a fight. The gunshots yesterday had been their warning. This raid in which nothing was taken but the photograph was their subtle suggestion to get going.

He decided he needed a good night's sleep and, after eating his lonesome supper and washing the few dishes, he fixed up his sleeping bag very neatly under the tarpaulin. He had a smoke and ground out the cigarette. Then he walked up the canyon a few hundred yards to a place where a juniper thicket crowded down on the trail and the stream below, rolled up in a blanket and went sound asleep.

Gunfire woke him, rattling back and forth between the walls of the canyon. He heard a horse scream, a terrifying sound. A man shouted something, and after a while there was a great thunder of hoofs. Irby had ridden a long time with Crook and Miles. He had handled many a pack train. He figured by ear that there were horses, properly shod saddle horses in that cavalcade. But there were mules, too, many of them, pack mules. They roared down the canyon into the river and across. A long time later Irby could hear them on the far side, passing the Curtis place.

He went back to sleep.

Next morning he went back to his camp and found his dead horse. His bed roll was full of holes. The sack of hay he had tucked inside it was thoroughly ventilated. He looked at his house and decided he would have to postpone working on it for another couple of days.

He turned his bed roll into a pack he could carry on his back, and headed for town. At the southern side of the river he walked up to the Curtis house. The road passed the dwelling so closely it served almost as a drive. If there was anyone sitting on the porch you were bound to say, "Hello."

Sarah Curtis was there in her rocker. Her face was white and she was not laughing. Irby gave her a friendly smile.

"Morning," he said.

The girl said, "Why—hello, Mister Teague."

Irby asked amiably, "Your pa make out okay—hunting antelope?"

"He was hunting antelope," Sarah said. "Even if he didn't get one."

Irby Teague liked Sarah. He wanted to take her home and keep her around. He guessed he could look at her day and night for a long time and not get tired of it. And her voice was music.

"Wanted to talk to your pa about the

antelope," he said. "They're one critter you can't get close to. You have to use a mighty high-powered rifle. I was wondering what your pa would suggest."

The girl was evasive. "You'll have to ask him," she said. "Right now he's not around."

"You all alone?" Irby asked.

"You can't scare me," she said, frightened. "Nobody can scare me. I can take care of myself."

He grinned. "Suppose I told you I wasn't Kid Chapin—what would you think?"

"I was only five years old when the Kid hid under my bed," she parried.

"But you remember him?"

Something like anger colored the girl's face. "Of course I remember him. They thought he had gotten away with those two saddle bags full of his father's loot. He was under my bed, but nobody thought of looking there."

"Did he have those saddle bags?" Irby asked quickly.

"Yes," she said. She said it with a sharp hiss, with an explosive sound. "He had them."

Irby laughed aloud. They had stopped digging long ago, but the canyon near the original location of the Chapin shack had been pock-marked with holes.

Irby asked, "Why didn't you mention it to anybody? Why'd you let them go on digging up Horse Thief Canyon?"

"Does a girl admit that she's hidden an outlaw under her bed?" she countered.

Irby thought about it. The girl in question had been "going on six." The outlaw was about ten. He had twenty thousand dollars worth of gold in two saddle bags that he could hardly carry, gold from smuggled horses. Just how far, he wondered, did the honor of a five-year-old girl go?

"I guess she doesn't," Irby admitted. He liked Sarah the more he saw of her. But there was an uneasiness in the liking. The shot that had almost killed him a couple of days ago had come from the neighborhood of the Curtis ranch house. The riders who had filled his bed roll with lead, and the pack-mule train that had followed, had come right up this trail so close to the girl's porch she could have taken her pick and dropped her loop on any man or mule she might chose. Irby got back to the original question. "I asked—what would you think if I told you I was not Kid Chapin?"

"The Kid had blue eyes," she said. Irby had blue eyes. "His hair was black, curly, like springs." So was Irby's. "He was only three or four feet high when I knew him, but his pa was a good six feet."

"The Kid was a runt," Irby told her. "When I knew him he was only five feet four."

The girl stared at him for a very long time. Then she said, "I suppose you're going to tell

me that moths ate those holes in that bed roll?"

Irby liked that. He enjoyed the first real laugh he had experienced in some time.

"That's right," he said. "Horse Thief Canyon moths. The biggest and meanest moths in Texas. Genuine forty-five caliber." He added more seriously, "I'm going to town to get some moth balls. Would you lend me a horse? Mine died."

"Sure," she said. "I'm sorry. He was a nice horse."

THE horse she lent him was an old plug, saddle galled. Irby rode slowly, sitting aslant of the leather most of the way, watching the trail ahead. When he broke out into the high, flat country where Moody City was located, he felt much better. Any bush-whacker along this stretch would have nothing to hide behind but bunch grass.

Moody City, Moodyville, Moody Corners, was just as it apparently always had been—half asleep. The decrepit horse that Sarah Curtis had lent him failed even to wake up the dogs. But when Irby stepped down from the creaking saddle in front of Moody's store he was pleased to see that most of the town was on hand to greet him. Adam Speers, the stove warmer who had asked if he had a woman at his place was there. So was Phil Hewlett. Phil looked as if he had not had any sleep last night.

"Afternoon, gents," Irby greeted them.

They had been talking about him. There were ways you could tell; their unease while he stood before them. Irby grinned innocently.

"Got a blanket here, Moody." He stole the girl's joke. "Got moths in it last night. Look!" He held up the blanket so all could see where the bullets had torn into it. "Lucky they didn't take a bite out of me," he ended.

Adam Speers took his feet off the rail that circled the stove. Phil Hewlett who had been sitting on the counter, put his boots down on solid ground. The men shifted their positions in various subtle ways. Some were getting ready to duck, and some were planning on beating Irby to the draw when and if he went for the pistol he wore snug against his right thigh.

"Mighty big moths you have up in Horse Thief," Phil Hewlett said.

Irby asked cheerfully, "Happen to have any new blankets in stock Moody? A new tarp, too? Those moths ruined mine."

Old Moody stepped easy. Irby thought that Adam Speers was certainly one of the men who had been in the posse the night they beat Rupp Chapin to death. Rupp had been tougher than Texas rawhide, harder than wrought iron. It must have been a terrible beating that had killed him. Yes, he was sure

that Adam Speers had been there, and Adam had never forgotten it. Lon Curtis, Sarah's father had been there, too, and Robber Moody, and crazy Mike. But if Phil Hewlett had been in the party, Phil must have been mighty young.

Moody laid out a new blanket. He took a tarp down from a shelf. Phil Hewlett had walked to the front door to look at Irby's mount. Phil's eyes were veiled.

"Moths get your horse, too?" he asked. "I notice you got a Curtis mount out there."

Irby's doubts concerning Hewlett had vanished. It would not have occurred to anyone there to look at the horse he had ridden to town unless he knew that Irby's was dead. Irby looked on Hewlett with new interest.

"Sure enough," he said. "Moths got him, too. He was a good horse, Hewlett. He carried me over many a trail. I was sort of attached to that hay burner."

Hewlett was jittery. He was a man who could not stand up against a good bluff. If Irby had just come out baldly and announced that his horse had been shot and that somebody had tried to cut him down, too, Phil Hewlett would have known what to do, but this crazy talk had Phil on the fence.

"Lon Curtis ain't in the habit of lending horses to strangers," Phil Hewlett said.

Phil was trying to pick a fight. Irby reckoned the time was not yet ripe. Hewlett was backed by too many of his people here in the store and there was not enough space to move around.

"I didn't borrow it from him," Irby said. "His daughter lent it to me. And I'm not a stranger to them, Hewlett." He put meaning into the word, but he grinned while he said it. "I've been living over at Horse Thief near a month now. I reckon I'm a neighbor."

"Callin' on Sarah?" Adam Speers put in crudely.

"Been too busy for that," Irby said. He turned to Moody again. "You got anything in stock to keep those moths away?"

The question startled the men gathered there. Moody was slow to answer.

"If not," Irby said slowly, "I better stock up on ammunition for my Colt and Winchester. Those moths are so damn big I reckon shooting would be the best way to keep them off."

One of these men, or a combination of them, had tried to kill Irby Teague. They had tried twice, now. Irby was superstitious. Irby reckoned that if he did not beat them to it the next time they would get him. Three strikes and out. Irby waited. But the men were waiting, too. They were waiting for Lon Curtis to come in from his ranch—and their wait was abruptly over.

Hoofbeats sounded in the hot streets of late

afternoon. A dog, not as lazy as most, ran out to bark. The horse stopped in front of Moody's store. Spurs rattled.

Sarah Curtis stepped across the threshold. Sarah in levis and a shirt was small but sturdy. She who had always laughed, looked now like one who did not even know how to smile.

"Beat it, Kid," she ordered.

No one moved, Irby least of all. Irby might have been one of the fixtures of the store. The girl's voice lifted, and it became a little harsh.

"Get going!" she cried. "You who call yourself Irby Teague—"

"He been messing around with you?" Adam Speers asked.

"No," she said.

"He steal that horse?" Phil Hewlett wanted to know.

"I gave it to him," the girl's cheeks reddened. Intently she said to Irby, "Don't say I didn't give you a chance—these men won't."

Irby was completely at sea. But Phil Hewlett, who had been jumpy, jumped the gun. Phil reached for his forty-five.

CHAPTER THREE

Three Graves Have I . . .

IRBY was in the middle, not knowing what was going on. The girl's arrival lead an import—he didn't know what. She stood now between him and the door, blocking him.

Phil Hewlett's gunsight was just clearing leather when Irby moved. Irby could have drawn his gun and killed Hewlett right there, but he had seen enough killing when he rode after the Apaches. He backed into Adam Speers who was taking him from the rear, reached over his shoulder to grab Adam by the coat, and neatly tossed the smaller man over his head. Adam took a complete somersault in the air. Phil tried to duck from under, but the stove-warmer landed on top of him, knocking Hewlett back against a counter.

Everyone there had expected shooting. Irby had plenty of clearance as he went for Hewlett. He wrenched the pistol from Hewlett's long, white fingers, slapped Hewlett smartly on the knuckles with the barrel, kicked Speers out of the way, and twisted Hewlett around in front of himself.

There was no one behind him now but Sarah Curtis. Though she seemed to have suddenly switched camps, Irby had to take a chance she would not cut him down from the back.

Adam Speers tried to get to his pistol and Irby stamped on his wrist. He had noticed that Adam had stepped in lime recently—most likely during the raid last night when Irby's not-yet-finished masonry foundation had been crossed. It was a pleasure to stamp on Adam's wrist.

For a while the room was in a state of suspended animation. Phil Hewlett hugged his crushed knuckles. His right hand looked curiously boneless. It had begun to puff up.

"There seems to be a little misunderstanding," Irby Teague said. "I'm not Kid Chapin."

He was talking to a collection of wooden faces. It was as if these men had ceased to live fifteen years ago after their brutal murder, as if they had grown petrified—all but their souls, which quaked and shivered. Irby knew he was wasting his breath, but he said it anyway.

"The Kid and I were pardners, buddies," he said. "The Kid used to tell me about this place, about the fine grass up there where his old man held stolen horses until he could run them into Mexico. It was a sort of natural corral. Plenty of water, too. It sounded good to me."

These wooden faces had not changed a bit. They did not believe a thing he said.

"The Kid and I were in the Army," he said. "The kid was hell on wheels—all greased up and headed down hill. He was killed in an Apache ambush. Me—I'm Irby Teague—I grew up in an orphanage. I'm not Kid Chapin."



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Irby thought he heard the girl sob once, but he did not dare look around to see. Despite his speech these people were still lined up against him. On the floor Adam Speers was making plans to kill him.

"That's about it," Irby said finally. "I'm going back out to Horse Thief. Phil's going to ride away with me. I got my hands full, Phil. Maybe you better be good and carry my truck."

Phil Hewlett's own gun was in his back. He picked up the new blanket and tarp and went slowly toward the door. Irby backed away. He passed the girl who was standing so straight and quiet. He felt with his heel for the threshold. Then he turned around as if to follow Phil Hewlett, then spun completely.

Adam Speers had lifted himself on an elbow. He was biting his lips against the pain of his smashed ribs. He squeezed the trigger of his pistol the moment Irby faced him.

Irby shot once. The bullet went into Speers' forehead and came out the back of his neck. Speers' single shot broke the big front window. For quite a while the falling of glass was the only sound.

Irby marched Phil Hewlett down to the wagon yard where they got a horse. They rode, Hewlett leading, out of town. They went at a brisk little trot into the setting sun, along the high plains toward the river. Hewlett did not have anything to say. When they were well out of town, Irby gave him back his pistol. Gingerly Hewlett dropped the gun into the holster.

"It won't work, Kid," he said.

"What won't work?" Irby asked. "And if you call me Kid again I'll give you a licking that'll be the grandpappy of all lickings."

Phil Hewlett said, "You're too fast for me, mister. I saw what you did to Speers. Giving me back my gun isn't going to mean I'll try to use it on you."

"When I kill you," Irby promised, "I'll do it in public. I'll have witnesses. I didn't bring you out here to shoot you."

"Then what do you want of me?" Hewlett asked.

Irby rolled a cigarette and lighted it. Irby seldom smoked while in the saddle, but he needed something now.

Irby said, "You were only a kid the night they beat Rupp Chapin to death. Likely you didn't have anything to do with it. You were along, that's all. Your old man took you. He's dead now. You—you don't need to worry because you were out there."

Phil Hewlett said, "I'd recognize the Kid anywhere. I wasn't much older than he was. I never forgot him."

Irby said, "You're fighting a war that's over. Like Jackson at New Orleans. The Kid is dead." This was not going over. He said,

"You and everybody else are so damned scared you haven't bothered to think I might be somebody else. The Kid," he added, "told me before he died—said he didn't have any idea who the posse was who beat up his father. The old man knew the vigilantes were coming after him. He gave the Kid his sack of loot and told him to run. The Kid never saw the posse. And if he had, he was so scared, he would have forgotten them."

Hewlett's expression was one of relief and craftiness at the same time.

"Then how did you know I was along that night?"

"Because you've been acting so damned guilty," Irby shouted. "Because you've tried twice to kill me."

Hewlett looked so smug Irby wanted to smash it off his face. Irby was having a hard time holding himself in. Twilight had given away to night while they talked beside the trail. There was a soft luminosity in the darkness. A trotting horse was coming up the road. Hewlett did not seem to hear it.

"What gives you the idea I tried to kill you twice?" he asked, as if the notion was absolutely preposterous.

Once, Irby thought, with a high-powered rifle—once with a pistol while Hewlett thought he was sleeping. As a matter of fact, there was a third time, in the store, and Irby had not been nicked. Irby began to feel very fine.

"It don't matter," Irby said. He felt immune to Hewlett's bullets. "Now get the hell out of here before I change my mind. And get quick!"

Phil Hewlett ran like a scared rabbit.

Irby waited. The hoofbeats on the trail slowed and stopped, then started up again and Sarah Curtis appeared in the night. Sarah's face was set. She had been crying.

"Why don't you go?" she asked. "Why don't you leave us alone?"

He rode with her in the soft, gloomy night. After her first outburst she had nothing to say. She neither repulsed him nor encouraged him to stay. At the ranch he unsaddled the horse he had borrowed from her. He intended doing the same for her mount, but she completed the job with swift efficiency while he was working in his. He rolled up the new blanket and tarpaulin. Carrying them under his arm he accompanied the girl to her front porch. He remembered her as he had first met her there—laughing.

There she faced him briefly, and the tragedy masking her face made him feel like a man caught in quicksand.

"Two," she said. "You've got two now. The rest won't wait to be picked off like ducks on a log. And next time you have to run don't figure on hiding under my bed. The score's even. It's wiped off the books."



Rupp Chapin built his shack
and began to run horses
across the river. . . .

She wheeled about and ran into the house. He waited a long time outside, but no light showed in the house, so he walked down to the river. Starlight danced brightly there, and when he glanced back toward the house he saw that the girl had lighted a candle when she thought he had gone. He had to talk to her. He left the tarp and blanket there on the beach, and went back to the house. He knocked gently on the door. The girl opened.

Her face was white, incredulous. It took her several seconds before she realized that it was he. Without a word she slammed the door. As angry as she, Irby wrenched it open again. The girl was reaching for the carbine above the lintel. Irby twisted it from her. He turned her toward himself.

"Phil Hewlett knows I'm not the Kid," he said. "Look him in the eye and ask him. He knows. He knows all I want is to live in peace."

"Go away," the girl said bitterly.

Irby dropped his hands and turned. He had a brief glance into the living room. There in the flickering candlelight he could see Sarah's father stretched out on the settee. He was covered with a sheet, and his eyes were open, staring at the ceiling.

"A knife in his back—" she whispered.

IRBY knew he should have pulled out. But he stayed and from across the river next day he watched the funeral. Lon Curtis has always been afraid the quicksand or flood would get him, so they buried him up and away from it, up where his wife had been buried before him. Then the people went away, and

the girl was alone. Irby elaborated a hundred speeches that he intended delivering to Sarah Curtis. They could all be summed up in three words—he was sorry.

He climbed up the rise to the place where the Kid's two brothers and father had been buried. Below, the house he had started lay unfinished. The setting sun dyed the river crimson and flashed from the windows of the Curtis house. Irby sat on the ground among the flowers he had planted and smoked a steady string of cigarettes. There was something about all this that he did not savvy, something that eluded him. These people were too hard to convince.

He was still sitting there in the little burial ground when lights winked on in the Curtis ranch house. It seemed that they were talking to him.

Coming tonight. Irby felt a sudden shiver shooting down his spine. *They're coming tonight.* Often when he was in the Army he had watched the heliographs blinking from the tops of mountains and high mesas, sending their signals by the flash of sunlight on mirrors. He had learned to read the codes then, and he had not forgotten them. *They are coming tonight.*

The girl was signaling him.

Roads blocked, the signals blinked. *Can hide you.*

Irby picked up his Colt and Winchester and walked into the river.

He could see the girl, sitting in a rocker with an open book in her lap. He circled the house twice like a dog getting ready to lie down. Then he stopped at the kitchen door and knocked quietly.

He went inside and she closed the door. The kitchen was dark, and he could not see her. He could feel her near, and the fragrance of her was sweet and delicate.

"They may be watching," she said.

Irby asked, "You changed your mind?"

"Yes," she said. Bitterness was still in her voice. "I asked Phil—what you told me to ask. Here." She passed him a small card. It was warm from her pocket. The feel of it was familiar, slick on one side and a little rough on the other. "A picture of the Chapins," she said. "Phil picked it up the night he and pa searched your duffel. He gave it to me today."

"Why—thanks," he said. "I kind of fancied that picture. The Kid and I went through a lot together."

It was odd, he thought, there in the dark room, how he would always deny he was the Kid. He might as well insist that he did not exist at all.

But strange things were happening. The girl came close to Irby and put a hand on his arm. Her fingers trembled.

She said in a whisper, "I had some of pa's whisky out for the men from town. After—after the funeral—Phil had a drink or two. I asked him if he really thought you were the Kid. He broke out the picture. He said it proved it."

"I suppose it did," Irby said. "I suppose it doesn't make any difference what I say."

"They'll be coming pretty soon," the girl said. "I want you to know, Irby. It seemed pretty funny to me that Phil should try so hard to prove you were the kid when everybody already believed it."

"Yes?" Irby prompted.

"You were in their way," she said quickly. "Pa thought you were a Ranger or marshal, trying to find out who was running those guns into Mexico along the old Horse Thief Trail. Pa figured on laying low until you went away. It was Phil who said you were the Kid. Phil tried to get pa to kill you."

She began to cry. Irby took her into his arms, and she let her head fall against his chest. She was warm and soft and frightened and terribly unhappy. She became quiet and tense.

"They broke up the night pa thought Phil had finished you—the night they ran that last shipment. I thought pa was right until—until—I found him with a knife in his back. Rangers don't fight that way—but the Kid might."

"No," Irby said. "The Kid wouldn't have done that. Hewlett?"

"I don't know," she said.

Sarah took a deep breath and moved away. She went to a door where a crack of light could be seen. Irby backed away and stepped outside. He had it all now—a scrap between the smugglers—a chance to run this stranger off by pretending he was the son of an old time renegade. A chance for Phil Hewlett to get rid of Lon Curtis and blame it all on Irby Teague.

It could have worked out very nicely.

HE WAITED in the yard. The girl read her book under the bright lamp in the living room. She seemed to be all alone, but she never turned a page, and after a while Irby went back into the kitchen.

"It's me," he said through the crack in the door. "I'm hungry. I'm looking for that pie I left here."

He could not see her in there, but he could picture her and he had her looking at the book and talking without moving her lips just in case somebody was watching.

"Cupboard—wall," her muffled voice came. "You fool."

Irby felt along the back wall. There was a cupboard there, and in it was the pie. He ate half of it. Then he took out his heavy case

knife and carefully cut up the tin pie plate. He guessed the girl would not mind when she learned why he had done it, and then he went outside again.

Two men were riding in slowly, staying off the traveled part of the road so the shod hoofs of their horses would not make too much noise. They stopped by the Curtis house and threw their reins over the hitch-racks where the living room lamp would not disclose them. They stepped down.

Old Robber Moody was griping, "I still think we should of called the sheriff," he said.

"You're getting yellow in your old age," Phil Hewlett jeered. "You seem to forget, Robber, this is old Rupp Chapin's whelp. He's killed two already. There's you and Mike and me left."

Irby let Phil silhouette himself in the doorway. He waited until Sarah stepped aside. Old Moody was right behind Phil, sagging in the shoulders and knees. Irby was off to the side, so both men were plain in the light.

"I got my sights on you Hewlett," Irby said. "Turn around and start shooting. Or put up your hands."

Phil Hewlett froze there. The old man only seemed to sag deeper. There was no heart in him for gunplay.

"You been worrying a long time about the Rangers," Irby went on. "Well—turn around and take a look."

Phil swore. He dropped in a crouch, firing with both hands. He hopped around trying to get behind Moody, and the latter howled when the bullet scorched him. Phil took advantage of his terrified fort to take a shot at a bright spot of metal on Irby's chest. He busted one

of Irby's ribs, and Irby reached around behind Moody to drag the sight of his pistol across Phil's face. Then he smashed Phil behind the ear with the barrel, and while Phil was falling, kicked him in the face, good and hard, smashing his mouth with his heel.

Moody stared a second, then sobbed.

Moody squalled, "I quit!"

IRBY wanted to get rid of the old man. He did not like having Phil Hewlett lying on the porch snuffing through a broken nose. He gave orders in his best official manner. He had been a sergeant under General Crook and he knew how to make his voice carry authority. He told Moody to take Hewlett to the settlement and lock him up. He helped lash the younger man down on his horse.

When they were gone, he went into the house. His broken rib just about doubled him up. He felt very faint, but quite weightless. If he had fallen, he would have floated down. Yet he managed to grin at the girl.

"How about warmin' up a cup of coffee—and breaking out the rest of that pie?"

"Why—yes," she said.

She scurried off to the kitchen, carrying a lighted spill of paper to use on the bracket lamp beside the stove. It glistened on the cut up pie plate. Irby heard a soft cry.

He remembered the tin star he had whittled with his knife and stuck on his shirt. He skimmed it across the room, through the kitchen door. It dropped, tinkling, at the girl's feet. Irby thought, that would tell her. That would tell her that he was plain Irby Teague, here to stay.

Then he passed out cold.



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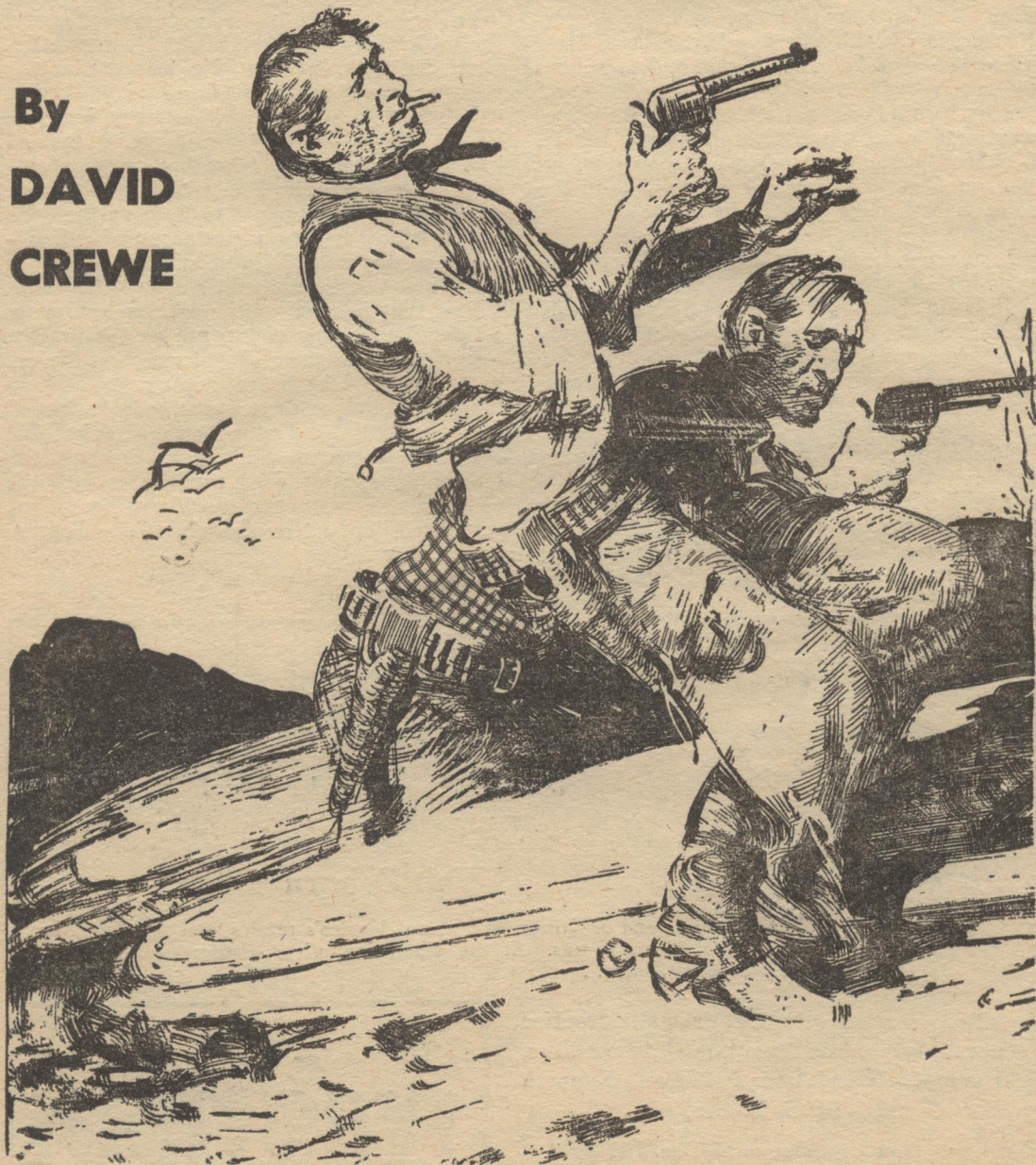
SHOOT THE

THE first bullet had struck Sheriff Sam Gilmore in his chest. The second had driven in just above and to one side of his belt buckle, ranging through his body at an angle. Looking back, he could not honestly say that there had been any immediate sense of pain. Only weakness, and the retching sickness that had convulsed his stomach.

But now, after three hours on the dirty

blankets in Charley Longfoot's cabin, the pain was beginning to make itself known. It came slowly at first, as though exploring the numbness of bullet-shock that had so long held it back. But the numbness was losing its grip, and the pain walked heavily through Sam Gilmore's body, pulling nerves taut with its fire-hot fingers and putting fever into Sam's brain.

By
DAVID
CREWE



MAN DOWN

Charley Longfoot moved out of the shadows and bent over Sam Gilmore's bed. He was a short, thick-shouldered man who had renounced half of his name and most of the characteristics of his race after he had taken a squaw for his wife. His eyes were flat and impassive as he looked down at Gilmore—the stoic eyes of an Indian—but friendly concern was hidden in the deep seams of his face.

"You feel better Sam?" It was a throaty voice.

"I feel like hell," Sam Gilmore breathed. He was surprised that it took a definite effort to bring the words out of his throat. He could still think clearly, but it was difficult to speak.

Sam moved his eyes to the window. It was a poor man's cabin, a squaw man's cabin, with

no glass in the windows. When summer came the window was open, but during the winter a steer hide was nailed across the opening. Sam looked for the sun, but he couldn't see it. He wondered if he had been sleeping, but he couldn't remember having slept. All he could remember was the Midnight Kid, and the flame that had stabbed from the killer's gun.

"Have I been sleeping, Charley?"

The squaw man shrugged his shoulders. "All time you lay there, eyes closed. I ask you want water. You drink. Squaw ask you want Injun medicine. You no take."

Sam Gilmore reasoned this out and found his answer. Then he had not slept. He could not have accepted the water but refused the squaw's herb medicine if he had been sleeping. But time had no meaning for him.

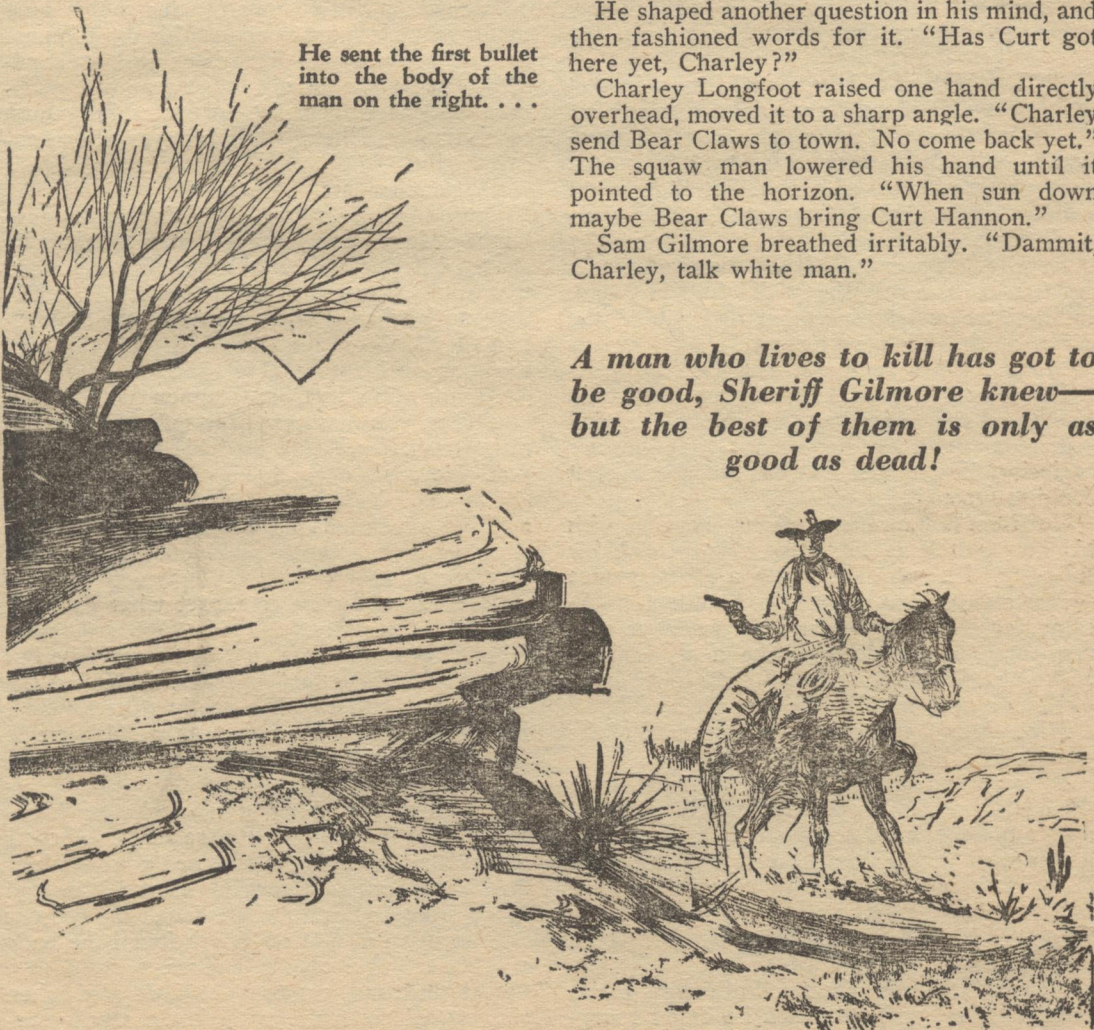
He shaped another question in his mind, and then fashioned words for it. "Has Curt got here yet, Charley?"

Charley Longfoot raised one hand directly overhead, moved it to a sharp angle. "Charley send Bear Claws to town. No come back yet." The squaw man lowered his hand until it pointed to the horizon. "When sun down maybe Bear Claws bring Curt Hannon."

Sam Gilmore breathed irritably. "Dammit, Charley, talk white man."

He sent the first bullet
into the body of the
man on the right. . . .

A man who lives to kill has got to be good, Sheriff Gilmore knew—but the best of them is only as good as dead!



A brief smile touched Charley's mouth, a smile that was thin and lost and furtive. When he spoke his voice lost some of its throatiness.

"You were shot about noon, Sam. Bear Claws hadn't had time to get here with your boy. They ought to be here by sundown. Can I do anything for you?"

"No."

"You ought to let Laughing Woman fix you something to eat."

Sam shook his head. Food could do him no good and the thought of it sickened him. In his time he had seen many men shot, and he knew how these things went. He understood his chances, but he wasn't afraid. He only hoped he could hold out until Charley's son got back from town with Curt Hannon.

"Water, Sam?"

"Yes."

He drank thirstily, but the water did nothing for his parched throat. That was the fever in him, burning out what little strength and life were left in him.

He wished Curt was there beside him.

HE CLOSED his eyes and for an instant the pain slipped away from him and his mind was bitterly clear. He was vaguely aware of movement close to him in the squaw man's cabin, of voices, but those were indistinct impressions that scraped only shallowly upon his consciousness.

At first he remembered only the cruel mockery that had been in the Midnight Kid's eyes, the derisive malevolence that had rubbed the edges of the Kid's soft drawl.

"Looking for someone, sheriff?"

He was a tall youth, with a frame that would lose its sharp angles as he grew older, and something about him tugged on Sam Gilmore's curiosity, like a face he had once seen but couldn't remember.

But Sam Gilmore was too preoccupied with his own problems to struggle long with his curiosity. He gave the youth a grave glance—just another twenty-year-old with a hankering for black clothes and the swagger of a man-eater, a pup baying like a wilderness-wise dog. Gilmore smiled.

"You a new hand on the Box T, son?"

His only reply was in the biting smile of the youth's thin lips.

Gilmore said easily, "I was coming along the Houston Flats road and picked up hoss tracks turning into Arroyo Prieta. I figured it was some of the Box T hands, and reckoned I'd pass the noon meal with them."

The Kid's laugh was short and brittle. "You wouldn't be trying to string me, would you, sheriff?"

Not until then did the smell of danger touch Sam Gilmore, and even then he didn't recognize it.

"Something eating you, son?"

"You wouldn't be hunting for Jess Cabel, would you, sheriff? Or Monte Chess, or Lige Rydell? The Midnight Kid, maybe?"

Understanding struck Sam Gilmore then, stiffening him with the cold shock of reality. His information had been that the outlaws who had broken out of Yuma prison last week had been trying to make their way across the Border. But that information had been false. They had doubled back.

Monte Chess and Lige Rydell came out of the rocks behind the youth in black. They moved together, with the balanced wary strides of men who knew they walked in the presence of death that soon would strike. After them came Jess Cabel, and on this man settled Sam Gilmore's attention.

Eighteen years had not made many changes in Jess Cabel. He was a little grayer than he had been when he and his gang had burned out and massacred the Mike Hannon family. There was a little more cruelty in his long mouth, a little more venom in his dark, humid eyes. But he would have been just as handsome except for the old bullet scar that puckered his cheek from the corner of his mouth to his temple. The mirth in his eyes was mocking, hating.

"Remember me, Gilmore?"

Sam Gilmore spoke with deliberate contempt. "In a county that's had more than its share of polecats, I could never forget the one that stinks worse than all the others, Cabel."

Jess Cabel's laughter was silently malevolent. He brushed the tips of his fingers along the scar on his face. He spat.

Gilmore said, "Curt Hannon was just a boy when you massacred his folks, Cabel. He always wondered how bad his bullet marked you. He made a good job of it."

The hatred in the outlaw's humid eyes was a thing of unreasoning venom, malice that stemmed from a vanity that would always bear the scar of a boy's bullet.

"Hannon will live to regret what he did," Cabel said harshly.

Sam Gilmore knew that there could be but one end for these final minutes. It was in the eyes of the outlaws what was in store for him. He had his moment of regret that his time to die had come, but even then there had been no fear.

"There's something you ought to know about Curt Hannon," Gilmore said coldly. "I headed the posse that discovered your work at the Hannon ranch, Cabel. We found Mike and Mary Hannon dead, and we found the body of their daughter. But we never found the body of Curt's four-year-old brother."

"At the time you thought Curt died when you burned down the cabin, but a seven-year-old boy is pretty slippery. Curt pushed his

little brother out the door, then ducked back into the cabin. While you were firing the place, he climbed out the back window and hid in the brush.

"When you were gone, he started walking, but he ran into a bunch of Apaches. They took him with them, and he didn't care much. His folks were all dead. But Curt learned a lot from those Apaches, and he never forgot you, Cabel. When I heard about him and brought him to live with me, I taught him a lot more. He'll be mighty glad to know you've come back, Cabel, and this time he'll know how to handle you."

The outlaw's laugh was malevolent. "You don't think you're going to tell him, do you?" he sneered.

"Curt Hannon will recognize you, all right."

Jess Cabel's smile was tight and cruel. "It's too bad you never found the body of Curt's kid brother, Gilmore."

It was a strange statement that at first was meaningless to Sam Gilmore. Then he followed the outlaw's stare to the Midnight Kid, and that same feeling of familiarity again touched the lawman. He couldn't put his finger on it.

He said grimly, "You're traveling in a tough crowd, son. If you've got any sense—"

He didn't finish that. He stared unbelievably at the youth. That tall angular body, the cut of the jaw, the steady, green-flecked eyes—and suddenly Sam Gilmore knew!

"Why," he began wonderingly. "You—"

"Take him, Kid!" Jess Cabel yelled harshly.

With all his speed, Sam Gilmore did not have a chance. Surprise had shocked the nerves that should have been cocked and ready, and the will to kill Curt Hannon's brother was not in him.

The first bullet struck Sam Gilmore in his chest, and the second drove in just above and to one side of his belt buckle. He never knew when his horse sheered around in panic and pitched him to the ground.

THERE were those in Aztec county who said that Curt Hannon was a man who would live out his life without ever offering friendship or accepting it. On the surface, this statement was not without a certain amount of truth. He seldom smiled, and never laughed. He did his work as Sam Gilmore's deputy with a passionless efficiency. If he was given a trail to follow, only the sheriff could pull him off it. If he had a drunk to man-handle or gun-whip, he did it thoroughly and with the least possible waste of motion.

There were those in the county who were surprised that Curt Hannon had yet to kill his first man. He had the makings, they claimed, of another Bill Hickock. Or worse. There was undeniably a cruel streak in him that cropped out in moments of stress. Yet he had been known to set and care for the broken leg of a worthless mongrel dog. And he had been seen slipping into the town's crib district one cold winter night, taking food and medicine to a girl who was sick and without help. Still there was no man who could accuse Curt Hannon of ever patronizing that district.

He was a strange, silent man in whom bitterness and hatred fed on the unforgotten memory of that gray morning when his father and sister had been slaughtered, when his kid brother had vanished and when he himself had been burned, protecting his brother from a falling firebrand.

The seared palm of his right hand was the key to Curt Hannon. The scar was burned into his flesh and into his brain. And beside it was the memory of the outlaw leader whose face had taken Curt's only bullet.

Curt Hannon strode into Charley Longfoot's cabin behind Dr. Forsythe. He took his position beside the bed, looked impassively at the bullet-broken man on it, then turned his eyes to the squaw man.

"You got anything to tell me about this, Charley?" It was a flat, expressionless voice, with nothing in it to hint that he was asking about the man who had given him a home



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and a job. He might have been speaking about a stranger, and to a stranger, for all the warmth there was in his tone.

The squaw man's throaty voice broke the room's darkening silence.

"Sam shot where Arroyo Prieta turns into Devil's Hip Pocket. Charley heard gun, went to see what about. Find Sam hurt bad, bring him here."

"Talk white man, Charley."

The squaw man made an empty gesture with one hand. "I'm with Injuns so much—" He let that drop. "There's nothing else to tell, Curt. There were hoss tracks leading into the rocks, but I didn't follow them. I brought Sam here and sent Bear Claws to town after you and the doctor."

"What time did this happen?"

"About three o'clock."

Curt Hannon's mouth was thin and hard and bitter, and his words were clipped.

"Did Sam tell you anything about it?"

Charley Longfoot hesitated. "Maybe you'd better wait until Sam can tell it." His eyes dropped, and he spoke to the floor. "Dammit, Curt, I don't want to call those outlaws down on me. You know how this goes. If I talk out of turn it might bring trouble down on my woman and kids."

"I want to hear what Sam said, Charley."

The squaw man raised his eyes. He lived on the edge of the badlands, and he was ruled by the grim code of the men who rode the unmarked trails.

"Talk, Charley."

"Sam said he stumbled onto a gang of outlaws, the bunch that broke out of Yuma last week."

Curt Hannon's gray-green eyes gripped the squaw man coldly. "Mace Reeder's gang? Lige Rydell, Monte Chess, the Midnight Kid?"

"Yes, and a couple of others hiding back in the rocks; Sam didn't name them." Then the squaw man's voice turned harsh. "Hell, I might as well go whole hog in this. Sam gave Reeder another name—Jess Cabel."

Curt Hannon smiled then, a cruel eager smile.

Charley Longfoot said hurriedly, "Sam had something else on his mind, but he wouldn't let it out. He acted like it was something important he wanted to tell you, Curt."

But Hannon had turned back to the bed. "How about him, doc? Can you pull him through?"

Forsythe straightened his bent shoulders. "I don't know. Either one of those wounds is enough to kill him. They don't leave much room for hope."

He raised his glance to Hannon's chiseled features. "I can bring Sam around if you want to talk with him."

Curt Hannon looked down at the unconscious man on the bed, at the thinning white hair, the fever-burned face, the drawn lips.

"No," Hannon said.

A trace of distaste stirred in the doctor's dark eyes. Not once had he seen the slightest reflection of compassion or pity in Curt Hannon's granite features.

"I'll do all I can, Curt," Forsythe said. "I'll have to move Sam to town, but I don't think he can make it. If you want to talk to him, you'd better do it now."

"No."

Dr. Forsythe's patience cracked. "Damn you, Hannon, stop biting yourself and act human. Sam Gilmore gave you a home and a job; he was your friend and now he doesn't have a chance in a hundred of living through the night."

Hannon raised his slate-gray eyes, and his voice came cold and edged with leashed bitterness.

"I learned more about death when I was a kid than you'll ever know, doc. As long as Sam is unconscious he's not in any pain." Then he said harshly, "What do you expect me to do, doc, stand around here and cry like a woman or go after the men who shot Sam?"

"You can't go after that gang alone."

There was cruelty in Hannon's brittle laugh, as he turned toward the door.

Forsythe followed him with a sharp voice. "Don't be a fool, Curt!"

Hannon strode out of the cabin and swung into his saddle.

HE RODE with the low sun slanting full against the flat planes of his face! Where Arroyo Prieta gouged into the Houston Flats road he swung his mount into the brush and picked up the tracks of Sam Gilmore's horse.

He rode without haste and yet without patience. The arroyo curved in and flattened out, and here where the sand was stained dark old Sam Gilmore had fallen. The boot marks in the earth told Hannon their grim story. The Midnight Kid had stood here when he had loosed his murderous guns, and three outlaws had come out of the rocks to back the Kid. But two other killers had remained in the rocks at one side—Jess Cabel's murder insurance.

Beyond were the rocks and cactus and frowning spires of the Devil's Hip Pocket. Hannon picked up the trail, and followed each turn as it bored deeper into the badland. The sun was down, but heat still lingered in this rocky pocket.

Now the pattern of what was to come began to take shape in Curt Hannon's mind. Jess Cabel and his outlaws had made no at-

tempt to conceal the shooting of Sam Gilmore. They had made no attempt to hide their trail into the badlands. They had known Curt Hannon would follow; it was what Jess Cabel had wanted.

The rocks thinned out, and the trail angled across a shallow basin, an arid amphitheater that was surrounded on all sides by eroded boulders.

Hannon saw the first dull glint of gun metal as he moved into the clearing. He didn't slow his horse. He moved farther into the basin, his eyes wary and restless. This was the trap, and he knew it. It was how Jess Cabel would operate, bait his victim into the open where he could be whipsawed by hidden killers. The second gunman was staked out in the rocks far to one side, and Hannon knew then that the rest of Cabel's gang would be waiting in the boulders on the yonder end of the trail.

This would be, Hannon knew bitterly, just like the shooting of Sam Gilmore. It would be Cabel's pet killer, the Midnight Kid, who would step out of the rocks to spring the trap. And if the Kid failed, those two staked-out killers were in a position to cut the rider down with their murderous cross-fire.

Halfway across the basin, Hannon drew his mount to a halt. He bent low in his saddle, as though to examine the trail more closely. From under his hat brim, he saw his movement force the two gunmen to rise behind the rocks to keep him in sight. It was what Hannon had wanted.

He pulled his gun, straightened suddenly, and sent his first bullet into the body of the man on his right. Some killer shouted a startled oath.

"Hey, Jess—"

A rifle smashed, and the bullet laid its hot wind against the side of Hannon's face. He spun his mount, saw the second killer crouching over a leveled rifle. Hannon's gun bucked, and the killer's body wheeled and slumped, and Jess Cabel's shout rang out harshly.

"Get him, Kid—get him!"

Hannon spun his mount and sent it plunging back into the rocks, and the smile on his lips was a bitter and ruthless thing.

SAM GILMORE refused to die that night. He lay in a fever-ridden coma during all that long pull to town in Charley Longfoot's buckboard, and when they carried him into the doctor's office he was more dead than alive. His eyes were blue-lidded, his cheeks were sunken.

"Any man less stubborn would have been dead hours ago," Doc Forsythe said.

Charley Longfoot looked at the case of medicines, the row of neatly laid out surgical instruments, and frowned at the futile thought

that stirred in his mind. He had thought that memory was buried beneath more than a score of years and the oblivion of uncounted bottles, but here it was again.

He said, "Sam acted like he had something important to tell Curt Hannon."

"It's all that's keeping him alive," Forsythe answered. He raised his eyes to the squaw man. "There's a bottle in that cabinet, Charley."

The squaw man turned and crossed the room. He opened the cabinet, removed the bottle. He held it up to the light, and stared at the amber liquid. Without taking his eyes from the bottle, he said, "You'll need some help tonight, won't you?"

"Yes." Dr. Forsythe looked at his slender strong fingers. They were as rock-steady and sure as they had always been, but lately he had been worried about his eyes. He was getting old, and too many hours riding the circuit and working under flickering lamp-light had cut the sharp edges from his vision.

"Yes," he said, "I'll need help, Charley." He turned halfway, and when he spoke it was to the wall.

"I'm all right when it's prescribing medicine. But this is different. Sam Gilmore is my friend, and he hasn't a chance unless I remove the bullet that's pressing his heart. I'm scared, Charley. You know how something like this is. Folks say you were a doctor once."

The squaw man stared at the bottle, and said nothing. All he wanted now was to get drunk again, to escape what had once more been dragged out of his past. He uncorked the bottle, pulled it closer.

"My hands are all right, Charley, but I need your eyes. I need you to tell me what to do."

The squaw man said with slow bitterness, "I was with Kincaid's troops when the Army first pushed into here twenty-five years ago. There was a girl back East, but she wouldn't wait. You lose your perspective when things go wrong and you're stuck too long on the frontier. One day I saw Laughing Woman—" Silence choked off his words.

"A man never knows what is right for him," Forsythe said.

"I'm a squaw man now. I've got an Injun wife and two half-breed sons."

He jerked the bottle to him, put it to his lips.

"The Almighty never made any white man to be better than a red man. It's what's inside that counts, Charley."

The squaw man turned his glance and stared long at the doctor. Then he corked the bottle, and set it on the cabinet top.

"We'd better see what we can do for Sam, doctor," he said.

Late that night they removed the last bullet. They applied the bandages, and Forsythe wiped the fine overlay of sweat from his forehead.

"You'd better get some rest," Charley said. "I'll sit with Sam."

At the door, Forsythe turned back, and motioned toward the bottle on the cabinet top.

"It's yours if you want it, Charley, any or all of it."

"Thanks, Phil." Charley crossed the room, and picked up the bottle. He stared at the amber contents, then turned and opened the outer door. He pulled the cork, drew back his arm, and sent the bottle plowing through the dust of the street. He turned back, and took his chair beside Sam Gilmore's cot. Dr. Forsythe closed the door quietly behind him, and silence settled down for the night's watch.

MID-MORNING the next day, Sam Gilmore stirred and opened his eyes. He stared long at the white curtains of the window above his bed before he saw them. He was a man in whom everything had channeled into the single instinct of clinging to life. He saw the curtains and wondered about this room, and with his shallow curiosity came fragments of memory.

He turned his head on the pillow, and saw Dr. Forsythe seated beside his bed. He managed a shadow of a smile.

"You've been a long time coming awake," Forsythe said.

Sam Gilmore had nothing to say to this. He was thinking of the four-year-old boy who had been carried away by the outlaws who had murdered his parents eighteen years ago. That boy was the Midnight Kid now, a killer. Bend a sapling, and it will grow into a crooked tree. That was what had happened to young Tommy Hannon. Tommy's young life had been bent and shaped toward one ruthless end—to kill. He was Jess Cabel's revenge against the Hannon who had put that ugly bullet scar in Cabel's once-hand-some features. Young Tommy had been raised by Jess Cabel—perhaps for a single vicious purpose—to kill his own brother.

And then Sam Gilmore remembered Curt Hannon, and what he had wanted to tell that silent, bitter man.

"Is Curt here?" The sheriff's voice came in a small distant whisper.

Forsythe shook his gray head. "Don't get yourself worked up, Sam. You're in bad shape."

"I've got to—tell Curt something."

"About the Midnight Kid?" Forsythe asked.

Sam Gilmore looked at the doctor through the uncertain haze of his vision. He said nothing.

"About the Midnight Kid being Curt Hannon's brother? Is that what you want to tell him, Sam?"

Gilmore opened his lips, but he couldn't speak. He needed every breath to feed the flickering spark of his life. He looked mutely at the doctor.

"You were out of your head, Sam, and you said things about the Midnight Kid. I put two and two together, and got the answer. You want Curt to know so he won't kill his own brother. Is that it?"

Sam Gilmore groped for a word and found it. "Yes."

"When a man turns killer," Forsythe said, "he has to be destroyed. The Midnight Kid is no exception, Sam."

"Not for—for Curt to do," Gilmore breathed bitterly. "He saw his folks slaughtered—it did things to him. Wouldn't take much to ruin him. If he kills his own brother—"

"If he did, he'd never need to know it. You and I wouldn't tell, Sam."

"Jess Cabel—would," Gilmore whispered. "Cabel's planned it—all these years. He wants the Kid to meet Curt. Either way that turns out—Cabel will have his satisfaction."

Forsythe couldn't deny what Sam Gilmore said. He could find no answer for it.

"Get Curt here, Phil."

"I can't, Sam." Forsythe looked at his hands. He opened them, closed them tightly. "Curt went after Cabel's gang yesterday. Charley Longfoot sent his boy on the trail to find out what happened. Cabel tried to ambush Curt in the Devil's Hip Pocket, but Curt Hannon is a hard man to trap. He has an Apache's cunning and a white man's gun science—a tough combination, Sam. He took Cabel's bait, killed two of the gang, and led the rest out into Diablo desert."

Sam Gilmore nodded at this. He made no reply.

Dr. Forsythe said darkly, "You know what I think, Sam? I think Hannon led that gang out into the desert so he'd have them out in the open. He's lived his life for this. He'll take his time and pick them off one by one."

Gilmore shook his head, a weak, dragging gesture. "Curt ain't that kind—not a killer like that."

"I hope you're right, Sam. But a man can hold only so much hatred, and Hannon has carried his too long."

Forsythe stuffed tobacco into his pipe. He scratched a match, and stared at the yellow flame.

"Herb Jessup got together a posse. They knew they couldn't catch up with Cabel's gang by cutting across the desert, so they took the long way around—the Thorn Springs

road. They figure if they're lucky they'll meet up with Cabel's crowd when they come out of the desert in Donahue canyon. It's a good bet they'll be set before that gang can run down Curt Hannon."

He pushed to his feet and picked up his black leather bag. "I'm giving you this straight, Sam. It's how I think you want it. You should have been dead hours ago, but you've got a good chance if you get the rest you need. I'll see you tonight and give you any news I can pick up."

Silence lay with old Sam Gilmore. He was thinking that Forsythe was right in saying that a man could hold only so much hatred. When that hatred boiled over some men would do murder, strike like an Apache from the desert brasada or from the cover of a cutbank, without warning.

And other men could be equally as ruthless in their hatred, yet they would be ruled by a code they could not break. They would fight and kill, as Curt Hannon had killed, but they would not step across the line that no man could cross and continue to live in peace with himself.

Late that night Sam Gilmore awoke, pushed out of his bed and dressed. He drew strength from some inner reservoir, and made his way down the street. Pain knifed him and he was sick, and the earth was an unsteady thing that slipped and rolled under his feet. He sagged against the wall of the livery office, fighting against the clouds that threatened to smother his consciousness. He rapped on the window, and got the livery man awake. His voice was a hoarse whisper when he asked for a buckboard.

Limp Donnelson looked at him through harried eyes. "You're not in any shape to go any place, Sam. Let me take you back—"

"It's my life, ain't it! I've got to have a buckboard, Limpy. And bring me a rifle."

The livery man helped Sam Gilmore into the buckboard. Sam stretched out on the flat wagon bed and snugged the rifle against him. He wrapped the reins around one hand, and looked into the livery man's worried face.

"Don't send anyone to bring me back, Limpy." He was sick and empty, and pain knifed him with its sharp hot blades. Yet somehow the pain didn't touch him, and he wondered vaguely why. It was as though his body had died and only his brain lived.

"I've got to do this alone, Limpy. Don't send anyone—to stop me."

At sunup Sam Gilmore slid out of the buckboard, and crawled to the crest of the hill overlooking the ancient burned timbers of what had once been a ranch house. He squinted through the haze that shimmered in his vision. There was no one down there, not yet. He pushed the rifle in front of him

and gripped the lever. He didn't have what it took to jack a shell into the chamber. He tried again, and felt his consciousness slipping away from him. He tried desperately to grip it, but it was black water that ran between his fingers. Oblivion came, as gently as the touch of his mother's hand.

Yet the oblivion was not complete. Through it he heard the muffled beat of hoofs, the silence as the horses were halted. And he heard Jess Cabel's hate-harshened voice, quick and eager with cruel triumph.

"You gave us a long chase, Hannon. You'll be just as long dying."

THE outlaw's voice reached deep into Sam Gilmore and drapped him out of the darkness. He looked down the hill slope, and saw it all—the trail-weary horses and the outlaws swinging out of saddles to take their positions.

He saw the ancient flame-seared timbers of the old Hannon house, poking like black fingers through the overgrowth of sage and cactus. This was where Curt Hannon's family had been massacred and this was where Hannon had led the outlaws for the final accounting. It was how Sam Gilmore had known it would be and he could only watch. He had a rifle, but not the strength to use it. He had eyes and ears, but no bone and muscle.

Curt Hannon stood alone near the blackened timbers of what had once been his home. He stood tall in the ruddy morning light, his face burned dark by the desert sun. He was bone-tired, and he showed it. He had spent a day and two nights goading the outlaws on and gradually bending them back to this place. His mouth was hard and tight, but his eyes were grim and ready.

Jess Cabel's smile was a thin wicked thing. "You gave us a long run, Hannon." His fingers brushed the scar that puckered his once-handsome features. "I think I'm going to like it better this way. I've waited a long time to even this score."

Curt Hannon made no movement. "We've both waited a long time, Cabel."

Lige Rydell spoke narrowly through the waiting silence. "I don't like this, Jess. He never once tried to lose us. All he wanted was to lead us to this place."

"That's right," Cabel said.

"It might be a trap." Rydell's wary eyes scraped the brush and rocks, the rolling line of the hills. "I don't like this at all."

Jess Cabel spoke malevolently. "This is the end of a circle. Hannon figured that what started here should also end here. That's all right with me. I figure the same way."

He stood between Lige Rydell and Monte Chess, and his eyes flicked briefly to the

Midnight Kid. For a while he didn't speak, drawing the full flavor out of this festering moment. Then virulence brightened in his eyes, and impatience plunged through his dark features.

"He's your man, Kid. Take him."

The Midnight Kid only smiled, a drab, mirthless twist of his hard mouth. He paced forward, and there was a slow grace in his movement. It was the smooth and balance stalking of a killer who had been trained to this profession. It was the pacing of a youth who had known none of the easy days of boyhood, only the constant prodding of the lust to kill.

Curt Hannon called out sharply, "Keep off, Kid."

But the Kid kept moving in, slowly, inexorably.

Hannon flung his bitter contempt out at the outlaw leader. "Are you that yellow, Cabel? Haven't you got the guts to make your own fight?"

Jess Cabel laughed silently. "This is how I want it, Hannon."

Then it was how it would be. Prone on the crest of the hill, old Sam Gilmore knew that and his thoughts cried out sharply. *He's your brother, Curt!* But he couldn't drag the words out of the utter weakness that was in him.

Curt Hannon waited motionlessly, and his thoughts settled into a single bleak groove. He didn't want it this way, but he couldn't change it. This stalking black-garbed killer stood between him and Jess Cabel, and so the Kid would have to be removed. It was Hannon's decision, simple and ruthless and made long before he knew the kid.

He said softly, "This isn't your fight, Kid. Eighteen years ago Jess Cabel burned the home that stood here. He murdered my folks, and now he's hiding his carcass behind you to get me."

"He's not hiding behind me, Hannon." The Kid's voice was slow, edged with malice. "I asked for this job, mister."

"You just think you did. It's how Cabel operates, you fool. He doesn't give a damn if you're killed."

"I won't be killed, Hannon." The Kid halted his pacing, poised himself. His eyes were bright, his smile coldly mocking. "You through talking, mister? It won't do you any good."

"All right," Hannon said. He shifted his feet, and that was all he needed to do. He was ready. His fingers spread, his flame-scarred palm facing slightly forward, just over his gun. "All right, Kid."

The Midnight Kid's bright eyes dropped, settled on Hannon's hand, waiting for the first move.

"It's your go, Kid," Hannon said easily, but with an edge.

But the Kid made no move. A frown shadowed his face, and that seemed to check the cocked violence that was in him. He stared at the flame-seared palm of Hannon's hand, and a strange expression, like the tugging of a forgotten memory, stirred in his hard face.

But Curt Hannon had no eyes for this. He was facing a killer, and every nerve in his body was keened for that split second when blood and muscle would jump to the age-old command of kill or be killed.

They waited.

Jess Cabel's voice rose sharply, "Take him, Kid!"

But the Kid made no move. He kept staring at Curt Hannon's flame-seared palm, and the frown etched deeper into his too young face.

He spoke uncertainly through the trenchant silence, "Jess, there's something—"

He started to turn, and Jess Cabel's hand plunged downward and swept up, and his gun roared. The Midnight Kid's back arched to the impact of the bullet. He wheeled, his gun dragging up.

"Jess—" It was a single word that was instantly lost and meant nothing. His gun kicked, and as he fell he fired again.

Curt Hannon had no time to wonder. His hands dropped and leaped up as Jess Cabel sank loosely to the ground. In that confusion of violence, Hannon knew he was firing only by the kick of recoil against his bent elbows. He put his first bullet into Lige Rydell, and saw flame stab from Monte Chess' gun. Lead tugged at Hannon's shirt and he faded to one side.

He fired once and then again. Monte Chess turned and started to walk away and tripped and fell heavily.

IN THE years that followed, Curt Hannon used to wonder what strange passion had driven Jess Cabel to put his bullet into the Midnight Kid's back.

"A killer is like a rattlesnake," old Sam Gilmore said. "You never know when or who he'll strike."

It was an answer of sorts, but somehow it didn't fit.

And during those years Curt Hannon wondered about the burial of the Midnight Kid. Sam Gilmore had planted a tree at the head of the grave, and during the planting the sapling had been twisted and bent.

But in the years that followed, the tree had straightened and grown strong and tall. Often old Sam Gilmore went out to the valley and stood looking at the tree, saying nothing.

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 35)



1. If your Western friend said he was expecting to be "Pecosed," you should either lend him your gun, run for the sheriff, or both. "Pecosed" means to be murdered and thrown in the river. The term, by the way, gets its name from the Pecos river.

2. True. "Peewees" are short-top boots.

3. In cowpuncher slang "reading sign" means interpreting the markings of a trail. Thus, a cowpuncher would trail something by "reading sign" on it.

4. "Redcoats" is a term the cowpuncher used to use in reference to the Canadian Mounted Police—so named, of course, because of their well-known red garments.

5. "Riding line" means riding along a certain boundary—generally according to a certain prescribed path.

6. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "rib wrench," you would return with a spur.

7. True. "Sag" is the Westerner's term for slope.

8. If a cowpuncher said he was looking for a "sage hen," you would know he was looking for a girl. "Sage hen" is a Western slang term used in reference to members of the opposite sex.

9. "Spur leather" is leather which is fastened to a spur in such a way as to prevent the foot from slipping too far into the spur.

10. True. A "buck hook" is a part of a spur.

11. If the ranch boss sent you out for a "stew

ball," you would return with a spotted horse. A "stew ball" is a white horse spotted any color but black.

12. In the old days, a stock detective would usually work for an association of cattlemen.

13. False. The expression, "too handy with a rope," is one the cowpuncher used to apply to the cattle rustler. The implication is, of course, that the rustler used his rope on animals not belonging to himself—hence, his handiness with the lariat was frowned upon in the West.

14. True. A trail blazer is one who goes ahead and marks out the trail.

15. True. In the old days the "wagon boss" was the person in charge of the roundup.

16. The Western slang expression, "walking sheep," refers to "herding sheep." The expression originated because sheep herding is an occupation which must be done on foot—just another reason why sheep herding was frowned on by the hard-riding cowhand!

17. A "Colt quarantine" is simply any barrier maintained by force of arms.

18. In the language of the Westerner, a "white-water bucko" is a person adept at driving through rivers.

19. True. "Wrango" is another name for "wrangler"—a shortened form, obviously.

20. False. "Yak" is a cowpuncher term used in reference to certain Mexican cattle. The expression was at one time also used to refer to Yaqui Indians.

A quarrel was in progress. . . .



THE DEVIL'S GULCH

CHAPTER ONE

Gallows Venture

HE PRESSED close to the warehouse wall, seeing Carman's blocky figure on the sidewalk at a break between two buildings. The loud racket of a Portland evening had muffled the third mate's footsteps. Dryden held his breath while he waited to see if Carman was coming his way. He rubbed the sweating palms of his hands against lean thighs, slowly, carefully. He saw that Carman was turning in.

Beyond the shadows where Creed Dryden

waited, the clipper *Northwester's* third officer said, in his nasal voice, "Dryden, what're you doing ashore?"

Dryden saw what he had to do, since the man had identified him. His elbows crooked, long, strong hands coming up. He leaped soundlessly. Carman had not seen well. He tried to block the rush by tipping a heavy shoulder. Dryden's hands shot over the shoulder, coiling on the mate's thick neck. They shut off the man's wind and the call he had



tried to issue, they stopped his heavy breathing.

Carman fought blindly against planned motion. He clubbed with his elbows, but Dryden was behind him now. He had a knee in the small of Carman's back and he jerked hard. Carman collapsed in the alley's dirt, his heavy

Dryden was done for in Whiskey Gulch, but he had one more chore. If they were going to hang him—he wanted to make sure it was for murder!

body thrashing. Dryden tightened his grip, lean face pinched in a grimace. He loosened the grip only when he was certain consciousness had run out of the mate. He did not want to kill him, but to silence him, to render him helpless for the time it took to get away from here. He straightened, a tall man whose slenderness concealed the healthy strength in him.

Someone else had paused on the sidewalk now, a dozen paces away. Dryden's heart slammed against the ribs, and he cursed with silent lips. The figure came his way, steadying as Dryden's vision cleared. Dryden saw there was a gun in his hand.

The man's calm voice said, "Did he have enough on him to make it worth while, bucko?"

Anger surged in Dryden; this was no robbery, though half a dozen might occur in a night in the surging Portland town of '68 that was the supply base for the eastward mine fields. He was puzzled by the manner of the man's approach; there was no alarm, no censure in it. Dryden said, "A personal matter."

"The law would call it something else. Do you want to come with me?"

"Where to?"

"I know a place where we can talk. Or would you rather I called the law?"

"All right. Lead the way."

"You lead the way, my touchy friend. Go on behind the building to that other street."

Dryden obeyed. When they came out on another sidewalk, the man put his gun in the pocket of his coat, but Dryden knew it was ready to use. The man was quick and incisive, not as tall, but broader through the shoulders. Dryden's heart hammered again when they turned through the crowded lobby of a hotel and ascended the stairs. In a moment they were in a pleasant, well-furnished room. The man locked the door. He smiled. It was a hard face but not unpleasant in this expression.

"Sit down. I heard the fellow back there call you Dryden. Now you'd have to kill me to destroy the link between yourself and him. I don't think you want to, so I'll put away the gun. It makes this an ugly business."

"Who are you?"

"Phil Kilroy's the name. I run a game in The Palms. I've been looking for a good man. You look like a good man. Have a drink?" He turned toward a table where a decanter and glasses stood.

Dryden accepted a drink. It was good brandy. He sniffed it, looking at Kilroy, noting the sleek black hair, touched with gray at the temples, the seamy face touched with gray, and the gray, dapperish sack suit. He shifted in his chair, a much younger man, ex-

cept for the ageless, determined glimmer in his black eyes.

"What do you want, Kilroy?"

"A partner in a little venture. From the man's cap, I gather you jumped ship, Dryden, and he saw you. Gold fever?"

Dryden shook his head. "A personal matter."

"If I turn you over to the authorities they'll send you back aboard, and it'll mean thirty days on bread and water. Worse, it will mean more of whatever you were trying to run away from. You don't want me to do that."

"No. What's your proposition?"

Kilroy smiled, easing a little. "It'll get you out of Portland. I want a man to do a chore for me up in Whiskey Gulch."

"Where's that?"

"East of the mountains, in the John Day country. Gold camps there, like around Baker and out of Lewiston and down in southern Idaho. The whole shebang draws through here. When the job's done you can catch a stage East and get aboard the Overland at Salt Lake. I gather you'd like to get back East. Is that where you shipped?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't call it shipping. I was impressed aboard the *Northwester*."

Kilroy nodded. "And they have to anchor in midstream to keep the crews from going overside to the mines. So you'd be interested in a job?"

"What kind of job?"

"I want to get back a chunk of money a crooked gambler took away from me."

With a laugh, Dryden said, "Thought you said you were a gambler."

There was no resentment in Kilroy's seamy face. "Your own alibi right back at you, friend. As in your case, I was drunk and careless. It happened in Placerville. Ten thousand dollars. The man is now in Whiskey Gulch, where he's run it into a small fortune. I want back not only my money but what he's made with it. Because, my friend, he was stone broke before I staked him, against my will. It's all mine by rights."

Dryden had finished his drink. "Why don't you go after it?"

"Because he knows me. And he's smart. It'd be a simpler job for somebody he doesn't suspect. I'd suggest that you arrive in Whiskey Gulch as just one more down-at-the-heel prospector. I'll cut you in for a fourth of what you can recover for me."

"And still make a nice profit, apparently." Dryden refused another drink, staring closely at Kilroy. "I'd question your right to what he's made, even conceding that he started on your money."

Kilroy tossed his head impatiently.

"How are you at cards?"

"Not bad. Not good."

"Know any tricks?"

"Enough to protect myself from tinhorns. Not enough to outsharp a sharper."

"You won't work it alone. I'll have someone there to help you in a cross-play. And to watch you. It won't be easy to cross me. You won't know who till the time comes. I'll furnish you with expense money. You'll take a steamboat to Dalles City and a stagecoach from there. Interested?"

"No. I don't like the smell of it."

"Rather go back aboard the *Northwester*?" Kilroy's hand slid into his pocket, where the short-barreled gun reposed, his eyes going suddenly hard.

"All right. I take the job. What's his name?"

"Harlow Hargrove. You won't have any trouble finding him, because he's made himself a bigwig up there. Runs a gambling palace and operates a dust bank on the side."

"If we don't take him at cards?"

"Then you'll get the money any way you can. You take your share and turn the rest over to my other representative. Then you clear out. Go home. You can't lose, Dryden."

"When's the boat?"

"In the morning. I'll arrange the ticket, and you can stay in your cabin till you're well away from here. Tonight you sleep in this room, so you won't have to show yourself. I have other accommodations. I'll leave you now, but don't try to run out on me, Dryden. If I give your name and description to the law, you'll have a hard time staying off that ship."

CREED DRYDEN slept soundly that night. He had no intention of trying to escape. Not yet. It would simplify matters greatly for him to accept a reasonably safe passage up the river. Up there would be the place to get out of it, if he decided he wanted to; on the other hand he needed money too desperately to study far into the morality of the thing.

At eight the following morning the *Inland Queen* stood down the Willamette, bound for the Columbia and the eastward passage through the mountain gorge to the flat and open country beyond. A trim craft, she moved with steady way under a summer morning sun, crowded to her guards with passengers and freight. The willowy banks of the lesser stream slipped quickly behind; then she was in the broader river that was the main thoroughfare to the great rich northwest country lying between the Cascades and the Rockies.

Another gold strike was in full heat. As he moved guardedly aboard the packet, Creed Dryden had noted the long lines of drays at the wharves, the long queues of would-be

passengers, and had appreciated Phil Kilroy's influence in securing passage so quickly for him. This feeling had not been lessened when they had stood down past the *Northwester*, threateningly at anchor in the middle of the river.

Dressed now in rough miner's clothing furnished by the Portland gambler, Dryden kept to his cabin. As he watched the clipper drift past his window, bitterness had tugged at the corners of his strong mouth, and he experienced the relief of at least partial escape.

Yet he admitted now that the old pattern of quick impulsiveness was asserting itself. Glancing briefly over the twenty-seven years of his life he acknowledged that all its turnings had come this way. Action was a tonic to him; inaction and frustration a corrosive, toxic thing. A taciturn man whose lean face masked the play of inner feeling, he could stand just so much, then everything within him would break unpredictably into the course of action open at the moment. It had built him a meandering life.

Notwithstanding, he was glad to be moving on his own again. He knew little of his destination, nor did he plan for it. That was the pattern, too. A man drifted until he found himself in a tight corner, whereupon he broke out. The sizable town of Portland behind, Dryden stretched on his bunk, smoking, deliberately willing doubt from his mind.

Shortly after noon the *Queen* reached the Cascades portage. Dryden, no longer considering it necessary to conceal himself, went boldly ashore with the others. The river broke cleanly here, with a long stretch of bad rapids, passengers and freight transferring to another packet above by means of a five mile, narrow-gauge tramway.

They were in the deep cleft of the gorge now. Dryden's gaze drifted to the vaulting, conifered mountains on either shore. It was a thing of massive and impressive beauty, and he sucked in a stirred breath. He found a place on one of the carriages and enjoyed the ride to the upper landing.

His through ticket did not call for a private cabin on the second packet, for it would reach Dalles City by evening and he was out of immediate danger. Boarding, Dryden remained by the railing on the passenger deck, watched cargo operations and the thickly mixing people. His long, brooding passivity broke in him then, and for the first time he felt a rise of excitement about this venture. He had a chance to pick up a nice piece of money. Whatever the terms—why not take it? He had had enough austerity on the *Northwester* to last him for a long while.

There had been a deadly issue between himself and the first mate, due to Dryden's

maddened reaction to the indignity of being impressed aboard. He had spent weeks in irons. Then he had resorted to guile. He had shown no inclination to jump ship when the clipper had stood in to 'Frisco bay. For several days after she put up the Columbia and Willamette, anchoring in midriver at Portland, he had shown no particular interest in the shore. Then, the evening before, he had gone over the rail, swimming for it. He had hidden on the north edge of town till his clothes had dried in the summer evening air. Then he had drifted casually into the teeming town, feeling it simpler to lose himself there, only to run spang into Carman, the third officer, who was passing the night ashore.

Dryden was glancing down river by chance when the girl stepped out of the nearby cabin. She wore a light summer dress of gay yellow, without the popular bustle, with only the hint of a hat perched at an angle on her pertly carried head. The eternal breeze of the gorge clamped her skirt to long, slim legs. She tried to free it, meeting Dryden's frank gaze with a look of amused distress.

"Damn that wind!"

"It's very pleasant, ma'am. A thoughtful breeze. But over here it's a little quieter."

She came toward him, and he removed his hat. When the sun struck her hair, he saw that it was a deep chestnut, fine-spun and pulled back, with glossy ringlets hugging her nape. She carried gloves of soft white leather in long and slender hands.

A promising venture, indeed, thought Dryden, picking up the musings she had interrupted.

CHAPTER TWO

Satan's Gulch

THE PACKET stood up the middle reach of the Columbia shortly thereafter. Dryden, conscious of his rough clothes, put down uncertainty and suggested a drink in the bar, which the girl quickly accepted. There, at a table, he felt her eyes on him appraisingly.

"Who are you and where are you going?"

"Creed Dryden, and heading for Whiskey Gulch." He saw her nod in the slightest way, as if confirming what she had thought of him.

"And you?"

"Beulah Cornett, and heading for Whiskey Gulch."

"Certainly not to prospect."

She smiled slightly. "In a woman's way." She had ordered wine to his brandy, and she sipped it. "I'm about to do something impulsive."

"Miss Cornett, you're with a kindred spirit."

"I need to attach myself to a strong and decent-looking man till we get there. That's why I joined you on deck. Would you mind?"

He grinned. "You haven't found out how hard it'll be to get rid of me."

"We can't sit here forever. Would you like to come to my cabin?"

"It would be a privilege, ma'am."

They finished their drinks leisurely, a quietness hanging suddenly between them. *There's somebody aboard she's afraid of*, thought Dryden. *Don't feel too flattered, man.* She stood up quickly and he followed her across the main cabin and along the side deck. She looked at him appraisingly as she opened her door, then stepped through with a little toss of the head. Dryden followed, closing the door and removing his hat.

Her guard was up for the moment. Beulah Cornett removed her own small hat, tossing her gloves onto the stand beside it. She faced him, momentarily wary but still relaxed, a smile lurking about her eyes. She was too subtle to speak what was in her thoughts, but her manner conveyed them.

Dryden put her at ease. He reached into a pocket for his pipe and tobacco. "Whom are you afraid of, Miss Cornett?"

Her expression sobered. "The funny thing is, I don't know. It's just a feeling I have. Somebody has reason, and I think somebody is following through. Would you mind if we leave it at that?"

"Not at all. But I'd like to know something about you, Beulah Cornett."

"There's not much of interest. I came to 'Frisco with my father, and he practiced law there. He died a year ago, leaving me little. I came up to Portland about six months back, looking for something that I could do. I had no luck. So I decided to get closer to the source. I'm going to try my luck in the diggings. And you?"

Dryden frowned, firing his pipe. The girl had taken the cabin's one chair, while he perched on the edge of the bunk. "A long chain of cause and effect. By chance, I come from a family of barristers, too, and I was scheduled for the same. I didn't like it. I skipped out of college and went to sea. I didn't like that too well, but I followed it a few years. Not long ago I showed the stupidity of drinking too much in a waterfront dive on the east coast and woke up to find myself shanghaied. I jumped ship in Portland. That should make you trust me better, Beulah. I'm now a fugitive."

"I trusted you already, Creed Dryden, or I would never have entered into this arrangement with you. You're a gentleman."

"Less than you think, if I understand the word properly. I told you I'm an impulsive sort."

She caught the import of his words, considered it gravely, but said nothing.

THE packet tied up in Dalles City in late afternoon. Dryden, waiting to move down the gangplank with the Cornett woman, noted the distinct change in terrain that had come in the last miles of the gorge. The pressure of a vast territory's rapid growth funneled through it into Dalles City, spilling out again by steamboat, stage, freight wagon, livery rig and saddle horse to eastern Washington, northern and southern Idaho, eastern and central Oregon. The throbbing frontier town sat in a huge bare bowl of tawny monotony, the business center flung along a flat skirting the river, the residences terracing upward on a giant eminence.

They registered that night in the Umatilla House and next morning took stage over the Dalles Military Road to eastern Oregon. Clattering over the high promontories east of the town, the double-spanned Concord rattled over the toll bridge crossing the thundering Deschutes, clung to the Columbia to the rising twists of Spanish Hollow, where it pulled southward past a toiling jerkline outfit. At the top of the hollow it came abruptly upon desert uplands that at once awed and disturbed Creed Dryden.

Link upon link of majestic, snow-tipped mountains broke the western horizon, while in other directions the soft purple of distance hazed the rolling, sagebrush prairies. The stage rattled on and on. They ate supper in Grass Valley, with night falling on the long undulating stretch that slowly changed to rimrock desert. The Concord kept pounding, past Shaniko Station where sheepers already were laying the foundations for a vast wool industry, past Antelope with its bullet-scarred buildings and uninhibited buckaroos.

All through the night Dryden rode restlessly, the girl asleep with her head tilted against his shoulder, himself cramped and chilled by the high night's air, while the endless land rose and fell beneath the whirling wheels. They breakfasted at Burnt Ranch that only a few years before had been wiped out by Indians, warming for a short while before a blazing fire in the stage station before the driver called grumpily that they were ready to roll again. Topping a rise near Cross Hollows, that second morning, they saw mounted Indians whirl across a far brim.

"Hostile Paiutes," a passenger commented. "Up from Nevada. They've attacked these stages a time or so."

A keening of his instincts was coming to Creed Dryden. It was a land foreign to him but appealing through its very ruggedness. From four points of the compass men came

here to rendezvous with uncertain futures. Perhaps he would find his own.

They nooned in the trading post town of Mitchell that day, thereafter following the deeply scarped canyon of the John Day, eating supper in bustling Dayville and rolling in the mantled cold of yet another desert night into Whiskey Gulch. Dryden, with the others, went tiredly to a hotel, and not until the next morning did he sense the sweep of the town six thousand miners a few years before had built in a matter of months.

Dryden turned out into the morning street, teeming with packers, miners, freighters, stretching into the distance along the scarped east wall of Canyon Creek, a sharp hunger in him. There were no real cross streets, the shack town running for nearly two miles toward the forests of the distant Strawberry Mountains. Hunting for a place to eat breakfast, Dryden heeled up suddenly before an open-fronted tent shack bearing the crudely lettered legend: NEWSPAPERS—THE LATEST INTELLIGENCES.

A quarrel was in progress. The proprietor, leaning across the splintered counter, eyed the contestants with impartiality. On the sidewalk a huge man in a stovepipe hat and checked sack suit glared at a teen-aged boy.

"I only got one *Oregonian* left," said the proprietor, with a shrug. "You gents kin fight for it."

"I asked for it first, mister," the boy said, in a resolute voice.

"Run along, bub. I want that paper." The dapper man's voice was gravely, impatient. "I'm not gonna. My sister—"

"The devil you won't!" The big man placed a splay-fingered hand against the youth's face and shoved. The boy flailed awkwardly, taking a lurching step across the sidewalk and going down in the deep dust of the street. The man grabbed for the newspaper, but before he could reach it Creed Dryden had it.

"What's the argument, friend?"

"I can't get enough old papers," said the proprietor, shoving empty hands upward. "First come first served. Now you two kin fight it out, Chrismaster."

Chrismaster pulled around, leveling a cold gaze on Dryden. "You've got your gall, bucko."

Dryden tossed the paper to the boy. "Run along, sonny." He faced the proprietor. "How much is it?"

"Five—"

Dryden ducked, sensing Chrismaster's swing rather than seeing it. The fist connected with the back of his neck, tipping him off balance. He stumbled backward, straightening, seeing a glittering anger in Chrismaster's eyes.

"Fight it out, the man says. Well, I'm in a hurry for my breakfast, my friend." The

words were light on Dryden's tongue. He stepped in, feinting with his left for Christmaster's slabby middle. Then his right shot forward, clipping off Christmaster's jaw. It knocked the man completely apart. He tilted up a surprised, chilling face and went down.

"Love me!" breathed the proprietor. "That's the first time that's happened to Heck Christmaster in this town. But the paper'll still be five dollars, mister."

Dryden paid him, observing that the boy was still near, watching closely, eyes shining. "Gee whiz, you sure took him, sir. I haven't eaten yet. Why don't you come over to our hotel for breakfast?"

"Why don't I?" Dryden grinned, falling into stride with the boy, then noticing for the first time that the lad moved with stumbling, uncertain steps. "Did he hurt you, son?"

"No, sir. It's the sickness I had a couple of years ago. But I'll get well out here, pop said." He fell silent for a moment. "I owe you the money for the paper."

"No hurry." They turned into another hotel, better appointed and considerably south of Dryden's own. Abruptly Dryden pulled off his hat.

A girl rose from a chair in the small lobby and came toward them, eying Dryden with casual interest, settling a questioning look on the boy. "What kept you, Danny?"

Excitement rose in Danny's voice. "A man got mean and—sis, you owe this man five dollars. But he's having breakfast on me."

After an uncertain moment, the girl smiled. She was very slight, dark, and tanned. Her smile brought charming lights to her brown eyes, and Creed Dryden felt warmth spreading across his chest.

"That's not a proper introduction, Danny," said the girl. "We're Daniel and Cindy Hargrove."

"Dryden," he said. "Creed Dryden."

WHILE they ate in the crowded dining room, Danny Hargrove made a detailed description of the quarrel down the street, after which his sister regarded Dryden with more appreciation. At the end of the meal, she hesitated over her coffee.

"What are your plans, Mr. Dryden? I could use a good man, if you're really all that Danny thinks."

Dryden's grin was quick and relaxed. "It's no problem getting on somebody's payroll in this country, is it?"

Cindy laughed. "Hardly, when everybody's crazy to set up his own business in one of the gulches up the creek. Mr. Dryden, Danny and I've fallen heir to a pretty big job here and we don't know how to handle it. We got in on the Salt Lake stage a week ago to find ourselves orphans. We know nobody. And

you're the first man I've seen with breeding to balance brains."

With a sharp look, Dryden said, "You said your name was Hargrove. Was your father Harlow Hargrove? And you say he's dead?"

"Yes. Killed by a fall from a horse. He owned the Long Tom Saloon. Now we own it. Did you know him?"

"No. In Portland I talked to a man who did, and who wanted me to do a little business with your father. Do you know a Phil Kilroy?"

Cindy shook her head. "My father came West years ago, looking for his fortune. He made it finally and sent for us. We'd been living with our aunt in Illinois, for our mother died when Danny was born. Danny was ill a couple of years back, and father thought it would help him to come out. We got here to find him gone, with the town committee holding his property together for us. I'd like to hire a manager."

"Sorry, ma'am."

Dryden rose, briefly thanking them for their company, and departed. It took a moment to get it sorted out in his mind. Harlow Hargrove, the man from whom Phil Kilroy wanted him to recoup an old loss, was dead. His considerable property was now in the hands of a girl, admittedly helpless, too readily trusting, who had offered him a job as her manager. It put an entirely different face on things. He decided to take a look at this Long Tom Saloon.

Whiskey Gulch's countless pleasure resorts conducted a heavy business. Dryden located the Long Tom without inquiring, for it was the most pretentious in the camp. He turned through the doors.

There could be no question that the place was making money, big money. The long bar ran half the length of the room, while the space beyond was packed with crowded gaming tables. Opposite was a small, railed-off space with a counter, supporting a pair of gold-scales, and against the wall behind stood a big iron safe. This would be the dust bank the Portland gambler had mentioned enviously, one of the crude forerunners of more elaborate financial institutions to come in time to the gold districts, where miners were permitted to place their crammed pokes in safekeeping in return for a paper receipt and a service charge of one-half per cent per month. This department was idle now.

A ripple of interest turned Dryden toward the door. The batwings brushed open, and for a second the young new owner stood there uncertainly. A look of heightened resolution crossed Cindy Hargrove's face, and she came in. Her gaze passed over Dryden with no sign of recognition. A bartender dried his hands hurriedly on his apron and followed her

through a door beyond the railing of the banking department.

A man said, "You're a lucky dog, Rufe Edding," and the bartender gave him a look half of amusement and a half of annoyance before he opened the door and stepped through. Dryden regarded him closely, not liking the fellow's deep-set, calculating eyes.

The girl's passing left a wake of reaction in the big room. There were many women in Whiskey Gulch, but few such as Cindy Hargrove. Near Dryden a man said, "It's a shame the way that pretty youngster's been tossed to a pack of wild wolves."

"The Citizens' Committee done a good job holding her dad's property together till she got here. They won't let anybody trim her too easy," a companion returned.

Creed Dryden turned out onto the street, baffled by his own reactions. Misfortunes that he admitted were of his own creating had begun to set a cold self-interest in him. He wondered now if that hadn't always been his trouble.

With its high desert elevation of nearly four thousand feet, Whiskey Gulch enjoyed balmy summer weather. Yellow sunlight now ran over the broken, brown land. Miners and camp-followers wove along the stretched-out street. Dryden, passing across the street toward his hotel, noted that Beulah Cornett had come out onto the upstairs gallery. Her gaze was on him and, grinning, he tugged off his hat in greeting. She smiled slightly, lifting a hand.

He wondered about her as he passed into the hotel. She was charming enough and intelligent enough to have little trouble making out in a camp like this. His mind made a moment's comparison between her and Cindy Hargrove, and he judged that she could take a situation such as had stumped the Hargrove girl and walk off with it. Yet something about her disturbed him. On the second floor, he looked hesitantly toward the door opening onto the gallery, then stepped into his own room.

THE day passed indolently. Dryden found himself relaxed for the first time in months, let a pleasant torpor hold him in his hotel room, smoking, dozing, thinking. At the end of the warm afternoon he had made no plans.

When he emerged for breakfast the next morning he at once caught the electric excitement in the air. He paused at the stand of the man who had made a profitable business of importing old copies of newspapers.

"Got a new valley paper?"

"Not till Wheeler rolls his stage in again, mister. Hell—we're making our own news this morning."

"What happened?"

"Somebody busted into the little girl's safe last night and cleaned it out. Rufe Edding just called in the Citizens' Committee."

Dryden stared. "You mean the Long Tom? The Hargrove girl's place?"

"None other, mister. And has it got this camp jacked a mile high! A good third of the miners in these parts banked with her old man. All they got now is the receipts he give 'em. Unless the gal can pay off in whiskey." The news vendor laughed; it was not his trouble and a man didn't borrow that of others in this country.

Dryden went at once to the connected rooms Cindy and Danny occupied at the hotel. The girl was away, as he had expected, but Danny was there. The excitement in the boy's face indicated that he knew what had happened.

"Golly, Mr. Dryden," said Danny, in greeting. "Bandits and everything!"

"Do they have any idea who might have done it?"

Danny shook his head. "All I know is that Rufe Edding came for sis a couple of hours ago. Said he'd found the back door lock pried open and busted. He went right away to open the safe and found somebody'd cleaned it."

Dryden said, "Who knew the combination?"

"Just Rufe Edding. He was a bartender for pop, but he ran the place till we got here. You mean maybe Edding's just claiming the safe was robbed?"

"I don't mean anything, Danny," Dryden said hastily. "Tell your sister I'm sorry, will you?"

Danny grinned. "Well, she's kind of sore at you, Mr. Dryden, for turning her down so cold. If you want her to know that, maybe you'd better tell her. She goes high, wide and handsome when she blows up, sir."

Dryden left, excitement kindling in him. The story Rufe Edding had told Cindy had a false ring; even Danny had been quick to catch it. Yet Dryden knew that his feeling now was only a hunch. Every mining camp in the West had its contingent of expert outlaws. There could be someone in Whiskey Gulch whose fingers were expert enough to open a safe he did not know. On the other hand, Rufe Edding had not looked like a man who would fail to see or to act upon the beautiful opportunity before him.

DOWN street a considerable group of miners had gathered in front of the Long Tom, with more hurrying up, excited men rocked by the news, harboring dismay that was bound to turn to panic and shortly to truculence. Gold dust was bought with sweat in this expanse of broken desert, and for every man who panned it there was another scheming for it. Dryden moved down

that way, sensing the tension, the poised action. Inexperienced as he was, he knew that a crisis had hit this camp.

The big front doors of the Long Tom were locked, which did nothing to soothe the mob. An angry-eyed miner beat on them and the continuing lack of response brought a swelling grumble. A man came through the crowd then, a big man in a checked suit who ploughed an aggressive way. He shouldered through to the door and heeled around. Creed Dryden watched with close interest; it was Heck Christmaster, the man who had tried to mix with him the previous morning.

A head higher than most of the others, Christmaster drifted a calm gaze over the crowd. In a confident voice he said, "No use getting heated up, boys. They had hard luck. You'd ought to be hunting the jigger who took the dust instead of gathering out here to scare Miss Hargrove."

There was a sharp laugh. "Was everything you made in the last six months in there, Christmaster?"

The big man turned untroubled eyes upon the questioner. "I ain't blaming you for worrying, Perkins. But you ought to have sense enough to know you've got to catch the thief to get your money back."

Perkins was unmollified. "You can be easy, Christmaster. It's easier to turn a dollar on a card than on a pan. If the thief's got sense, he's miles from here by now. What makes you think we could find him?"

For the first time resentment showed in Christmaster's heavy features. "We can if we use sense. You're hinting I don't have a stake in it, Perkins. I'm willing to back my hunch with cash. I'll buy your receipts if you want to sell them."

"I sure do!"

Dryden was watching in dumbfounded wonder. This thing was totally foreign to his appraisal of Heck Christmaster's character, yet the man was cleverly averting a panicked run on the dust bank. He was doing so out of no apparent motive other than level-headed generosity.

Christmaster jerked a thumb. "Come over to my place so I can weigh out the dust. You and anybody else who's scared out." The big man once more shouldered a heavy path through the crowd. Perkins followed him, a half dozen others unabashedly following suit. Others hesitated, tempted but reluctant to show it. More looked sheepish, and the mob began to dissolve. Idling on the sidewalk, Dryden saw yet others slip furtively into the saloon, three hundred yards south of the Long Tom, that was apparently Heck Christmaster's hangout.

Another day of indolence, of mounting restlessness. All through the day Creed Dryden

turned a persistent question in his mind. Something was going on here, something big and deep and probably dangerous, something that was none of Creed Dryden's business. Three men selected from the larger Citizens' Committee moved energetically through the town, collaring newcomers, questioning them closely. Others went here and there on pre-occupied business. Yet by evening they had not yet reached Creed Dryden. Uneasiness began to mount in Dryden; his record would not bear investigation.

Yet his preoccupation was greater than this. Rufe Edding, the bartender, puzzled him, as did Heck Christmaster, who was evidently a professional gambler. He knew of no connection between the pair, yet he deeply sensed that there was one.

When the last remnants of the crowd before its doors had vanished, the Long Tom opened for business. There was no run. Christmaster had stalled it off successfully. Why had he bothered, backing the move with his own dust?

Again Dryden kept to his room until evening, going at last to the Long Tom, where he found an empty chair and sat in on a mild game. It was strictly a covering pursuit, requiring only half his attention. Rufe Edding worked behind the bar with two helpers, his florid face impassive, his manner brusque, no apparent thought in his masked mind other than to finish another day's work. Dryden saw nothing of Heck Christmaster, who apparently did not patronize this establishment. Cindy Hargrove was not in evidence, nor had Dryden seen her since that first morning. Beulah Cornett was keeping very close to her room, and several times that day Dryden had downed the impulse to visit her.

An evening as long as the day had been wore slowly away. At midnight Dryden left the game, noting without much interest that he was a little ahead, and crossed to the bar. There he began to drink with evident purpose, at Rufe Edding's end of the long bar. He left it from time to time but always returned. Finally, when his awkward hand upset the shot glass he was trying to lift, Edding grunted, "Maybe you've had enough, friend. Maybe you ought to go turn in."

"Turn in hell," said Dryden. "I'm just getting started."

When at four in the morning the saloon finally emptied, Dryden was seated at a small back table, bent forward, head resting on his arms. Edding came back.

"We want to lock up, mister. You better go to bed."

Dryden got heavily to his feet. He lurched down the length of the room and brushed through the door. He paused on the edge of the sidewalk and there remained, sagging against a post supporting the board canopy.

Edding was last to leave the saloon, locking the front door carefully. He sent Dryden an indifferent glance, turned south, moving idly. A short distance down the street he hurried a little, his lumbering motion assuming purpose. Dryden turned that way, still weaving but following.

He felt the liquor he had been required to consume, but his head was clear. Near the south end of town Edding turned right across the rough bridge over Canyon Creek and darkness swallowed him. Dryden paused a moment, knowing that a wagon road led beyond, hugging the rising range to the southwest. He walked for less than five minutes, then saw a shack off the road, the front windows dimly illuminated from a light in one of the back rooms. He felt a little foolish as he approached with caution. Maybe this was where Edding lived; again, maybe it wasn't.

He knew presently that it wasn't. Dryden cut around a dark shed, came up cautiously on the main building. A window in this wall was fully lighted. Dryden's heart beat a heavy warning in his chest. He had no business here. He had all kinds of business here. He went ahead. He got close to the box house, beside the lighted window. He heard the rumble of voices, too low to understand. He frowned in deep impatience. Voices swelled louder for a moment but remained unintelligible. They diminished, and gathering that those inside were moving through the house, Dryden hurried around to the front again.

The door opened, and the blocky figure of Edding emerged. The bartender turned on the sagging porch. "I can't help thinking you put too much confidence into it this morning, Chrismaster. I've got this feeling we ought to've waited."

"Waited, hell. We'll have the thing done before anybody can add it up, and what can they do then?"

"They can stretch our necks if they get onto it. I got the feeling we're aiming too high, Chrismaster. We could take what we got and light out and be safe."

"We're doing it my way, Rufe. Shut up and get out of here. And don't come out again. I'll come see you when we've got more business."

Edding turned heavily down the path to the road. Dryden waited on the blind side of the house until night had blotted up the man. The light indoors went out. Dryden prospected his side of the cluttered yard until he located a stick of stovewood by the rear shed. He picked it up, walked around the house again, and clomped boldly across the porch. He rapped on the door.

Chrismaster had not had time to get to bed; he came across the room, grumbling loud enough to be heard through the door. "Damn

your edgy nerves, Rufe! Stay away from here."

Dryden pressed against the wall to the left of the door. When it opened he held his breath. A moment of intense silence, then Chrismaster looked out. Dryden came down hard with his club.

With only a gushing grunt Chrismaster went down. Calm again, Dryden stepped over him, took a leg and pulled him far enough inside to shut the door. The man was inert. Dryden flared a match, located the coal oil lamp and lighted it. He turned it low, until it guttered in the smoky chimney.

He was completely cool. He had proved his hunch that Edding and Chrismaster were somehow connected. He was making a desperate play to prove his feeling that the Long Tom gold dust was in this shack was also good. If he could get his hands on the dust the whole game would fall into his lap. Watching Chrismaster, for signs of returning activity, he began to search.

The likely hiding places in the bare, untidy place turned up nothing. A sense of frustration began to build in Dryden. If he failed he would have lost a night's sleep, and there would be the chance that Chrismaster had recognized him in that second before blackness overwhelmed him. It seemed ridiculous when, in the interest of thoroughness, he finally lifted the lid of the tin, air-tight stove in the living room. It appeared to be stuffed with the summer's accumulation of rubbish. Dryden poked down a ways, then tensed. His fingers had contacted buckskin.

Dryden re-examined Chrismaster and found him still breathing heavily. He moved fast after that, lifting out the buckskin pokes stuffed tight as sausages. A dozen and then another dozen. It had been easy for Edding, emptying the safe in the few small morning hours when the saloon was closed. He had probably had Chrismaster's help bringing the stuff here. Dryden, alone, was going to have some lugging to do getting it away. He took a box that had been used for a chair in the kitchen and filled it. He could barely lift it, but he staggered out into the night.

CHAPTER THREE

Hangrope Brand

DRYDEN went early the next morning to the Hargroves' hotel, too excited to be tired from his short shift of sleep. A rap brought Danny to the door and a hearty invitation to enter. Cindy was up and dressed and she turned from the window toward him, a frown pressing itself between her deeply brown eyes.

"Well, Creed Dryden. What brings you?"

Dryden said, "It's only a hunch, but I think that today somebody will try to take your saloon away from you. He'll present you with more dust receipts than you can redeem. Then he'll demand that you sign the business over to him instead. I'm only guessing, but it's the only thing that makes sense. If it happens, send for me at once. I can help you."

"Why!" The girl took a step toward him, puzzlement and disapproval of him in her eyes. "You turned down the job I offered you. Why are you interesting yourself now when it's too late?"

"It's strictly business," said Dryden. He grinned and left.

Dryden went out to breakfast, his plans made, feeling good. He bought a cigar and returned to his own hotel room. He had barely closed the door of his room when he heard a light step in the hallway. There was a rap, and at his grunt the door opened. Beulah Cornett came into the room. Her face was grave, her eyes intently meeting his.

"I think, Creed Dryden, that the time has come to talk."

"You talk. I like to listen to you." Dryden offered her the room's one chair, and when she took it stepped back quickly, the scent of her hair clinging in his nostrils.

"You won't like what I'm going to say. I'm Phil Kilroy's representative, Dryden. He hired me to keep an eye on you and to help you when the time is right. I think it's come. What I don't know is whether I'm going to help you or have to fight you."

Dryden stepped back another pace, his gaze on her in sharp wonder. He shrugged at length and grinned. "So your little story of being afraid of somebody was just a man catcher."

"That's right, Dryden. Instructions. I was to get my woman's hooks into you."

"They're painless hooks," murmured Dryden. "Now, what do we talk about?"

"This. Are you playing your game with Chrismaster for Kilroy or for yourself?"

Dryden's jaw hinged open again. "How'd you know that?"

"I've watched your every movement. My figuring comes out where yours did. They're a clumsy pair. Anybody with a grain of intelligence would wonder about the story Edding told to cover the robbing, even if it were the truth. I've learned that Chrismaster owns that saloon where he gambles. Why should he try to save the Long Tom from ruin? You'd think he'd welcome it."

Grinning slightly, Dryden nodded. "That's the way it looked to me. Chrismaster was a little too fast in picking up some dust receipts—unless he wanted to get enough of them into his possession to close Cindy Hargrove out and take possession of a bigger and better

business than his own. He probably only had to put out a few thousand dollars to achieve that and stop the run, to boot. Meanwhile, he had the balance of the dust in his possession. A profitable little piece of business."

"But now he doesn't have the dust in his possession," murmured Beulah, "and if he ever finds out who has it, he'll kill the man. That's my trump, Creed. If you're thinking of playing this on your own, you'd better reconsider."

"You're guessing," said Dryden bluntly.

"Perhaps. But all Chrismaster'll need will be a guess and you'll be dead. It's in your manner that you've done something you're elated about. Moreover, I kept a long and sleepless vigil at my corner window, last night. I saw you come in. Carrying something. But not all of it. Naturally you'd hide the rest. Where?"

"That's a card you don't hold," said Dryden. He was less certain of himself now. There was little point in withholding anything from her.

He crossed to her. Chucking her under the chin, he lifted her head and kissed her. With a small sound she got to her feet, coming at once into his arms.

After a while she said, "Maybe I won't be too stubborn about watching Kilroy's interests, Creed. But I still want money—lots of it. You've got it, now. Let's go away from here."

Dryden swam up through heady sensations. He said, "I'll think about it, Beulah."

She drew back. "Damn it, do you have to think?" She smiled in quick relenting, turned toward the door and ran out.

It was shortly before noon when the knock for which Dryden waited sounded on his door. It was a flunky from the Long Tom.

"The lady wants to know if you can come down there right away."

"What for?"

"I don't know, mister. She just told me to tell you. And she was kind of in a sweat, mister."

"Tell her I'll be there. No, I'll tell her myself."

Dryden grabbed his hat and descended the stairs two at a time. He turned out into the sun-bathed street, down which a jerkline outfit toiled dustily, and headed for the Long Tom. It was busy, even at this comparatively early hour, and the door to Cindy Hargrove's office was closed. Dryden pushed open the railing gate and then the door, without knocking.

His first impression was of Cindy's relieved eyes. She was standing by the window, her small body arched in anger. Heck Chrismaster heeled around, staring at Dryden with hardening eyes.

"Get out of here, bucko."

"I sent for him!" There was anxiety in the girl's angry voice, Dryden noted. "Mr. Dryden, you guessed it right. This man has six thousand dollars worth in dust receipts, signed over to him by a group of miners. He insists on taking the place over to satisfy them."

Chrismaster's gaze raked Dryden from boots to hair. "So you've been guessing. How come you can guess so good?" His gaze centered on Dryden's sagging coat pockets.

"A gift," said Dryden. "You have no more right to take over than anyone else holding receipts."

Chrismaster said dryly. "The boys'll support me, Dryden. They like the way I helped 'em out. If you force me, I can get elected receiver for this dump. I'm apt to get a little cross if I'm crowded that far."

"Your moods don't interest me, Chrismaster," Dryden began to lift heavy pokes from his pocket. "It wasn't a brace of guns, if that's what worried you. Cindy, find somebody who knows how to run your scales and pay this man off."

Smoky lights gathered in the big man's eyes. There was a moment in which he seemed about to erupt into violence. He pulled himself together with effort. Yet his gaze kept flicking Dryden; he knew where this dust had come from. With a cry of relief, Cindy scooped up the pokes and disappeared through the door.

Chrismaster looked at Dryden. "Bucko, you look plumb unhealthy to me. You don't look long for this world."

"You can start endorsing those receipts, Chrismaster. To me. Creed Dryden's the name. Write it plain, or I'll write it and you can add your X."

"So you're not in with the girl. What do you mean to do to her?"

"Just listen to the town talk, Chrismaster. You'll hear."

The girl marched in triumphantly. She dropped three dust pokes onto the desk. "There you are, Mr. Chrismaster. Now I'll thank you for the receipts."

Chrismaster shrugged. "The man says I'm to endorse 'em to him, ma'am. I reckon I will. Maybe I can take 'em away from him again. Maybe he'll play marbles for 'em." The big man lowered himself into the chair at the desk, picked up a pen and dipped it. He wrote laboredly, stood up, pocketed the pokes and stomped out.

Dryden examined the receipts. They were all properly endorsed to him, aggregating slightly under six thousand dollars. Then he looked at Cindy Hargrove and once more saw the pronounced dislike in her brown eyes.

"So you're playing your own game, Creed Dryden."

Dryden pocketed the receipts. "You've tried the frying pan, and now for the fire. I'm taking over the Long Tom myself, Cindy, on the basis of the scheme Chrismaster dreamed up."

It was as if he had slapped her. Cindy straightened, disbelief crossing her countenance, anger surging again into her eyes. "You cheap gallant! How did you come in possession of that dust in the first place?"

"I was in a little game last night."

"I'll bet! Creed Dryden, I'm going to the Citizens' Committee! You're the man who robbed the safe—now you're using my dust to take the whole thing away from me! And Danny believes—"

Dryden chucked her under the chin and lifted her face, but this one pulled violently away from him instead of wilting. He grinned in open admiration. He said, "Honey, you go tell everybody how mean I am to you. I want you to. But meanwhile, go tell the boys out front that it's now my shebang."

She whirled out of the room. Dryden stared for a moment at the door, the grin fading from his face, a chill replacing it. Then he shrugged.

He had things to think about of immediate importance. Heck Chrismaster was fully aware now who his nocturnal visitor had been. He would be fanning coals of wrath over his scheme's complete ruin. He would be on the rebound shortly, bouncing hard and fast and with sinister intentions.

NO DEPUTATION from the Citizens' Committee called upon Dryden in the days that followed and, with the exception of a glittering-eyed Rufe Edding, the saloon personnel accepted his authority.

Dryden fired Rufe Edding summarily, left instructions at the Hargroves' hotel that their bills were to be sent to the saloon for payment. He posted notice that under its new ownership the Long Tom was ready to redeem any or all of its outstanding dust receipts. It restored confidence, and shortly the banking department began to operate again.

Yet Creed Dryden knew few easy moments in those days. If anything, Heck Chrismaster's continuing inertia served only to increase the strain. Little by little Dryden removed the stolen gold dust from his cache and returned it to the big saloon safe, on each night's visit expecting a slug to smash his spine. Yet he executed it so carefully that he was not molested. In a fortnight, the Long Tom was a thriving and healthy business again. It gave him satisfaction, but not much.

Cindy Hargrove studiously avoided him, and Dryden in turn avoided Beulah Cornett. He saw Danny at a distance, on occasion, and the shocked look in the boy's face disturbed him deeply.

It was on a warm day in August when Phil Kilroy came in on the stage that came three times a week from Dalles City. He arrived in the night, and Creed Dryden was unaware of the fact until late the next morning when the door of his office opened softly and Kilroy stepped in.

The Portland gambler was as dapper as ever, as gray as ever in dress and countenance. He said, "Hello, Dryden."

"Kilroy!"

Kilroy took a chair, waving Dryden back into his seat. "I guess you've done all right, Dryden. You've done all I told you to and more. I figure we might as well settle up."

Dryden's gaze was probing. "I expect you've had regular reports."

The gambler shrugged. "I keep up on things. I guess I could have handled it myself, if I'd known Harlow Hargrove was going to get himself killed and out of the way. I guess it wasn't so hard as I figured, Dryden, but I'm a generous man. You'll be handsomely rewarded, friend."

"What makes you think I'm working for you any more?"

There was an easy laugh. "For one thing, you know it wouldn't be healthy for you not to be. For another, that ship's officer you choked down in Portland died, Dryden. It was murder. And they hang a man for murder out here, you know."

Dryden felt a cold wave traveling up his spine. "You're lying."

"Why don't you go down to Portland and find out? Or would you rather play safe and take an eastbound stage in a day or so?"

"If you inform on me you'd be an accomplice!"

"I've covered that. I've already told the law that I witnessed the incident, believing it to be only another back-alley brawl at the time. So if I happened to identify a man I accidentally ran into up here in Whiskey Gulch, it'd all seem natural enough, wouldn't it? But why dwell on such unpleasant possibilities? Let's settle up, Dryden."

A sick hopelessness filled Dryden. He was not convinced that Kilroy was telling the truth; on the other hand he dared not take steps to find out. It was something he had not expected, which upset his plans completely.

"Meanwhile, Kilroy, how do you expect to take over this place with anything passing for an excuse?"

"Hasn't the girl signed it over to you?"

"No."

Kilroy frowned. "Then what are you doing, running the place?"

"I worked it. You can find out how for yourself."

The gambler rose, sighing. "You're mak-

ing it more difficult than I expected, Dryden. I don't like that. I'll be at my hotel in case you change your mind." He turned in the doorway. "About this time tomorrow, Dryden, I might be in the mood to tell the local law boys they've got a murderer in their midst. Banking for them. Cheating helpless women. Ever been in a riled mining camp, Dryden?" Kilroy smiled coldly and left.

Creed Dryden chewed a thumbnail. He had expected a showdown with Kilroy eventually, but he was not ready for it yet, Heck Christmaster and Rufe Edding having been his immediate worry. Trouble was ganging up on him and as far as he could see all he could do was sweat it out.

At six in the evening Dryden left the saloon to have his supper. He had decided to call Kilroy's hand.

HE WAS lingering for a moment outside the restaurant where he had eaten when he saw Danny Hargrove hurrying across the street toward him. The blended hurt and sullenness in the boy's countenance had vanished.

Danny said, "Mr. Dryden, sis aims for us to take the eastbound stage in the morning. She says you've crooked us out of everything, and there's no use fighting you. I don't believe it. And I don't want to go."

"Why not, Danny?"

"Well, I feel better out here. I've been running around looking at things, and I'm walking better. I want to get a horse. I want to learn to shoot a pistol. Please, won't you tell sis you *are* helping us?"

Dryden lowered his voice a little. "Danny, it would be plain unhealthy for your sister and me to do anything but dislike each other at this time. It would be bad for you and her both. If she wants to go away, it might be better."

"Aw, shucks, sir!"

Dryden turned away from the keen disappointment in Danny's eyes. There was a prickling in his spine as he turned back down the street. He couldn't dodge things much longer; he would have to crowd the issue himself. His mind filled with thoughts of the wealth in the big safe that he now could open when he chose. The West was mighty big. There was a woman who had suggested their prospecting it for a better-suited environment. He bit his lip, shaking his head.

He had been walking toward his own hotel and at that moment Dryden glanced up to see the willowy figure of Beulah Cornett in an upstairs window. She beckoned to him. Unconsciously he hurried his steps, ascending to the second floor. Her door was partly open and she waited behind it. Dryden stepped in,

and she smiled half in defiance and half in pleasure, quickly closing the door.

"Is it getting hot enough for you in this town, Dryden?"

Dryden tossed his hat on the bed. "You sent for Kilroy, didn't you?"

"I did. And I've been cultivating Heck Chrismaster. I don't mean to string with either, but I had to force you to make up your mind. I don't think you're cheating that pretty little Hargrove girl. I think you're trying to save her bacon. You may even be in love with her."

"I'm not a marrying man."

Beulah smiled. "She'll hold out for it, Creed Dryden. You need a more practical woman. Let's take the Salt Lake stage, Creed." She came close, toying with his lapel, her strange perfume lifting from her hair and teasing his nostrils. Her hands gripped his sides. "Or else tonight. Let's get horses. I'll go anywhere. I won't ask anything except to be taken care of."

Dryden stepped back. "I told you I'd think—"

"You fool, in another couple of days here you'd be dead. You beat Chrismaster so bad he hasn't any comeback. He means to kill you, just to get even."

Dryden untangled himself, picked up his hat. He looked at her, grinning. "What if I told you to go to hell?"

Her cheeks stained. "Then I'd certainly help either Phil Kilroy or Heck Chrismaster to ruin you. Whichever I figured had the best chance."

"In other words, you want the man who has the money."

Beulah's eyes were level. "Could be. I've

never tried to deceive you, Dryden. Anyhow, not much."

He grinned quickly, turned and stepped through the doorway to the hall.

This night had to be it. Dryden put hard thought to it as he strode down the long board walk. He would have to kill Heck Chrismaster and probably Rufe Edding before they had a chance to shoot him down from some stealthy vantage point. He would have to deal with Phil Kilroy.

Dryden thought that one of the bartenders tried to catch his eye as he strode through the Long Tom, but he was too preoccupied for it to register property. He went on into his office. The room was in half-twilight from the gathering evening. He closed the door and as it wheeled shut, saw Heck Chrismaster and Rufe Edding standing against the wall. Chrismaster had a stubby gun in his fist.

"No noise, Dryden," said Chrismaster. "You can talk yourself out of this if you talk right."

"What kind of talk does it take?" Dryden asked slowly.

Chrismaster grinned. "Dryden, we'd rather not kill you. Take ten thousand in dust and your life and clear out. Tonight."

"Or else."

"Or else you're going to get a big hole in your liver."

Dryden sighed. "I'll risk it."

"You're a fool. If we kill you, it'll be to help the little Hargrove filly get her place back. It'll be because we came to warn you to clear out and you pulled a gun on us. The camp'll like us for it. Are you sweating, Dryden?"

"A little." Dryden measured them and was

Duck, Boys, here comes—

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discouraged by the results. He didn't even have a gun in his desk, even if he had known how to use one expertly.

There was a rap on the door, and Dryden's heart leaped into his throat. The door opened, and Phil Kilroy came in. He grinned coolly at the trio.

"You must be Chrismaster. Somebody was just telling me about you. Don't kill him. Not when I can get him hanged. Besides, it won't do you any good, Chrismaster. I've got a legal claim to this place. Harlow Hargrove cheated me out of the money he started this business on. I can prove it. I can tie up his estate so even the heirs can't touch it till my claim's settled."

There was a silence.

Chrismaster was rocked, but a glitter came quickly into his deep-set eyes. "Try to get anybody in this camp to believe Harlow Hargrove cheated you out of anything. What do you figure made him so successful here? Would the miners have left their pokes with a cheat?"

That settled Creed Dryden's last doubt. A man as crooked as Heck Chrismaster would not call another man honest unless the other man were unmistakably so.

Kilroy laughed now. "I won't rely on local justice. I'll go into the state courts. I can line up witnesses."

"Crooked ones."

"Maybe. But what can you do, Chrismaster, except make another clumsy effort to get a hold on the Hargrove girl? Can you think of anything else?"

"This!" Heck Chrismaster grinned wickedly. "I can cover two killings in here as easy as one! I can save the girl's place from two crooks easy as one—" His gun spoke then. Phil Kilroy bent in the middle like a broken reed.

Creed Dryden had hoped that Chrismaster would consider Kilroy the more dangerous of the two. He had utilized the split seconds in fast motion. Rufe Edding had jerked out a gun, but Dryden sailed under it. He hit Edding low and brought the man down on top of him. Then he got a grip on Edding's gun hand.

There was commotion beyond the door. If he could live through the next moments, Dryden knew, he might live to die of old age. He was under Edding, but he had no assurance that the treacherous Chrismaster might not drill the pair of them. He heard pounding steps. He heard Chrismaster curse. Edding was trying to turn his gun against Dryden's body and pull the trigger.

The door burst open, and in the same second Chrismaster fired, determined to have only corpses here when he told his story. Dry-

den felt a whamming jolt, then a great wash of blackness swooped over him.

CREED DRYDEN had dreams of being impaled upon a huge spike. Somehow he had thrown himself upon the spike. It was his own fault. A figure, delightfully feminine, looked at him with deeply brown eyes. Reproachful eyes, full of hurt as sharp as his own. He tried to think of something to say to take the hurt out of her eyes. He worried about that more than his own. He kept saying, "Cindy, listen! I had to make it pretty real to you that I was out to crook you. You had to hate me, and Chrismaster had to be pretty sure you hated me and that we weren't putting one over on him. Or he'd've hit at me through you. Or through Danny." But the eyes stayed hurt, and he would say, "Probably you'll never see it."

Then at last he heard a cool voice saying, "But I do, Creed. In fact, I always had the feeling there was more to it than I understood."

Dryden got his eyes open then, for it was the first solid reason he had had for wanting to get his mind clear. Cindy sat by his bed, smiling a little and worried a little and in love with him. He knew that this wasn't delirium. He said, with a weak grin, "I've been talking."

Cindy said, "Keep on."

"I've been wrong," said Dryden. "I'm the marrying type. But before I ask you if you'll be willing to live on my salary, we've got to settle how much you're going to pay me for running the place."

"Oh, you will keep running it?"

"You think I'd let anybody else after putting so much work into it? What happened to Chrismaster?"

"The bartenders broke in when the shooting started, and one of them had a sawed-off shotgun." Cindy shuddered. "Anyhow, you don't have to worry about him now. And he killed Edding, himself. That's what saved you. The bullet went through Edding first. The doctor had to probe it out of your chest. He said it was a little too high to hit your lungs."

"I'd like to have the slug."

"You can't. Danny's got it. You owe him that much, Creed. If it hadn't been for Danny, I'd have had the miners hang you sky high long ago."

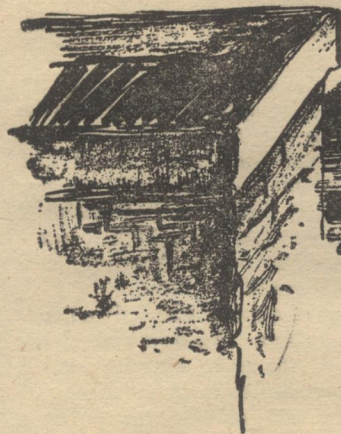
"He said you were bad when you were riled," murmured Dryden.

"But you'd ought to be around when I'm pleased."

"Aim to be," said Dryden. He pulled her down to him, curious suddenly to see how it worked out.

By **EVERETT M. WEBBER**

*For a girl's kiss
and a million
looted acres, Beas-
ley was ready to
die—but die
fighting!*



Beasley felt the jar as
he struck. . . .

LAW OF THE DOUBLE ROWEL

BEASLEY sat the bony old horse for a long time, gray eyes squinted against the rain that blew into his face as he studied the wreckage of the wagon in the valley below. Comanche work. Instinct told him to get out of here. Yet there was a chance in a thousand of a spark of life in one of the bodies, and he gripped the saddleless horse and rode slowly down through the scrub oak.

The fire down there must have been built yesterday before the rain, and the bucks who made it were probably far away. Still, the muscles of his sunken belly knotted at a sound

he mistook for a second for running ponies. Thunder, he guessed.

He shivered. He was wet to the skin under his soggy poncho and he knew the old muzzle-loading revolver inside his shirt was no doubt useless. Constantly he scanned the countryside, but nothing was in sight except the countless skeletons of his longhorns. The carpetbaggers who had milked Texas dry this past year since the war, while he was still in a Northern prison camp, had found that there was more profit in a hide than in a cow by the time you got her to market.

Beasley winced with each stumble of the old

horse. A Yankee bullet was still under his left shoulder blade and in this weather he could feel it. He was like Texas—shot all to hell and robbed of everything that could be turned into a plugged peso. He had found that out when he got home from the war.

Tonight he would hole up at the original cabin his father had built when he staked out his trackless miles of range in the old Spanish days. He'd dry out his powder. Tomorrow he would ride on to town and hunt up the boss carpetbagger—a fellow named Keegan of whose ruthless greed he had been hearing for the last hundred miles. In one way or another, Beasley aimed to relieve Keegan of whatever cash, horses, cartridge-guns, ammunition, grub and such the man might have on hand.

Then he'd hire a few tough Texans whose empty guts had run to nerve. Hold a roundup on his range, which ran fifty miles each way this side of the river, and flush out all strays the thieves had missed, run them in the back country a few years while they increased. When he went to war no one knew how many critters, from slickears to mossy horns, ran this range. Forty—fifty—maybe sixty thousand. Beasley had branded only trail herds for there were natural boundaries and the quick, relentless guns of his riders for rustlers, so there had been no tally. Now there were no tally, cattle, or riders.

He came to the wreckage of the wagon and was revolted at what had been a man, spread-eagled on a wheel and propped by the fire. The woman lay with rain beating into her open eyes. Her scalp was gone and her head was beaten in. Beasley didn't doubt that the Comanches had kept her alive for hours while her husband roasted. From the pony sign, there were upwards of a dozen bucks here, and he reckoned she was glad for the lick that finished her.

Stiffly Beasley slid his great, gaunt frame from the shying horse and tied the hackamore. He got the woman to a ditch. He cocked his head to listen above the beat of the rain and the rush of the ditch water against the body. He had heard that sound again, like low thunder, only it wasn't thunder.

Watchful of his backtrail, he cut the man from the wheel and put him in the ditch and raked in rocks to cover them over.

He stiffened. That was a shot. And another. And the bellow of cattle and the rumbling again. It was the beat of many hoofs, the clack of horns. He jumped upon his horse, his pulse fast, and rode to the ridge a quarter of a mile to his left.

Topping it, in one sweeping picture he saw the valley before him alive with pitching horns and a billowing ocean of red and mottled backs. A herd endless as a locust storm, streaming out of sight around the bend of

the valley. They had already passed the spot where he stood and their path was a sea of mud.

Now he heard another shot and across the valley from him a mile away a chuck wagon and a couple of sheeted wagons were rudely circled. Powdersmoke hung in the rain there. Maybe the defenders were firing at Comanches. Maybe at a rival bunch of rustlers.

Beasley contemplated that sardonically. He hadn't thought he had this many cattle left. They must have been a time rounding them up and getting that snowshoe brand and arrow trail mark on them, for some of the burns looked to be maybe a month old. Now if the thieves would kill each other off. . . .

With sudden decision he turned and rode along the flank of the herd. If he could scatter part of it in the brakes among the bayous it would take those rascals days to hunt them and in the meantime he could get his powder dry.

The horse had no savvy but after much flailing and yelling he got a wedge of the cattle started off up the ridge. Maybe three hundred. The rear of the herd passed him again and he rode out to round up another bunch from the back. He'd have to make it quick, for he could see Indians riding leisurely away from the fight over there and in a minute the cowmen would see him.

A rider broke out of a swag just half a quarter away, in full gallop. Beasley kicked his horse, spinning it about as he clawed out his old muzzle-loading revolver in its wrapping of tallow rags. He saw the cowman throw up a rifle and snap a shot. The horse pitched to its chest and Beasley tumbled into the churned mud.

Already the horse was up and staggering away, a smear of blood where the bullet had creased it behind the ears. Beasley scrambled after his gun but it had come out of its wrappings and water puddled over it. A bullet kicked up mud by him, and a voice called, "Get up! They'll kill you for this!"

Beasley rose, hat gone, rain beating upon his red hair. He was almost past surprise to see that the rider was a woman, though she wore pants under her slicker and rode astraddle.

She said, "I'm sorry about the horse. It was you I was aiming at." She was young but her gray eyes were unemotional, as if she had seen much worse than this. Texas was hard on women.

Her friends were coming fast. He put his hands to his mouth and shouted toward the ridge as if calling for help—and in the second she glanced that way he snatched at the rifle.

She jerked it back, firing. The ball ripped

past his ear, tugging at his shaggy hair. Burning powder sizzled all over his wet face. He caught the end of the barrel but the shying of the horse jerked it from his hand. He dodged as the girl swung the weapon at him, but he was off balance. . . .

HE WAS in the mud, half conscious, half asleep, head aching violently when he began to notice his surroundings. The girl who had hit him was standing beside him, rifle in hand, staring out into the dusk. A child's whimper came, and a man's voice, anguished and harsh, swore. "Shut up, baby, so we can hear."

Beasley turned his head still more. The three wagons made a rude circle. The riding horse and the plugs from the wagons, tied inside to the wheels, made a further barricade. Several bedraggled women stood with the men. A scrap of canvas had been rigged into a shelter for the children.

"Here—he's come to, Rance," the girl said.

The people whirled on Beasley and, as he tried to sit up, he discovered that he was pigged hand and foot. A big, gaunt-faced man with black mustaches strode toward him, exclaiming, "All right, you dirty renegade, you can tell your Indian friends we'll slice a piece off you for every shot they fire." He whipped out a bowie. "If you think I'm funning I'll give you a sample—" He stooped and caught Beasley's hair.

Freezing, Beasley said, "You damned fool, they're not my friends. I'm Ward Beasley, if the name means anything to you."

It obviously did. The man with the knife didn't quite start but there were exclamations of surprise and wonder from the others. Then the leader said, "Word came back here that Ward Beasley was dead."

A grizzly-bearded man came over and leaned to peer fixedly and finally he said, "By Jehosophat, he's a Beasley. But who was you yellin' for if it wasn't them Injuns when Allison—Miss Craybaugh—hit you?"

"Nobody. I was just distracting her attention. Look, mister, I'm your one chance to get out of this hole. I know this range. You don't or you wouldn't be trying to fort up here. Even cattle thieves try to be smart. No, you let me talk. There's a cabin a mile and a half or so from here. Forted up in it, we could put up a fair fight. If we got out alive, then would be time enough to settle our personal differences. If we stay here, come dark they'll crawl up and shoot and they're pretty sure to hit something—"

The bearded man said, "Shore—but a mile and a half—what you think, Mr. Keegan?"

The name rolled in Beasley's mind and he looked at the good boots and hat of the man who held the knife. He said, "Keegan? The

carpetbagger?" Keegan's face tensed and Beasley added, "I hear you've sent a hundred and seventy thousand dollars back home to Illinois."

"They don't do me justice," Keegan told him coolly. "Are you sure it wasn't a hundred and seventy million?"

Beasley said, "You folks better watch him. He'll rob you blind on those cattle you've rounded up for him. I was on my way to town to see you, Keegan."

The girl said, "Cut him loose, Callahan," and the grizzly-bearded man took Keegan's bowie and leaned and snipped the piggings.

Beasley sat up, head roaring and whirling, and then, as he got to his knees to rise, Callahan said, "You any kin to old S. M. Beasley that was? Ol' Snortin' Mad, up in the Nations?"

"Enough," Beasley said, unable to control his angry rashness, "that I don't take kindly to having my cattle run off."

The girl spoke sharply, "That's two or three times you've sounded that note, Mr. Beasley. If my herd has picked up anything of yours you're welcome to cut it out. But you were swinging a pretty wide loop when I first saw you."

Beasley stared at her and Callahan said, "We're migratin' from the Injuns, Beasley. We've brung them cattle—what of them we aint' lost on the way—from up in No Man's Land in the Nations. We've bought land here on your ol' Double Rowel range from Keegan—"

Beasley stood there groggily, digesting that, and Keegan said, "It's all perfectly legal, fellow. You let your taxes slide and I took your title—"

That was the final straw. Once Beasley's word was law on this fifty miles square of Double Rowel land. Land that had been bought with blood and courage, and this Keegan, this carpetbagger, had the gall to stand here and tell him he had taken it for taxes.

Beasley's throat trembled with the beat of his blood as he sucked wet air into his lungs. The whimpering of the child sounded through the little fortress, and the girl, Allison Craybaugh, said, "Well, as far as the title's concerned—"

Beasley said, "Forget it. Keegan and I will settle this between us—if we're still alive—when this scrape is over. There's plenty of range besides the Double Rowel you can settle on. Who's your ramrod? Callahan? Well—you ready to go, Callahan?"

He could almost have crawled out of here and left them with it. But the children couldn't help it that he had been thimble-rigged out of his land—and as for the others, regardless of their motives they had dragged

him into safety. Left out where Allison had poled him, he would now be scheduled for a slow fire.

Callahan said, "I don't know. We've had a tough go of it. Lost five good riders and our whole damned remuda and lots of gear and cattle the last three weeks. I jist hate—"

Beasley said, "Ain't much horse cover between here and that cabin. If they sneak up on us it'll have to be afoot and we might get there while they're deciding. If we stay here—"

THE pow-wow was brief. They hitched the wagons. By taking them, Beasley hoped to make the bucks think the party had decided the danger was over and they could take their time about an attack. They spared Beasley an old plug from a lost wagon, and a slicker, but he was bareheaded. The three women beside Allison mounted the wagon seats to drive, taking the children with them.

Buckling on the Colt they gave him over the slicker, Beasley said, "One more thing. Is it settled amongst you what man is to take care of which woman—and the children—just in case?"

The six men shuffled, not looking at each other.

"Not plain out," Callahan said.

"I buried a man and woman today," Beasley told him. "Been better if they'd had it settled—plain out."

Keegan said, "My God, man, that's no kind of talk—"

"Beasley's right," a third man declared in a hushed tone. He had mounted and now he drew his horse close to one of the wagons where two little girls sat by the woman on the seat. The others made their arrangements, and finally Beasley looked at Allison.

Callahan smeared a sleeve across his face as if he were sweating in spite of the rain. He said, "Her daddy, they got him couple months ago—but I—I couldn't—less'n I had to—"

Beasley looked at Keegan and then at the girl, at the spot where he would have to shoot and she eyed him somberly back. He mounted then and a couple of savages appeared in the murky distance, frankly watching as the little caravan started moving.

Beasley rode point, keeping a hundred feet to the right of the center wagon. He motioned to Allison after a little and when she came up he said, "Have somebody start handing grub out of the chuck wagon to the riders without stopping. And have the drivers tie their lines when we get to the creek, and jump out without stopping the horses when we go down into the creek gully. There's timber across there and we'll let the horses

take the wagons on and the Injuns can follow the noise while we vamoose."

Not answering, she swung back. Presently he went over and got a sack of meal to carry and then as they dropped into the deep bed of the creek they made the change. The women and children were taken up by some of the riders, everyone deadly still as the water rushed and gurgled. When Beasley judged that all the savages must have surely crossed over, up and down the creek, he led the way back up the same bank they had descended. Then a crackle of shots came and the squeal of a horse and the shrill yell of the Comanches as they charged the wagons.

Beasley kicked his horse and drew his pistol to rake its rump with the sharp sight in lieu of a spur. The other animals fanned out around him, splattering mud high. But he reckoned the Indians had already discovered the deception, for the shooting and yelling had stopped.

The ground steepened. Thorns tore at him. And he saw the bucks angling in on the right rear flank. A score of them. He pulled out, calling to Joe Callahan who was also riding single. To the others he cried, "Straight on up!"

The Comanches screamed and screeched their war whistles. Holding his fire, Beasley fell in at the rear with Callahan. The foremost buck was gaining. A gun was on his back but he had a spear in his hand. Beasley fired and missed. The Indian flung his spear. It struck the saddle horn and glanced off into the meal sack slung across the horse's withers.

Heart in his throat, Beasley caught the shaft as the meal spilled out and he whirled the point around to catch the Comanche in the stomach as he leaped to bear Beasley out of the saddle. The falling body carried the spear away and the frightened old plug took a fresh burst of speed. Beasley and Callahan fired together at the savages. One of them and then another hit the ground. The others dropped back.

With a shock he saw that part of the cabin was burned. But the original part of adobe and stone, with adobe on the roof, still stood. It was a single room, twenty by forty. They got the horses in while the braves came bellying up through the brush and boulders. A ball splattered the adobe by the door as Beasley finally dragged his mount in. He left it open a crack while the horses were tied at the far end of the room away from the spring that bubbled in one corner—for this had been a fortress as well as a home when his father had built it—and then he closed the great portal and dropped the bars.

Beasley said, "There's a firing step all around, and plugs in the loopholes."

SEVERAL followed suit as he pulled one out. He stood there a long time but darkness finally closed down without showing anything to shoot at.

"They'll get us just before daylight," Callahan growled.

Someone brought out a tinderbox and by the light of its candle they broke up a bench—the only furniture left—and kindled a fire to roast hunks of pork. Allison made cakes of meal and salt and water and spread them on a fragment of the bench to bake.

Wearily, his headache coming back upon him, Beasley watched her. Out of her slicker she had a nice figure that filled out her shirt and trousers just about right. And in spite of the .38 she wore with such authority she had a curiously domestic look with the light on her cheek and shining through her brown hair as she tended the cakes.

Beasley couldn't remember his mother, but he knew now that when his father used to ride twenty miles up here from the big house to sit and smoke he must have been thinking of the girl who helped him build this place. Only, unlike Allison, she hadn't been the kind who would have truck with a carpet-bagger.

The girl presently took food to Keegan who sat a little apart on the firing step preening water off his mustaches. Then she brought some to Beasley where he sat with an ear

to the door. He rose and she said, "I want to tell you I'm sorry I hit you this afternoon. And to thank you for getting us here."

Beasley shrugged. "I was getting myself here too." He listened to see if he'd heard footsteps on the roof.

All at once words tumbled from the girl. "Mr. Keegan really had reason to think you were—you wouldn't be back. Before father was killed he told him he wouldn't buy tax-title land and see the old owner go starving—"

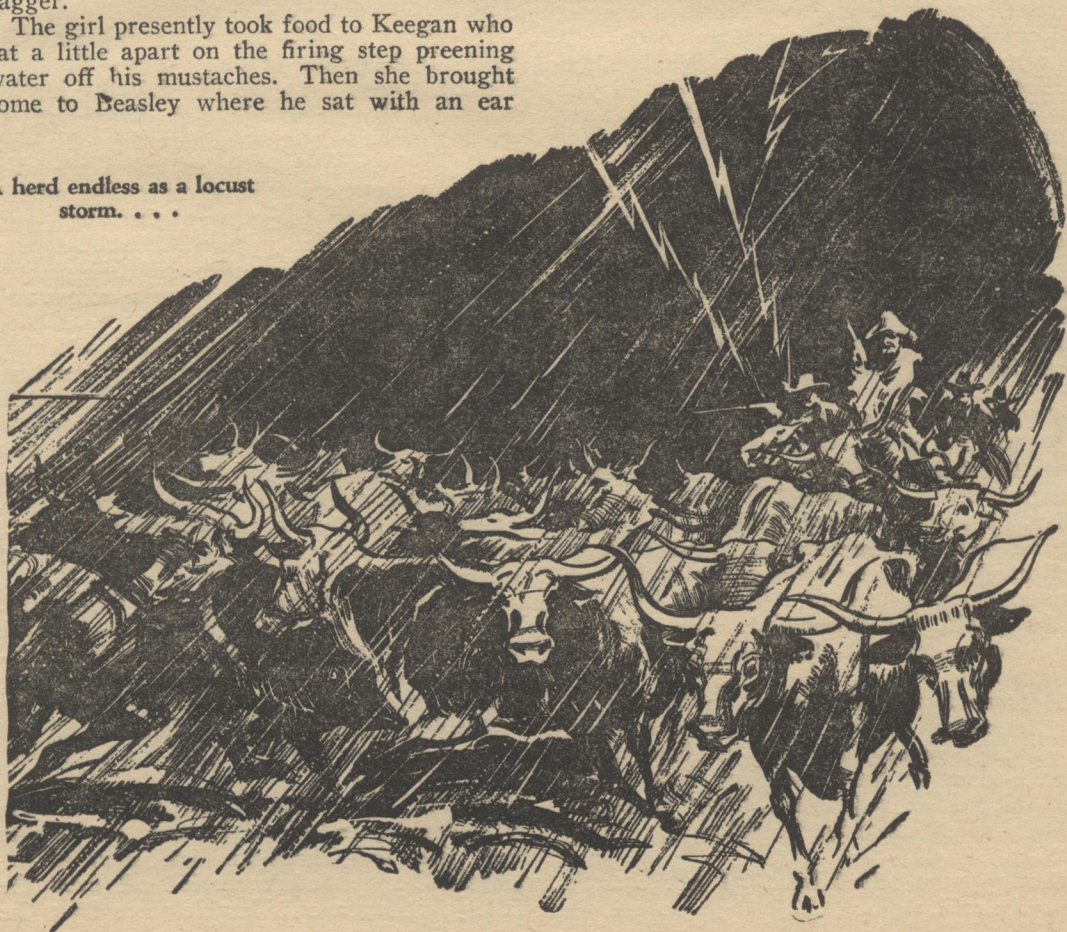
The rain drummed harder. Beasley grunted a non-committal answer and stuffed more of the half-cooked food into his mouth. "What'd you give Keegan?"

"Twenty-five hundred dollars. Two and a half cents an acre for a hundred thousand acres and a six month's option on another hundred thousand."

Keegan had risen and was standing apart talking with one of Allison's riders. They looked his way in the light of the embers and Keegan's stare was cool as he met Beasley's look.

Twenty-five hundred was a fortune in this land just now. His voice still lower than the

A herd endless as a locust
storm. . . .



beat of the rain, Beasley asked, "Any emergency clause?"

"Yes, we're covered."

He nodded. "All in fine print? Yes, you're covered. I heard about those deals all the way home. If you don't take up the option, you lose all you thought you'd already paid for."

Allison said, "I resent that! I think he—" She hushed.

"Loves you?"

"At any rate, I've lost it already unless he just gives me back my money. I wouldn't take your land under the circumstances."

"I can't understand," Beasley told her, "how you could deal with a carpetbagger."

"We—we didn't know he was a—carpetbagger. And I don't know it yet. At any rate, he's proved himself to be a gentleman—and a friend."

"I see." Rain suddenly beat down the chimney as the wind stopped and blackened the embers. It tingled his scalp to consider that Keegan could creep upon him in the darkness, and he held his pistol ready as a club. He said, "Well I can be as nice as you. If we get out of this, I'll trade you a hundred thousand acres of land—only I'll shoot Keegan if I catch him on it, same as I would the rest of my place. I've got twenty-five hundred sections—million and a half acres—and you can just about take your pick. If you want to trade."

"For what?"

Maybe it was because he had hardly talked to a girl the past five years, or maybe it was because this girl was who she was, but in the darkness he got his free arm about her and kissed her. She didn't move nor struggle and he released her abruptly.

She drawled, "Just a hundred thousand acres for that? No, thanks, cowboy."

THERE was a little loft room, a sort of balcony, at the end of the building above the horses. Everyone went up there presently for a nap except Beasley and Callahan. Beasley changed position frequently for he had a creepy feeling about Keegan. And maybe that rider he had been talking to was his man instead of Allison's. But if a knife should be slipped into him and his body carried outside—like he'd gone out to scout a little. . . .

He tensed, thinking again he had maybe heard someone on the roof. If a buck yelled down the chimney, the rest of them would hit the door at the same time with a log. But minutes passed and nothing happened. He whispered hoarsely, "Callahan?"

"Yeah?"

Beasley approached him. "I got a little idea," he said.

His father had put rungs across one side of the chimney just in case he might ever want to escape up to the roof through it. Beasley had often clambered up and down as a kid, though it was a smutty business, and now with Allison's Henry, loaded with sixteen cartridges, he crawled into the fireplace and stood up.

In the blackness he found the lowest rung and drew himself up. Pistol ready, he watched the top but the night was so dark he couldn't tell where the chimney stopped and the sky started. Cautiously he felt his way, expecting to grasp the foot of a Comanche each time he reached upward. But finally he caught the rim of the chimney and a moment later, the rain beating upon him, he rolled out upon the almost flat roof.

Pulling down the hat he had borrowed, he hunkered there a long time. The rain eased. He was beginning to see a little. He crawled forward to have a look out front.

There was a faint scraping noise behind him. He whirled back. Was that the end of a pole? He moved to the chimney again and thrust his hand gently out. A ladder of poles had been raised, and it quivered with the climbing of an Indian.

He raised the rifle barrel, peering intently. Suddenly the outline of a head topped the roof. Beasley swung the gun. He felt the jar as it struck. The buck fell back. There was a startled grunt below. Beasley caught the end of the ladder to drag it up but there was evidently another warrior upon it. He gave it a shove and it swung outward, hesitated, and crashed heavily. In the same second he gave a wild whoop, as if he were a brave yelling down the chimney, and then he ran across and stationed himself above the door.

As he had expected, there was a heavy rushing below and a splintering of wood as the butt of a log struck the door. It crashed again even as he unlimbered the Henry and fired. He levered and fired again, aware that the door was broken down. He and Callahan had tied half a dozen horses to the bar inside. There was a pawing and squealing and the surprised cries of the Indians as they burst in among the pawing hoofs.

They were coming out down there now. Beasley loosed a couple more shots into the melee. A fusilade cracked from the doorway below, the powder flaring out in long orange streaks.

Beasley called, "Anybody hurt?"

"None of our bunch," Callahan answered.

BEASLEY couldn't sleep. When the rain stopped and the moon came out he saw that the Comanches had been so demoralized they hadn't carried off even the fallen that lay a considerable piece from the

cabin. The horses had done one in. Five others were scattered in the yard and when daylight came he saw another body away down the hill. Of course, it could be a trick.

There came a distant burst of firing. Beasley went to the door. Far away a troop in blue rode pell mell into the timber. Ahead of them, beyond the woods, the remnants of the Indians came out on their painted ponies.

Keegan descended the ladder from the sleeping place, stubbled and red-eyed, mustaches askew. He stood watching a moment as pursued and pursuers vanished. Then he said, "Let's make a little medicine, you and me."

Beasley followed him outside and Keegan said, "Beasley, I've got a little influence around here, as you sort of mentioned. How'd you like to be a captain of Rangers? Pays good money and it's made up entirely of returned Texas soldiers."

Beasley said, "Be beholden to you?" He controlled the sudden twitching of his lips.

"I might," Keegan added, "fix you up with some land. I don't want to be tough on you—I admire a brave man—but you got to realize you fought on the wrong side of the war."

Beasley's scalp was crawling. He said, "How much did you make off my cattle, Keegan?"

Keegan drawled, "I don't know. But I had competition. All sorts of hide thieves and rustlers were working in here. And I had to split with a politician. Altogether, I doubt if I took you for more than seven or eight thousand. Why?"

He stood there at ease, watchful as a panther. A big, insolent man with heavy hands. Beasley realized that the fellow had got him out here to goad him into a fight, but yet, as he approached Keegan, he could not have stopped had he wanted to.

He dived headlong at him, struck out with his left. Keegan parried the blow and drove a fist into Beasley's chest that sent him sprawling back into the mud. Keegan leaped at him with both feet, and Beasley rolled aside and caught his ankles as he lit and brought him down. He crawled upon Keegan and Keegan twisted under him, going for his eyes. Beasley got a thumb in his mouth and ground his teeth and, cursing, Keegan went for Beasley's groin with his free hand and roweled his legs.

Beasley twisted free, sweating in pain, and then they rolled over and over down the hill, locked together, pounding and biting and gouging. The long months in the prison

camps were catching up with Beasley. He was weakening.

"Knife! Knife!"

Beasley got one fleeting glimpse of Allison as he struggled to keep Keegan from drawing the blade in his boot. He got his free hand on a rock the size of a goose egg and pounded it into Keegan's mouth. A second blow took him in the temple, and as the man rolled away he struck him again and again as blood came from his nostrils and ears. . . .

Not till they pulled him away did he remember he carried a pistol. It was still in the holster. He stood groggily, trying to remember something else. With a grunt, he knelt, breath coming in great wheezes, and found Keegan's money belt and pulled it free. He unbuckled the pouches. They were filled with thick sheaves of Yankee money.

"Must be a fortune!" Callahan said.

"Won't go far," Beasley panted, "spread out amongst them Keegan set to starving. But it'll help."

Allison came with her hat full of water and shooed the others away to cook and fetch wood and turn the horses out and dispose of the Indians. Beasley sat on a rock, still wheezing, not protesting as she washed his face and dug grit from his raw cheek.

Finally she said, "I—I heard what he said about robbing you."

"How do you want that twenty-five hundred you gave him?" Beasley asked. "Big bills or little?"

"You keep it and go redeem that tax title—no, I mean it. Because I—I've decided to take you up on that trade you made me last night—and if your title's no good mine wouldn't be either." And as Beasley eyed her sharply she added, not looking at him, "I might—take—another chunk of land, too. If you've got it to spare."

Beasley's heart was pounding harder than during the fight. He said, "I wouldn't want to chunk off any more little pieces. Nothing less than half the whole Double Rowel."

"Be a lot of land for a lone woman to handle."

"You wouldn't be a lone woman—if you traded."

"Oh?" she paused. "What kind of a deal did you have in mind?"

"Tell you what I'll do," Beasley offered. "I'll take you and call it even."

She raised her brows thoughtfully. "Could I think it over while I get kissed again?" she asked.

Next Month's Big Novel—

OUTLAW!

Out January 2nd

By T. C. McClary

THE DEATH

*A man rides hard for hate and Cass
Carlin had come too far to kill a man
—to spare his own life!*

HATE was dark and solid in his heart. It showed in the dust-streaked weariness of both horse and rider. It showed in the hard flatness of the man's eyes, in the terrible hammer of his pulse, in the bitter curve of his lips under the ragged beard, and in the gaunt stiffness of his body. And it showed in the wild, crazy pattern of his back-trail, mile piled upon mile, across the face of half a nation.

A man. Name of Tod Rory. Tall, humorless, dark-haired and dark-eyed. Very fast with a gun. Probably a law officer. Maybe thirty-five or thereabouts. You seen him?

Always the answer was no. Move on to another town. Hit the saddle and eat more dust. Heart-hard and bone-weary. But always the answer is No. And then. . .

Tod Rory? Yeah. Seen him up Tullala way. He's sheriff now. . .

Cass Carlin looked down into the twilight haze of the valley below. The hate that was in him ballooned until it was a sheet of flame engulfing his world. Then the moment passed. He touched his horse's flank and rode down the steep trail into the flickering kerosene lights of Tullala town.

It was a familiar pattern. The false-fronted buildings, the high board walks, the dirt street, the litter in front of the saloons, the spaced barrels of water in case of fire. At a livery barn he stepped down and said, "Rub him down, feed him plenty, treat him right. He's a good hoss." He looked at the bandy-legged, one-eyed hostler and shook his head and tended to his horse himself.

Afterwards he walked along the high board walk. He heard laughter and tinny music, the sound of voices, the clomp of a horse's hoofs, the creak of an unoiled wagon. Through an open door came the ring of iron upon iron and the red glow of the blacksmith's forge. The bank on the corner, the saloons, the hardware, the *Tullala Record* office. The batwing doors of the Palace swung open and a man reeled out. Cass bumped into him and the man fell and then arose awkwardly, swinging an angry, lusty, haymaking right.

Cass stepped inside the blow and his hand dropped to his gun. Hate looked briefly out of his flat eyes. Then reason came to chain the hate and he said, "Forget it, friend. Maybe

you can direct me to the sheriff's office?"

He moved on, then, on the worn and splintered planks. He reached the sheriff's office. Through the window he could see the shadow of a man's head outlined by yellow light. Cass let his hand brush the polished butt of his six-gun. This, maybe, was the thing he had dreamed about for so long. His hand fell away from his gun and he pushed inside the tiny office, pausing stiffly just within the tattered edge of light.

"Tod Rory? He ain't here now. Rode out yesterday."

The deputy was young, serious. Cass felt let down. His bitter lips formed a question. The deputy said, "He rode up the canyon with a posse. They're after rustlers. Maybe they'll be back tonight."

Cass began retracing his steps. He saw the Tullala House, a weathered three-storied frame building, and he angled across the wide street toward it.

A girl was behind the desk in the small square lobby, her pale gold head bent over a ledger. The light from a nearby lamp accentuated the soft curve of her cheek. She was frowning, holding the tip of a pencil against her red lips. She raised her blue eyes and Cass lifted his dusty hat and said, "I'd like a room, ma'am."

"For how long?"

"Tonight."

She smiled and turned the register for him to sign. He paused briefly. Then he wrote slowly and awkwardly, "Cass Smith."

"Have you come far?" she asked.

"Far enough, ma'am," Cass said, thinking of the search that had begun in Big Six down along the Mexican border and ended here at Tullala.

"Thank you, Mr. Smith," she told him. "Here's your key."

His utter sense of loneliness stuck in his throat and he said, "That's a mighty big ledger for such a tiny girl."

Her smile widened. "I've got it roped and hogtied."

CASS got his saddle roll from the livery barn and then went up to his room. He lit the lamp. After the chimney was warm he turned up the wick. He stripped

RIDER

He saw another shadow in
the alley and thought, I'm
not alone. . . .



By
WALLACE UMPHREY

and washed in a white porcelain basin. Then he looked at his bearded face and long untrimmed hair in the square mirror above the washstand.

His heart told him, but not aloud: *Murder is a nasty word, but you don't care. There is no right and no wrong left anywhere in the world. There is only a promise you made Big Joe while he died in your arms. Tod Rory shot him in the back and you'll pay him back in kind.*

In silence his head told him: *Tod Rory won't recognize you. You're the spitting image of Big Joe Carlin, but your beard hides that. A shot out of the darkness and your promise will be kept. It's best that way be-*

cause Tod Rory is too fast with a six-gun.

Dressing, he made his way down the stairs. He paused for a moment, looking at the blonde head bent over the ledger. There was a feeling of quiet contentment here, and it was something he had never known. A sense of unrest gripped him and he found it hard to shake off.

He went out to stand on the high board walk. A tall, gaunt, gray man came toward him, hobbling on crutches. The man came within a few feet of him and then stumbled and fell heavily. Cass helped him up.

"Thanks, stranger," said the gray-haired man cheerfully. "I busted my laig a couple of days ago. Fnd it right hard to get around."

He added, "I own the bank here in Tullala."
"You ought to be home in bed," Cass told him dryly. "If you don't give that leg a chance, they'll have to shoot you."

The gray-haired man grinned wryly. "Can't take the time off. Too many lives locked up in the bank vault."

Turning, Cass watched the banker hobble on down the street. It didn't make sense, the thing the gray-haired man had told him. Cass turned it over and over in his mind, until the banker was lost from sight. Shrugging, he made his way up the street to the Palace.

He bellied up to the bar. A bottle was set in front of him. He was oblivious to all sound and movement—a man made lonely by the hatred festering inside him. He drank heavily, but without effect.

A fat finger touched his arm and he turned to stare into a bland, smiling face above a frock coat and a gaily flowered vest. The black-coated shoulders shrugged and gestured. Cass followed the broad back down to the end of the bar.

"They call me Little Jack Horner," said the fat man, smiling only with his eyes. "I own this place."

Cass said, "Glad to know you." And added, "I guess." He started to move away.

The fat finger tapped his sleeve, restraining him. "Wait. Are you just another saddle tramp?"

"Yeah."

"Wait. Let's look at your hands."

Cass said, "To hell with you."

Little Jack Horner still smiled. "You ain't no cowhand. How would you like to make a little money?"

Cass turned his palms up and looked at them. They were soft and clean. It seemed odd, somehow. Little Jack Horner had told him he wasn't a cowboy. Yet that had been the only thing he had ever done, until he rode the vengeance trail. Bitterness spilled out of Cass Carlin's eyes.

"Did you hear me?" Little Jack Horner asked.

"I heard you," Cass said.

"It's like this." Little Jack Horner leaned closer. "You just listen. There's a guy here who gets in my hair. I want him out. He keeps the town so tight a man can't make a dollar any more."

"The sheriff?"

"Tod Rory. You know him?"

"What's the matter?" asked Cass. "Won't he let you rob the drunks in the street?"

"Watch your mouth," Little Jack Horner said. He stared bleakly for a moment. "Don't fool yourself, stranger. Tod Rory's no good. There's a story about how he shot a man in the back down Big Six way. He's fast with a gun, all right. But you have the look.

Maybe you can beat him. Maybe you're the man."

Cass felt tension crawl across his scalp. "Why don't you hire some local talent?"

"Rory's too fast with a gun. Besides, he's got all the folks around here fooled. They all like him." Little Jack Horner tapped Cass Carlin's arm with his fat finger. "I think he'll be in tonight. I know what he'll do. He'll take one drink at the bar. Maybe he'll talk a bit. Then he'll go out the back way to the alley, looking for drunks. He always does. The alley will be empty, and there'll be a light behind him. It's worth good money to have him out of the way."

Cass said thinly, "I don't kill for money."

Little Jack Horner took his upper lip between his teeth and worried it. His eyes rested on Cass for a long moment. Then he made a small gesture with his plump hands. "Okay, stranger," he said quietly. "I had you pegged wrong. Forget it." His eyes became dangerous. "Don't ever mention what I just told you."

Without answering, Cass moved back to his place at the bar. He poured a drink and found that his hand shook a little. He thought, *I'm not a hired killer! I'll murder Tod Rory because he's got it coming. But I won't kill for money. There has to be a difference.* But this thought left a taste in his mouth.

At length he heard somebody saying, "Hullo, Tod. Heard you were back. . . ."

Cass looked up to see a tall, grave, dark man coming through the door. The light gleamed brightly on the star pinned to his shirt under the calfskin vest. Hatred clogged in Cass Carlin's throat.

"You get them rustlers?" somebody asked.

"Two got away," Tod Rory said quietly. "I let one go."

"How come?"

"The last one was just a youngster. Maybe he wasn't all bad. Mostly it's better to save a life than take one."

"You figure the gang is busted up?"

"Bent some," Tod Rory said. "Not enough of 'em left to cause much trouble."

He slid along the bar and stopped beside Cass. Cass felt a momentary sensation of being trapped; it was hard to breathe. Tod Rory poured a small drink, then bent his dark gaze on Cass. There was no sign of recognition. Cass lifted his own drink. The feeling of panic inside him went away, leaving him calm and sure of himself again. He tossed off the whiskey and wiped his lips. The sheriff turned away and spoke to the white-aproned man behind the bar. Cass went out into the night. He walked steadily to the end of the block, turned the corner, and entered the dark maw of the alley behind the Palace.

This was the end of a quest—and a prom-

ise. Little Jack Horner had told him how the sheriff would come out the back way. Cass would shoot Tod Rory down and then be on on his way. An eye for an eye. Big Joe Carlin's death would be avenged.

Big Joe Carlin had never been much of a father, but Cass had always worshipped him. His father rode home only seldom, but he had been a big man, full of pride and deep laughter. And he had died, his head in his son's arms.

Pay him back, the man who did this to me. Give him the same as he gave me—a bullet in the back. Promise me, son. . . .

Now Cass held his gun ready in his hand. He leaned against a wall and waited, feeling strangely weary and spent. The taste of victory was not in him; rather an odd sense of defeat. It wasn't at all as he had planned.

The door opened, emitting a fat wedge of light. Tod Rory stood framed for a moment—Cass lifted his gun. When the sheriff reached the far edge of the light, he would shoot.

And then, all at once, the light glinted on a gun barrel at the other end of the alley and in a startled moment Cass thought, *I'm not alone. Must be Little Jack Horner ambushing the sheriff.* And then he thought, *Tod Rory is mine to kill. . . .*

The sheriff took another forward step, no awareness in his gait. Down the dark alley Cass saw the other gun lift and center.

Two guns blazed in the darkness. The sheriff sprawled out of range. Little Jack Horner cursed and staggered against the side of a building. His gun sounded again, and Cass felt himself flung backward by the impact of the bullet. Falling, he leveled his own gun again and squeezed the trigger. Then the dirt of the alley was in his mouth and he knew no more.

CASS awoke. There was pain in him and he drifted back into unconsciousness. When he came to again, early morning sunlight laid a bright pattern on the patchwork quilt of the bed.

He was lying between white sheets. His head ached; it was thick with bandages. His lips were hot and feverish. There were rag rugs on the floor and lace curtains at the windows. Cass sat up and sweat popped out all over him. Agony seared his brain. Stifling a groan, he lay back on the pillow.

The clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen ceased. A woman he did not know came into the room and smiled at him, her face flushed from the heat of the stove. She was wearing crisp gingham. She wiped her hands on her apron, and her bare arms were finely molded.

Cass muttered dazedly, "Where am I?"

She wiped the sweat from his face and gave him a cool drink of water. "I'm Beth

Rory," she said. "Two nights ago you saved my husband's life. The least he could do was bring you here." There was a shadow in her dark eyes. "Except for the Grace of God—and for you—Tod might be dead."

It took Cass a moment to absorb her meaning. "Two nights," he whispered. "I've been unconscious that long?"

She nodded.

"I've got to get out of here," Cass said.

"Your wound is bad—not serious now. But you'll have to stay in bed a while." The heavy tread of boots came from another room. "Here's Tod. I'll finish getting breakfast."

Tod Rory came in, freshly shaved and smelling of soap. His face was strongly etched in the harsh sunlight; there was the sense of both strength and compassion in his dark eyes.

"I owe you something, Smith," he said. "It's a bit hard—" He broke off. "Thanks."

Cass asked, "How'd you know my name?"

"I always make it a point to check the hotels," the sheriff told him. "I like to know what guests are in town. Your horse is being taken care of. They'll hold your saddle roll at the hotel." He paused. "That was Little Jack Horner, owner of the Palace. You drilled him plumb center. He's hated me. I figure a man's got a right to do what he wants until he hurts somebody else. Little Jack Horner was the kind who did." The sheriff's eyes became remote. "What were you doing in the alley?"

Cass didn't answer. The sheriff pondered a moment; then he shrugged and the friendliness came alive once again in his face. He said, "I can't figure a man shooting another in the back."

Anger smashed against the wall of Cass Carlin's mind. He closed his eyes against the hate he knew must be mirrored there. He thought, *Damn him! The hypocritical son!*

Cass expected to leave that day, because you can't accept the hospitality of a man you are going to kill. But he was still there five days later. Each morning he saw Tod Rory leave. At noon the sheriff came home to lunch. Each evening he came home.

Cass talked to Beth Rory. And he learned a little of what the banker had meant.

"We've bought a little ranch up the canyon," she told him. "We're saving all the money we can to stock it." Shadows were in her eyes. "A married man shouldn't be a peace officer."

"Why not?" asked Cass.

She shuddered. "Each day Tod leaves—I'm never sure that he'll be back. A good sheriff has the worst enemies, or he wouldn't be a good sheriff. There is no security. Some day a man like Horner will shoot him in the back."

Cass clenched his hands under the covers.

Beth Rory was watching him. She said suddenly, "I want to tell you something. You will hear it anyway. Tod was a Texas Ranger down around the Big Six country. He shot and killed a man. Someone started the story that Tod shot this man in the back." She paused. "Shall I go on?"

"Go on," Cass said tonelessly.

"Tod is very fast with a gun," she said wearily. "That time he was too fast. This man he shot was part of a gang of rustlers who were running wet cattle across the border. Tod had orders to arrest him. They met in a saloon. This man was drinking at the bar when Tod went in. Tod called out to him. This man drew his gun as he started to turn. Tod was too fast that day. He started to draw after this other man, but he fired so fast that he shot this man in the back. Somebody started the rumor that Tod was afraid and so had murdered this other man." She looked into Cass Carlin's eyes. "You don't believe me."

"Your husband told you this?"

"If you knew Tod," she said defiantly, "you'd know he isn't capable of murder. He's respected in this town. Only the people on the wrong side of the law dislike him—and with reason. But outside, where they don't know him, there are stories. Do you believe me?"

"Why does it matter?" Cass asked.

"Pride," she said. "A woman likes to have her man respected." She sighed. "You're well enough to travel now. Would you like a basin of water and a razor before you get up?"

"I'll keep the beard," Cass told her.

That noon he ate lunch with them. Tod Rory was preoccupied. At length he laid down his fork.

"Some of that rustlin' gang are still around," he said. "Jubal Kane of Slant K tells me he's cut signs of a fresh campfire." He shook his head. "Maybe I was wrong, letting that youngster run off." He appealed to his wife. "You think I done wrong?"

She shook her dark head quickly.

"Men do strange things," Tod Rory murmured. "They lie and cheat and steal and kill. But because we are men too, we don't know why. That youngster should have his chance."

He was still looking at his wife. Cass saw the bond of understanding that passed between them. It was something that he had rarely seen, because he had never looked for it, and it troubled him.

The sheriff finally pushed away from the table.

"I'll go into town with you now," Cass said.

THE Palace was closed up, awaiting the probate of Little Jack Horner's estate, but farther up the street was the Square Deal. Cass leaned against the bar. It was quiet here in the middle of the day, and he wanted to think. There was no sense of assurance in his mind now.

A small thin man came inside and spoke jubilantly to the fat barkeep.

"The railroad is coming here!" he cried, waving a letter. "We've got that fight won. It'll be the making of this valley."

The fat barkeep grinned.

"It's a promise I made to myself a long time ago," the thin man said, bragging. "I promised myself that some day there would be permanence here!"

Cass learned that the small man was publisher of the *Tullala Record*. The warmth of Tullala's future seemed to surround him like a promise, as it would most other residents of the valley. Its glow beat up on Cass.

Troubled, he walked under the hot sun to the Tullala House. A few townsfolk nodded pleasantly at him. The blonde girl was again bent over the big ledger, frowning, the tip of a pencil against her red lips. It seemed to Cass as if time was turned back a week.

"That was a fine thing you did," she told him. "We all heard about it. The sheriff is a fine man."

Cass grunted; there was no answer to anything she had told him. Again, in the presence of this girl, loneliness emptied him. She said, "Your saddle roll is still up in your room. We haven't needed the space." Again Cass only grunted. He started up the stairs and then returned to lean on the desk.

"Still got that big ledger roped and hog-tied?" he asked.

She laughed. "I sure enough have!" Then her face became serious. "It's full of dreams. Dad's ailing. We bought this place on a shoe-string. Now we have almost enough money in the bank to pay off the mortgage. Then we'll have security."

"Security," Cass murmured. "It means a lot to some folks."

"Doesn't it to you?"

"Haven't had a chance to think on it," Cass said dryly.

She watched him gravely. "It's something you have to lean upon when you're troubled in mind. It's the end of a search for something. Only you don't have to look far for it—it's always there for the taking. Do you understand?"

Cass said softly, partly to please her, "Maybe I'm beginning to."

He climbed the stairs, the tread of his boots heavy and yet unsure. He peeled off his coat and lay down on the bed, his hands clasped behind his bandaged head. The restless un-

certainly still clogged his mind. After a long time he got up and went to the window.

From here he could see the town and beyond it the deep canyon sparsely dotted with ranches and homesteads. The country was growing. He looked down into the street and saw the banker hobble out of the door of the bank on the corner. He saw the publisher of the *Tullala Record* cross the dust of the street. He saw a heavy farm wagon creak up the street and stop in front of the wide doors of the blacksmith shop, saw a man jump down and go inside. A woman with a child on her lap waited there on the high seat of the wagon.

Standing there, his hands behind his back, Cass watched the shadows fall deep and long against the far canyon wall. He felt no hatred now for Tod Rory; you can never really hate a man you've never known. But his promise must be kept, because it was all he had.

He crossed to the square mirror above the washstand and looked at his bearded face. Man had strange prides. His father had been killed by a bullet in the back. Tod Rory had put that bullet there. Nothing else mattered. Perhaps his father's pride had been hurt when Tod Rory had withdrawn him; maybe that was why he had made Cass promise to avenge his death. It didn't matter. Perhaps Tod Rory had drawn too fast that day, so that it looked like murder. But that didn't matter either. Cass thought, *Men live by dreams*. But he still had his promise to keep.

And yet it came to Cass that he could never shoot a man in the back. Perhaps that was a matter of pride, too; he should have known. Even that night back of the Palace—he wondered now if he could have gone through with it. Probably not.

There was only one way left to pick up the battered pieces of his promise, only one course open to him now. He would have to face Tod Rory, evenly and fairly, two men fighting a private battle from which only one would walk away.

Cass got a razor from his saddle roll. He shaved quickly, wanting to get this thing over with and aware that darkness would be falling soon and Tod Rory would be going home. He put all thought of Beth Rory out of his mind, and a quiet sense of peace came over him. He should have known that this could be the only way. Tod Rory was fast with a gun. Cass didn't expect to be the victor; but in the last analysis his promise would be fulfilled.

He took out his guns and checked them. There was a slight film of oil on his hands, and he wiped it off on his pants. Then he shouldered his saddle roll and went down to the lobby. He put the saddle roll in a corner.

"I'd like to leave this here, ma'am."

The girl looked up. "I don't understand."
"Don't try," Cass said. "Maybe I'll be back for it." He crossed to the door. Without turning he added, "And maybe I won't."

HE STEPPED outside and squinted against the dying rays of the sun. For a long moment he stood there, looking toward the sheriff's office. People passed him and he ignored their passage. It was as if there were only two men left in the world—and he was one of them.

A tall straight shadow came out of the sheriff's office and strode toward him. It was Tod Rory, twin guns swinging low on his hips. There was neither joy nor fear in Cass now; his mind was empty of everything except this thing he had to do.

The thud of horses' hoofs from somewhere behind him lifted on the quiet air, but he ignored the sound. Nothing could distract him. The sound of shouting fell blankly on his mind. The rattle of sudden gunfire beat against his ears, but it had no meaning for him at this moment. The world was a walled prison and only he and Tod Rory were inside the walls.

Tod Rory moved out to the dusty street and began running toward him; and Cass moved implacably out to meet the sheriff squarely.

Cass opened his mouth to speak, but Tod Rory cut him off. Tod didn't even glance at him. He said, "Don't bother me now, Carlin. The bank's been robbed."

"Wait—" Cass said, but the sheriff was running past him now, gun in hand.

The prison walls around him fell away, and Cass was suddenly aware of what was happening. He heard the shouting, the gunfire. He remembered the crippled banker's words: "*Too many lives locked up in the bank vault. . . .*" He remembered Beth Rory, saving money to buy stock for a ranch, and the blonde girl back of the desk at the Tullala House who was working so hard to pay off a mortgage. *Peace and security. . . . This valley will grow and prosper. . . .* It all had meaning for him now.

And suddenly his own gun was in his hand and he was running toward the bank, following Tod Rory.

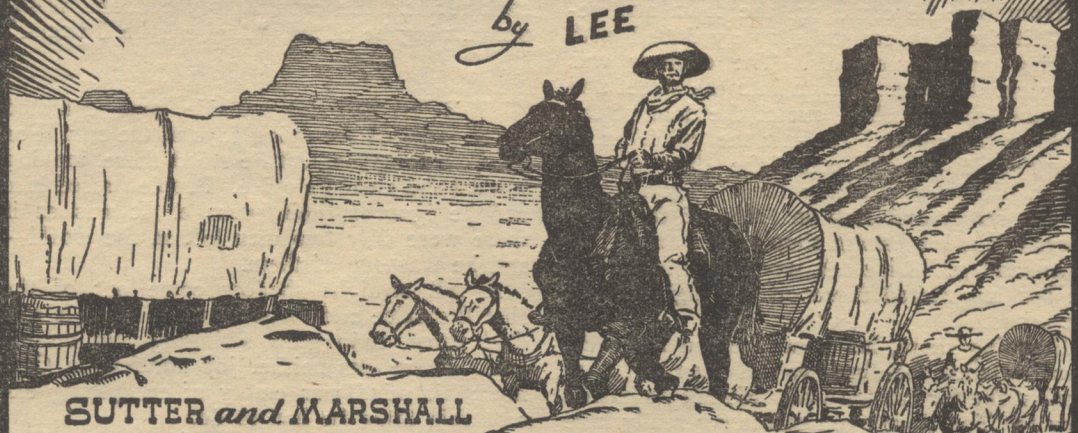
Three men ran out of the bank. One of them was carrying a heavy canvas bag. They leaped into saddle. Behind them a shotgun blasted. Leaning in the doorway, the crippled banker calmly reloaded. One of the bandits fired at him and he sagged slowly out of sight. The bandit trio wheeled down the street toward Cass Carlin and the sheriff.

Tod Rory was kneeling now in the dust of the street. His gun flamed, then flamed again.

(Continued on page 127)

TALES of the

by LEE

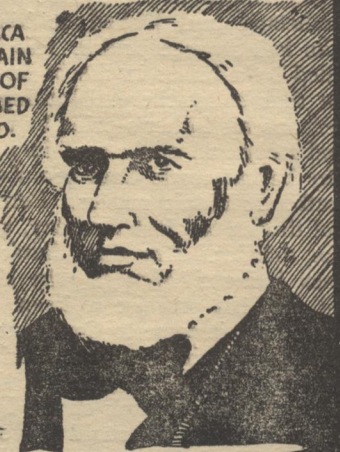
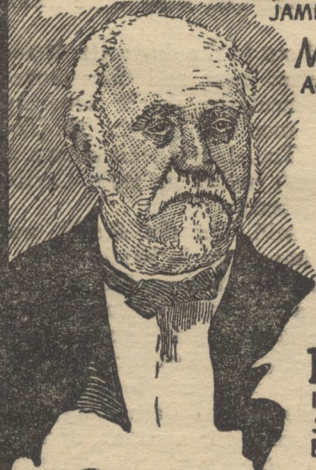


SUTTER and MARSHALL

EARLY IN THE 1800s WERE BORN TWO MEN DESTINED FOR A GREAT DISCOVERY AT A SPOT THEN UNKNOWN, WITH RESULTS BEYOND THEIR WILDEST DREAMS.

ONE, A BANKRUPT SWISS NAMED JOHN SUTTER, CAME TO AMERICA TO RECOUP & IN 1837, MADE THE HAZARDOUS TREK BY WAGON-TRAIN TO TRADE WITH THE MEXICANS AT SANTA FE. THERE HE HEARD OF FERTILE CALIFORNIA, ABOUT WHEN THE OTHER, A CARPENTER NAMED JAMES MARSHALL, WAS SETTLING NEAR THE OHIO.

MEXICAN AUTHORITIES GRANTED HIM 48,000 ACRES.

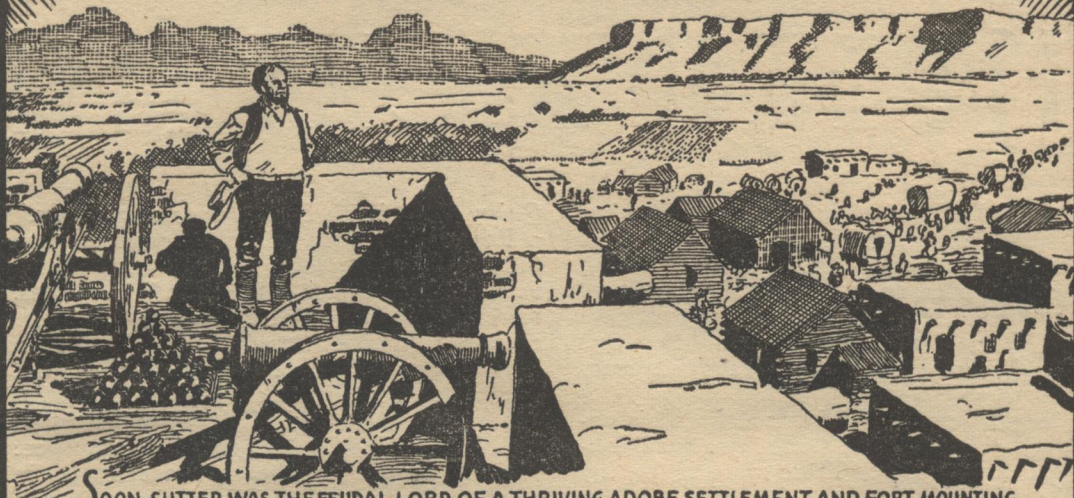


IN '39 SUTTER LANDED WITH 5 ARTISANS, 8 KANAKAS RECRUITED IN THE ISLANDS AND A WHITE BULL-TERRIER, NEAR THE PRESENT SITE OF SACRAMENTO, PACIFIED INDIANS ASSEMBLED TO FIGHT HIM OFF, AND ESTABLISHED HIMSELF.

THE DOG PROVED INVALUABLE IN NOSING OUT MARAUDING INDIANS. IN THE SPRING, RECEIVING WORD 300 COSUMNES PLANNED A RAID, SUTTER AND 8 MEN SCATTERED THE ENCAMPED WAR PARTY IN A SURPRISE DAWN ATTACK.



— OLD WEST —



SOON SUTTER WAS THE FEUDAL LORD OF A THRIVING ADOBE SETTLEMENT AND FORT MOUNTING 15 CANNON, SURROUNDED BY GRAIN FIELDS AND PASTURES, AT THE TERMINUS OF THE NEW CALIFORNIA TRAIL.

JAMES MARSHALL, WHO HAD TRIED TRAPPING IN THE ROCKIES, DRIFTED ON TO OREGON AND DOWN TO SUTTER'S FORT, BECAME HIS PARTNER IN BUILDING A SAWMILL ON THE SOUTH FORK OF AMERICAN RIVER.

ON JAN. 24, 1848, MARSHALL NOTICED SHINY FLAKES ON A ROCK IN THE UNFINISHED MILLRACE & TOOK THEM TO SUTTER WHO, MILDLY IMPRESSED, VERIFIED THE DISCOVERY AS GOLD. IN MARCH A SMALL ITEM ABOUT IT

APPEARED IN THE SAN FRANCISCO PAPER. BY SUMMER THE GOLD RUSH WAS ON!



SUTTER'S LABORERS DESERTED HIM, 49ERS OVERRAN HIS FIELDS, A TECHNICALITY VOIDED HIS TITLE, AND HE MOVED AWAY A RUINED MAN.



BOTH HE AND MARSHALL REFUSED TO JOIN THE GOLD-SEEKERS, AND LIVED OUT THEIR LIVES ON SMALL STATE PENSIONS.

SUTTER'S MILL FROM AN OLD PRINT

THE NINTH ||| NOTCH |||

ROSS DAKO had no name, no home but the California-rigged saddle the seat of his breeches had burnished to a rich mahogany luster, no close friend or ally except the walnut-butted Colt .45 which was always at his hip, packed in an open-toed holster that swung in lethal readiness on a small brass rivet.

The gun was slanted forward from his upper right thigh, the butt turned rearward, convenient to his hand. There were eight tiny notches cut in the butt—a calendar of last days for men who had not been quick enough when they had faced this gun. Ross Dako had no feeling about them. Some of them had asked for it; the others had been given a fair chance. Ross Dako had never shot a man where his galluses crossed. He had never thrown down on a gent without a warning. But he had no feeling about that, either. A man needed some kind of a yardstick to measure himself by.

Ross Dako wasn't his name, legally. Legally, he had no name. Legally, Ross Dako had never been born. He had been raised from a baby in a frontier parlor house. At twelve he had run away. After that, he had done a great many things. An old buffalo hunter named Mike Ross had given him the name of Ross Dako. It had seemed as good as any, since most of his boyhood had been spent in the Dakota Black Hills. The "Dako" was from Dakota. Ross Dako had never considered changing it. What would have been the object?

The sign over the batwinged doorway where Ross Dako halted his sabino said: STAKE ROPE SALOON. R. D. YANCEY & SONS. He lit down here, spanked dust from the shoulders of his gray cotton shirt, then stepped up to the rail and hitched.

A Mexican stood slouched in the shade of the saloon's steep-slanted wooden awning, his liquid brown eyes lethargic under a peaked sombrero, flamboyantly festooned with concha shells. Ross Dako walked over to him, his tall, lean-flanked body riding easily on the balls of his feet.

He said, "Mitch Hanna—know where he might be?"

The Mexican shrugged. "Perhaps the hotel, señor. Perhaps the Buscadero Saloon.

Quien sabe? With Hanna one never knows."

Ross Dako said, "*Muchas gracias,*" and turned, heading down Front towards the Prairie Queen Hotel. The street held saloons, mercantiles, dance halls. Furtive doorways and dim, trash-cluttered alleys flanked it. Front Street in Walapi was no different from Front Street in dozens of other wild, roistering trail towns to which Ross Dako had come, and from which he had gone. Front Street was the same everywhere. Front Street, in any town, was home to Ross Dako—as much as his saddle.

Mitch Hanna wasn't at the Prairie Queen, so Ross Dako meandered on downstreet another block, to the Buscadero. Two bartenders were working the long cherrywood bar; it was five o'clock and the place was already crowded. The bartender on the Front Street side seemed the least busy, and Ross Dako found a hole and pushed into it.

"Mitch Hanna hang out here?"

The bartender wore a black leather flap strapped over one eye. It gave his good eye an expression of peering fixity. He started to say, "Look, mister, I ain't here to—" when something in Ross Dako's pale, nerveless blue eyes stopped him.

Some men can tell, some can't. Ross Dako's mind cupped the thought for an instant, then indifferently let it go.

"Put out a drink then. I got dust in my throat an inch thick."

The bartender moved now with a surprising alacrity. He reached behind the counter and slid a bottle and a glass across the polished bar-top. He said, "Mr. Hanna's in the back office. You want to give me your name?"

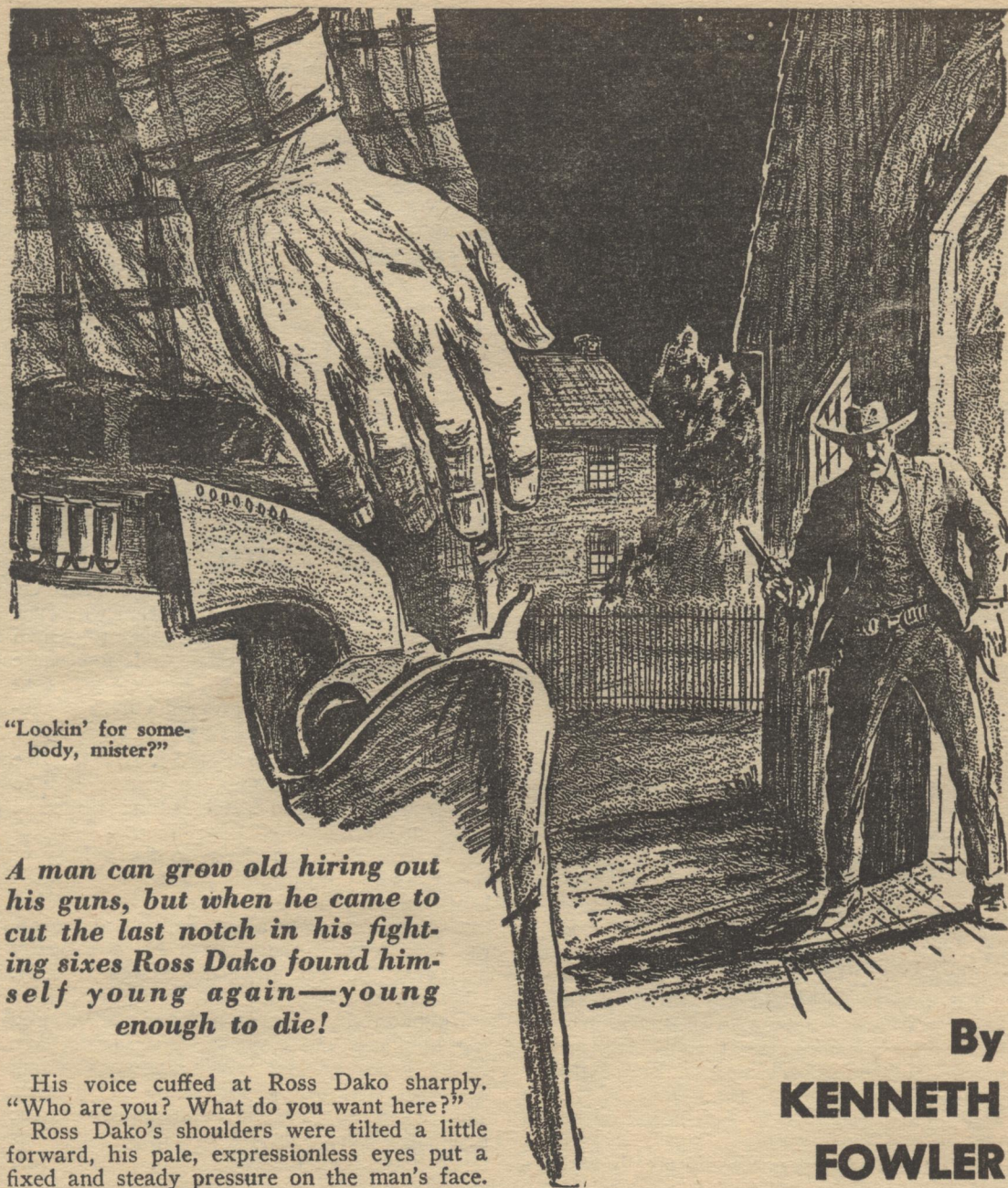
Ross Dako poured the glass full, down the drink neat. He gave the bartender a mild, unblinking glance.

"Good whiskey. No, I'll tell him myself."

"You'd better not tell him I—"

"That's all right."

A DOOR marked, M. HANNA—PRIVATE, was behind the poker and faro layouts at the rear of the saloon. Ross Dako had his hand up to knock when the door swung open suddenly and a man stepped out, an empty cash box cradled under his arm.



"Lookin' for somebody, mister?"

A man can grow old hiring out his guns, but when he came to cut the last notch in his fighting sixes Ross Dako found himself young again—young enough to die!

His voice cuffed at Ross Dako sharply. "Who are you? What do you want here?"

Ross Dako's shoulders were tilted a little forward, his pale, expressionless eyes put a fixed and steady pressure on the man's face.

"Lookin' for Mitch Hanna. Name of Ross Dako."

"I'm Hanna. How do I know you're Dako?"

"You sent a man called Pedro to Custer Junction."

"Pedro?"

"Mex. Fryin' size. Scar on his left cheek shape of a saber. That enough?"

"It'll do. Come inside."

Inside, the walls of the office were decorated with pictures of prize-fighters and show girls in various provocative stages of deshabille. "Sit down." Mitch Hanna nodded to a

straight-backed chair and deposited his own bulk in a cushioned swivel chair that creaked as he put the strain of two hundred pounds in it. He eyed Ross Dako narrowly out of dark, quick eyes.

"Pedro said I wanted to see you, that it?"

"That's it."

"Cigar?" Hanna pushed a box across the flat surface of a desk.

Ross Dako shook his head. "I got makin's."

Hanna lit a cigar, took it out of his mouth and looked at it and blew smoke at the burning core.

By
**KENNETH
FOWLER**

He said, "Well, I can give it to you fast. This town's figuring on a clean-up. Those who're doin' the figuring are putting up their own candidate for sheriff. If he's elected, they'll blow out every red light on Front Street. In my business, we like the color of those lights. We want 'em kept lit."

Ross Dako said nothing. He made his cigarette and massaged his long fingers free of tobacco crumbs after he had put it in his mouth. He scratched a match across his black whipcord pants and above the spurt of flame his eyes were motionless blue slits.

Hanna went on, "I'm the candidate for the town crowd—the big-moneyed people. But it looks to be close—too close for comfort."

"Gettin' that way," murmured Ross Dako, "all over." The lighted cigarette bobbed between his thin lips; his yellow-haired head was cocked back, one eye squinted against the tiny ribbon of smoke spiraling up.

Hanna said, "I understand you'd be a man open to a proposition."

"That," said Ross Dako, "could be."

"Five hundred dollars," said Hanna. "A hundred now, and the rest when the job's done."

"Who is it?"

"Man name of Tom Ames."

For an instant, an infinitesimal flicker touched a light to Ross Dako's hooded eyes, and Hanna said quickly, "You know him?"

"Heard of him."

"He may not be too easy. He's fast with a gun."

Ross Dako finished his cigarette. He rose and stumped it out in the tray on Mitch Hanna's desk. "I'll look over the ground. Let you know tonight."

An impatience tilted up Mitch Hanna's voice. "Why not now? Ames will be in town tonight for a conference at Judge Holbrook's house. Holbrook's backing him. You could—"

He stopped suddenly. Ross Dako's flat gaze was slanted down to the gun holstered at his hip.

"You don't figure you could take him yourself?" Ross Dako asked.

Mitch Hanna's teeth crunched audibly into the cigar. "Hell, yes! I didn't mean he was any professional. But I can't take a chance getting into this picture. That's your job. If it's a question of more money—"

"The money's all right. Let you know tonight."

"Where?"

"Oh, I'll be moseyin' around up near Holbrook's, I reckon. Can't tell exactly."

"Take your hundred now, then," Hanna suggested.

"Tonight'll be all right."

Mitch Hanna's voice dropped flatly. "You're in this from now out, friend. My

crowd can't take chances." He stared at Ross Dako coldly. "We'll pay anything within reason. Just don't try to leave town."

Ross Dako stood. He spoke as if the words had passed him. "Tonight then," he said, and walked out.

Outside, he stopped a cowboy turning from the hitch-rail to enter the saloon.

"Hey, you."

"The name's Hamblin, mister."

"Noticed that Arrow A on your horse, Hamblin. Tom Ames' outfit?"

"I ride for Tom Ames, yes."

"Shirttail outfit?"

"Nope. Pretty big. You lookin' for a job?"

Ross Dako shook his head. He said, "No, I got a job."

HE WALKED on, his thoughts busy crossing old trails, his eyes under the down-slanted brim of his Stetson cast down in a look of total abstraction.

Strange, the way this had happened. Or was it strange? A tumbleweed went wherever the winds of chance sent it. It was the pawn of blind, inscrutable forces. And now these forces had rolled back time. Ten years of time. Ten years that were suddenly and violently compressed into a single yesterday.

Abruptly, the bald irony of it struck home to Ross Dako. Mitch Hanna wanted him to kill Tom Ames. And Mitch Hanna wanted to pay him for it!

He took a vacant chair on the gallery of the Prairie Queen and planted his scuffed boots on the scabby rail. He tipped his hat low against the late afternoon sun and made the back legs of the chair a fulcrum neatly balancing the weight of his elongated body. He smoked.

Doubtless, by now, Tom Ames remembered him only as a vague symbol of the past. Tom Ames probably had never known the full depth of his feeling for Mary Hallenback. Tom Ames was a stolid, unimaginative man; he could not have known how different things might have been for Ross Dako if Mary had said yes, instead of no.

A man forgot, and he didn't forget. Time could assuage the pain, but it could never eradicate the scar which was the visible reminder of the pain. And time could not cut the cords of memory.

In the days when he had known Mary Hallenback he'd been trying to get started with a little three-up outfit of his own, here in this Rincon Basin country. He had been twenty-two, then, and at twenty-two a man imagines he can set the world on fire. Within a year he knew he was beaten, both with D-Spur, the ranch he'd started on a shoestring, and with Mary. In town, where, in those days, Tom Ames ran the mercantile, he had gone in

debt to Ames for more than seven hundred dollars. It still might have worked out if Ames had carried him for just a few more months. But Ames had been courting Mary Hallenback himself. And Ames, an ambitious man and scrupulous up to a point, had shown no scruple when it had seemed a question of winning or losing Mary Hallenback. He had shut off Ross Dako's credit at the mercantile, and that had been the beginning. . . .

The cigarette burned out between Ross Dako's fingers, and with an absent movement, he pulled out the sack of Bull from his shirt pocket and mechanically rolled another. It had been imperceptible at first, Mary's cooling towards him. Imperceptible, too, had been his slow envelopment into moroseness, his increasingly frequent trips to Hank Race's gambling joint in Rincon Junction. Then had come the fight with Wild Jim O'Gara, who was quicker with cards than with a Colt, and he had carved the first notch in his gun. The first; but not the last. He'd had to light a shuck, then, and when he had come back there were two more notches. By then, the bank had foreclosed on D-Spur and he was a saddle bum, a man with a horse, a saddle and a gun. But he went to see Mary for the last time.

She was still working then at the Bon Ton Bazaar in Rincon Junction, and when he had walked in, she had not been pleased to see him. But for a moment he had been aware only of the agreeable picture she had made there behind the counter, scissoring into a bolt of light blue calico that had startlingly seemed to draw its color from her grave eyes. She was not characteristically harsh, but a certain staid gravity had always ruled her, and that day there had been harshness, both in her manner and in her voice.

She had been almost cruelly blunt. She intended to marry Tom Ames. He was selling the mercantile and buying a ranch. He was a steady man, a good man, and some day he would be a force in the community. She was as sure of that as she had always been unsure of him. She had nothing more to say than that.

He should have realized, then, the hopelessness of argument, but he had said. "You know, a man could change, Mary. I've got a little stake again. If you'd take a chance—"

She'd not even let him finish. "You've gone too far in the wrong direction, Ross. You won't change." He remembered the way her hands had looked, one clasped over the other, and squeezed up tight. "Tom helped you once, but what have you ever done to help anybody? What one thing have you ever done that was wholly decent and honorable and unselfish?"

Her glance fell with bitter loathing to the gun cinched to his hip. "We've heard about you here, Ross. Riding with Major Murphy's

gun-bullies in that horrible Lincoln County mess. Buying your bread with blood—selling your guns to the highest bidder!" Fascinatedly, he watched the knuckles of her left hand sharpen into pale peaks. "You're not a homemaker, Ross—you break up homes. You don't build, you destroy. Most men fight for the decent things of life, but you fight for the worst!"

Ross Dako knew, now, that Mary Hallenback had been right about him. He wouldn't have changed, hadn't changed. Only now the rut was deeper under him and it ran in a straight, undeviating line away from all the things for which people like Mary Hallenback and Tom Ames stood—hatred of violence and corruption, a dogged, almost a fanatical zeal for uprightness and respectability. What they didn't understand, could never understand, was the apartness of two worlds of men, and the unbridgeable gulf between them. Why try and change that? There would always be the other side of the tracks. Men like Mitch Hanna would be on one side, men like Tom Ames on the other. Why try to make it any different? People picked their side, was all. And if some preferred Mitch Hanna's, what was the harm of that?

Suddenly the hot ash from the cigarette burned the tips of Ross Dako's fingers and he started awake and flung it over the rail. It was getting towards the shank of the day; he'd have to make up his mind soon. His mind was a dark well now, stirred only faintly by the small pebbles of thought dropping into it. Tom Ames could have his chance. He'd give him an even break to go for his gun. Hell, Ames wasn't the little tin god Mary thought he was. Ames had carried him at the mercantile, sure; but when he'd seen the chance to knock him out of the picture with Mary, he'd put on the screws quick enough. Made no difference about the side of the tracks when the yeast of ambition started working in a man. And now Tom Ames was big enough to run for sheriff. Only a gun sheriff would have Mitch Hanna worried—have Hanna's whole crowd worried about what would happen to their side, if Ames were elected.

A faint blue tone of dusk was settling over the street as Ross Dako rose and went into the hotel. He went into the dining room. A waitress came over to his table, near the window. Ross Dako noted her red mouth, the provocative flirt of her white-aproned skirt. Then he remembered. This was Front Street. The wrong side of the tracks.

AN HOUR later he strolled back to the gallery and sat down again. Front Street was losing its daytime lethargy, was rousing slowly to nocturnal wakefulness.

Somewhere out of the lazy dusk a piano tinkled tinnily. Lights went on in the Bootjack Saloon, across from the hotel. A pair of cowboys came out, unsteady on their feet, and stood lounging under the awning, lighting cigarettes. A big freight wagon rumbled past, churning up a smoky haze of dust, a lighted lantern blinking like a firefly from its rear axle.

A woman's lilting laughter floated out of the dusk, and Ross Dako saw a honkytonk girl stroll past, cuddling up to a grinning, strutting cowboy. *In with a trail drive, Ross Dako thought listlessly. Tomorrow he'll be broke.* The girl's mouth was a scarlet bow across her sallow face as she sailed past, her ostrich-plumed hat jiggling piquantly.

A half block downstreet, a red-wheeled buggy drew up in front of the Eureka Dry Goods and a woman got out and went inside, leaving a little girl on the seat, minding the reins. After a few minutes, the woman came out and started upstreet, towards the hotel. She had on a simple straw bonnet, Ross Dako noticed, and stepped along with a briskly dainty air.

As she drew even with the Bootjack, one of the lounging cowboys called out and lunged towards her drunkenly. He was holding her by an arm as Ross Dako sprang up from his chair and leaped the rail of the gallery. Dust spurted as his boots kicked into the powdery road bed. He reached the cowpuncher and his wiry fingers gathered a fistful of blue wool shirt. He yanked, and the man's head snapped back with a violent jerk.

The woman's face was a starched white in the spray of light from the windows of the Bootjack. She gave Ross Dako a quick, earnest glance and said, "I'm very grateful to you, sir. I should have known better than to shop at this hour of the night."

Then she had turned and was hurrying back towards the buggy before the shock struck—before he realized that Mary Ames had not even recognized him.

With a curious sense of remoteness, he heard another cowboy mumble apologetically, "He's roostered. Thought she was somebody else. No offense, partner."

He said, "No offense," and started slowly

back towards the Prairie Queen. He resumed his seat on the gallery and after a minute saw the red-wheeled buggy start away from the hitching post in front of the Eureka and start downstreet, past the hotel. Two dark, vague silhouettes against the gaudy backdrop of Front Street. Mary Ames. And the little girl huddled up beside her was, no doubt, her daughter.

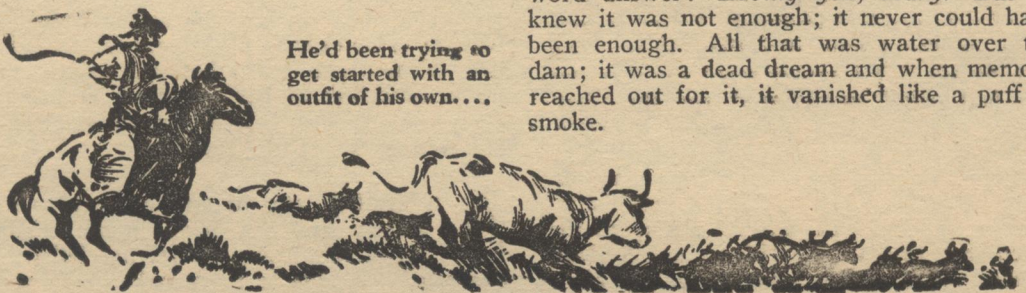
His thought held a flare of anger. *She should have known better than to come here at this hour.* Instantly came an echoing thought: *Why shouldn't a woman be able to walk safely on a public street any time she pleases—even on Front Street.*

He had never consciously thought this way before, and after a time a vague uneasiness stirred in him. The practical side of his mind rescued him. Men like Mitch Hanna, women like the girl who had gone mincing past him, a few minutes ago, had their rights, too. The argument didn't please him. He smoked through three cigarettes, his pale eyes set absently in a brooding stare. What was itching him all of a sudden? As for Mary Ames, why didn't she stay on her own side of the tracks?

He thought of the last time he had seen Mary Ames, ten years ago. She'd been twenty then, a little below the average in height, but with a slim, graceful body that had rounded perfectly into its mold of maturity. Tonight she had looked a little faded, he'd thought, from that single swift glance he'd had of her. Well, time did that to everybody. Time was change, decay. He, too, had changed physically. *You've gone too far in the wrong direction, Ross. You won't change.* No, he wouldn't change. Not in the heart.

Her eyes had been the color of blue sky, in those days; her eyes couldn't have changed. Nor, in ten years, her hair, which had been the indefinable shade of pale desert sand, lustered by desert sunlight. But her heart—towards him, that had changed, a long time ago. Did she ever think about him, now? Could it be that she ever wondered?

You're not a home-maker, Ross—you break up homes. You don't build, you destroy. What one thing have you ever done that was wholly decent and honorable and unselfish? Now, ten years later, he could think of a three-word answer: *Loving you, Mary.* But he knew it was not enough; it never could have been enough. All that was water over the dam; it was a dead dream and when memory reached out for it, it vanished like a puff of smoke.



IT WAS getting late. Almost time for the meeting at Judge Holbrook's. He had asked the waitress about the house, and she had verified what he had already guessed—that it was the dwelling with the ornate cupola at the junction of Front and Main. The house with the high iron fence around it, and the fancy horse-head hitching post out at the curb. Did people like that build fences to shut themselves in, he wondered, or shut others out?

He had just risen when the hand tapped him lightly on the shoulder and he jerked around.

"Dako?"

"Evenin'."

The figure was shadowy in the darkness of the gallery, but Ross Dako caught a fleeting impression of a narrow, thin-lipped face, had a feeling of steady, deliberate eyes coldly calculating him.

"Mitch says don't miss up on that chore tonight. You savvy? It wouldn't be healthy."

"Obliged, mister. I was just goin' out now to take care of it."

Down on the board walk he hitched up his gunbelt and started upstreet, towards Judge Holbrook's. What was it Mary had said? *Most men fight for the decent things of life, but you fight for the worst.*

As he went past the gaudy Silver Palace, he caught a flashing glimpse of a girl in a short spangled skirt, dancing on the bar. Two doorways farther on, a red-cheeked woman sidled up to him. "Doin' anything tonight, handsome?"

He said, "Yep. Got a chore," and hurried on, conscious of a disgust he had never felt before. That girl couldn't have been over eighteen. In a different kind of a place, in a different environment, she could have been like Mary Ames.

A block away, a bunch of cowboys celebrating end-of-trail burst from the doorway of a saloon and vaulted to their saddles. Yipping, they started down the street, exuberantly letting go with their six-guns.

Front Street in Walapi. Front Street in any wild border town. They were all here. A man never knew from what dark alley, from what gaudy falsefront, danger might explode. Front Street. Home. . . .

Ross Dako's thoughts ran back across the years. He might have had D-Spur yet, if it hadn't been for Tom Ames. Those men might have been his riders—if Ames hadn't put the screws on him, when he had. Things might have been different, but for Tom Ames. Different, even, between him and Mary.

Like a metronome softly stroking at the back of his head he kept hearing the words: *Too late, too late, too late.* Ross Dako's lips came tautly together. Well, it wasn't too late

for this. It wasn't too late to whittle a ninth notch in this gun riding at his hip. Even after ten years, it wasn't too late for that.

He was half a block from the private stable adjoining the Holbrook house when he saw the tall figure of a man, outlined faintly in the spread of light from the stable doorway. Men like Holbrook had everything. They got what they wanted, too. Maybe what they deserved, who knew? Maybe, now, Tom Ames would get what he deserved. Who was Ross Dako to say yes or no to that?

He was twenty yards from the stable now, fifteen, ten. His footfalls were steady and even on the boardwalk. His voice went out, sharp and incisive as a bell stroke.

"Lookin' for somebody, mister?"

The figure wheeled, startled. Then Ross Dako recognized the face. He recognized the face as, now, he recognized this town—for what it was worth.

"Dako!"

He recognized the voice, too, recognized the hoarse fright in it, the mounting panic. He could almost feel the guts behind it curling up, locking tightly.

"I'll give you a fair draw, mister," Ross Dako said evenly.

In the spill of light from the doorway he saw the hand, white, flashing down. He saw the sheer blue curve of the gun, arching up, making its beautiful, lethal glitter in the yellow disk of lamplight.

Ross Dako's gun came out of its holster with a gentle swooping movement—a cool, unhurried coordination of hand and eye and body.

The shots almost blended, so that the second seemed like a split-second echo of the first. But the first had been Ross Dako's.

The figure at the doorway crumpled. It became like a dark, motionless pool in the lamp spray.

A FEW minutes later, Ross Dako inconspicuously mingled with the crowd pressing around the dead man.

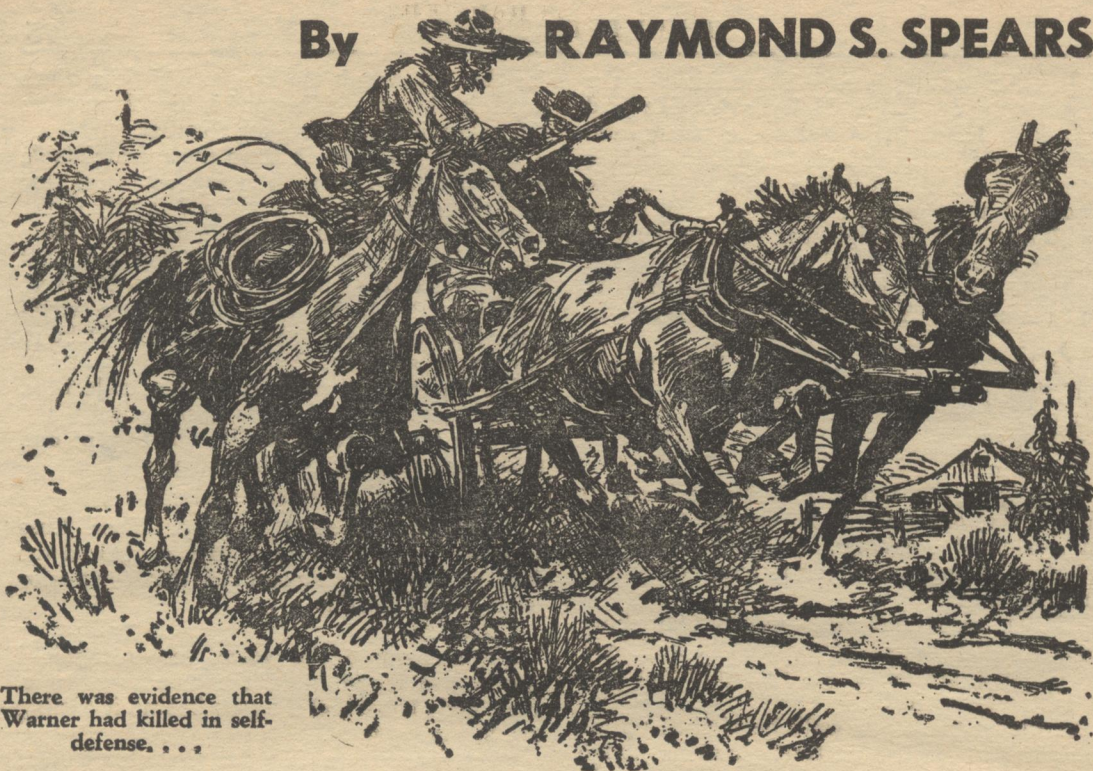
An onlooker next to him blurted hoarsely, "My God, it's Mitch Hanna! Looks like Tom Ames is in now, for sure."

"Godd thing, too," another voice hammered out flatly. "Whoever pulled this off, did a damned decent thing."

As the crowd broke up, finally, Ross Dako fell in with it. He had the feeling of being part of a wave, a wave washing him on towards a new, unknown shore.

In front of the Stake Rope, he unhitched the sabino and mounted. But he didn't take out the jackknife until he was well out of town. Then he cut another notch in the butt of his gun—the ninth.

By **RAYMOND S. SPEARS**



There was evidence that Warner had killed in self-defense. . . .

BADLANDS

Third of Four Parts || BARGAIN

THE brand inspection law ended easy theft and quick returns from raiding famous brand herds. The great combine of rustlers broke up. The leaders turned horse thieves, and robberies of banks, stages, trains increased. Butch Cassidy's head was worth thousands of dollars.

Cassidy and Al Haines took a ranch in the Owl Creek country and Cassidy brought in stolen horses. Their brands were forged or blotted and the animals run over into Idaho for sale.

A cowboy named Hughes recognized Cassidy and hid in a haycock, rifle ready. When Cassidy came riding by, with Haines, the bushwhacker shot the outlaw in the back. Badly wounded, Cassidy stuck to his horse and escaped.

"I got him! I sure got Butch Cassidy," Hughes boasted, "He's daid!"

Several weeks later, Hughes came out of

From the Hole-in-the-Wall the Sundance Kid and Cassidy ranged over history's greatest owlhoot empire — 600,000 square miles — from Utah to the Straits of Magellan!

the door of the ranch where he worked and dipped a pail of water from the spring. As he walked back to the cabin, Cassidy stepped from behind a big wagon.

Cassidy said, perfunctorily, "Hughes, my time has come! Now you die!"

He shot the bushwhacking reward hunter dead and walked, revolver in hand, to where he had ground-tied his horse. His voice had reached those in the ranch house and they looked and saw the tragedy. They told it later,

but not in court; the Owl Creek country minded its own business. Still, the incident disproves the legend that Butch Cassidy "never killed."

The brand inspectors at all the abbatoirs, slaughter houses, feeding pens and railroad terminals ended mixed-brand shipments without proper bills of sales. Inspectors knew innumerable brands, and brand books issued by the states covered thousands of ranch and company insigna. Suspect animal shipments, were held and investigated. Overnight even the business of fencing blotted and forged brands ended. The inspectors were hard to deceive.

Cassidy resumed his boyhood hand at hold-ups. Having purchased the Charles Peterson ranch on Owl creek, in the morning shadow of the Owl Creek Range, he brought in horses and Haines pastured them till they could be run through the Hoback Canyon, Jackson's Hole and over the Trail Creek Pass in the Grand Teton range. Many outlaw bands were on the build. In Utah Flat Nose Curry had left a legacy of desperate lore. The McCarthys, the Murphys, the Hardees, the McKinnies ran their courses. Harry Tracy in Brown's Hole was beginning a career of unrivaled brutality. Bill Cruzan was chased for months after the Big Timber, Montana, train robbery and landed in Deer Lodge pen.

Harvey Logan, Harry Longabaugh and Cassidy rode furtively. In Texas Black Jack Ketcham was raiding with Bill Carver, and Laura Buillon—Carver's sister—was riding with her husband, Buillon, and Ketcham. Ben Kilpatrick, of a good family, was beginning to romp, going bad. Matt Warner rode into the scene and for a time set the pace, having his own band, but drifting into Cassidy's purview.

W. A. Richards, who had been a cowboy with Cassidy, was elected governor, on a "stop range stealing" platform. Cassidy drove away sixty head of Padlock brand horses and hid them in Star Valley, south of the Hoback along the Idaho-Wyoming line, where Matt Warner hid out after robbing banks, stages and trains. Sheriff John Ward of Uintah county sent Undersheriff Bob Calverly after the Padlock horses—and Cassidy.

Spring had come in 1893. Kate Davis, a valley girl went after the mail, and Calverly met her, talked, and she knew Cassidy, who was down the line from the Afton Post Office. Calverly got to the cabin and found Cassidy dozing on a bunk, his gunbelt hanging over a chair. The officer grabbed Cassidy as Cassidy jumped for his gun. With his own gun barrel, Calverly side-swiped the outlaw and put the cuffs on him. The posse followed the girl to Al Hainer, who was caught and tied to a tree, while the posse rode to help their leader.

Kate Davis washed Cassidy's wound and bandaged it. Outlaws brought women many a wound to be dressed. The posse rounded up the Padlock horses, and then rode to Lander, Fremont county seat, where mighty few stock theft cases had been successfully prosecuted, and here Cassidy faced Judge Jesse Knight and a jury chosen with utmost care. The evidence was given, the jury took the case, and almost at once returned a verdict of acquittal for Al Hainer and guilty for Butch Cassidy.

"How come, Al?" Cassidy turned to his partner, unsmiling.

Neither Hainer nor Kate Davis ever had Cassidy's friendship, thereafter. Apparently Hainer had sold out. On July 14, 1894, Cassidy traded his names at the Laramie state penitentiary desk for No. 187. He gave his name as George Parker, his age as twenty-seven years, his occupation as cowboy. The most successful stock thief the West knew was away till 1896, when Gov. W. A. Richards visited his one-time fellow-rider. In the warden's office the governor gave the outlaw his hand.

"Hello, George. What can I do for you?"

"Turn me loose." Cassidy smiled, showing his small, wet teeth.

"Why?"

"I'm nearly out. The state's had its toll," Cassidy answered, "I'd like to have my citizenship back, for I have property in Colorado and my citizenship would make a lot of difference to me."

"Will you go straight, George?" Richards asked, gravely.

"I've gone too far, Governor." Cassidy looked away, "But I'll promise never to operate in Wyoming again."

The word of an outlaw—a half-promise at best. The governor thought it over.

"All right, George," he said, "It's a trade!"

A full pardon was written out on the spot, blotted and handed to the man it freed.

MANY attempts were made to implicate Butch Cassidy with robberies, stock thefts, killings across the Power River Basin and the Red Desert, but Cassidy moved from the Hole-in-the-Wall southward into the enormous Colorado river valley where, even today, there are 35,000 square miles without a highway. The date of the pardon was January 19, 1896. It was mid-winter. Stinging sunshine, driving blizzards, snow tangling the feet—the joys of liberty were Butch Cassidy's.

Cassidy went to Rawlins where he found, in Jack's saloon at the west end of town, the whereabouts of his pals. "They're hellin' around, waiting for you, I expect," Jack told him, "Brown's Hole hides most of them." Cassidy went to the lawless valley of the Green River, and built a cabin of logs in Ladore

Canyon, and held out at the Basset Ranch, where Anne Bassett was a most notable young woman, handsome, vivacious and adventurous. She rode with cattle rustlers and horse thieves, but especially with horse thieves, which is significant. Some men take sheep, some cattle and some horses—and men who have handled horses of the open range turn back to cattle only with reluctance.

Anne played an organ with vigor and sang with gusto. She ran up scores against the law frequently and—"They indicted and tried her in every term of court for years, but, shucks! What jury'd convict such a friendly gal?" Innumerable yarns are told of Anne. Like Cattle Kate Maxwell, she was a range queen, and presently settled down far away, quietly managing a Los Angeles apartment building.

To Brown's Hole came the old Wyoming cattle rustlers—among them Harvey Logan, alias Kid Curry; Harry Longabaugh, the Sundance Kid; the Texas fugitive Black Jack Ketcham; Ben Kilpatrick; Will Carver; Laura Bullion and others. Here were Matt Warner, Harry Tracy, and fugitive remnants of the McCarthy Utah crowd with whom Parker had traveled as a boy—running cattle, and probably in holdups of stages, a train or two and banks.

Many of the wild youngsters had matured and turned square. Even Teton Jackson who gave Jackson's Hole its name had quieted. At intervals the tough riders were cornered, some killed, some going to prison. Cassidy was never rambunctious, never a swash-buckler. He built his Ladore cabin small and lived there alone, and only a few knew its location on "Cassidy's Point." But he needed money and he knew the Wyoming cattle barons and thwarted private preservers would never forgive him, and so he rode the Thieves Trail which reaches from Milk River Basin, cut by the Canadian-United States line, down to Chihuahua, Mexico.

Perhaps his most notable live-stock exploit was riding with Logan, Longabaugh, and two others to the Crow Agency in Montana, rounding up all the Indians' prime horses and driving them down the line to Sidney, Nebraska, and shipping them to Boston car barns. This story is a tradition—apparently unpublished. I heard it in the last rendezvous of the Wild Bunch in South Dakota Bad Lands on a chance visit, when I didn't know my host and fellow patrons were among the West's most famous badmen.

Harry Longabaugh, the Sundance Kid, appears to have gone with the horses to Boston, where he sold them to the street car lines. Then he bought a horse and buggy to drive back to Montana. Somewhere in Massachusetts he overtook a comely young woman with a lunch pail and books, a prim looking

girl, whose blue eyes surveyed the man as she considered his offer of a ride.

"Riding is easier than walking!" Harry said, and to this the girl assented.

Riding beside Longabaugh, she listened to his Western talk, his tales of open, unfenced ranges, of sheriffs, outlaws and lonely fastnesses. He told of feats of raid and escape about the Wild Bunch—and the girl told of teaching dull youngsters in a land where every acre was fenced and convention fed on scandal.

The girl was Etta Place, who became forthwith Mrs. Harry Longabaugh, and drove with her Western longrider out to the Mississippi and thence jumped by train to Rawlins, Wyoming, and learned in Jack's famed saloon that she was wife of one of the Wild Bunch. She exulted. She donned divided skirts—presently overalls—and rode into the wilds on perhaps the wildest, rompingest career of any American woman, an outlaw's loyal and competent wife. She learned to ride, rope and shoot. She sat in with the Wild Bunch councils. She was educated—the "brains of the outlaws."

The loyalty of Butch Cassidy was tried many times by his associates. Cassidy's exploits in bank robbery were several times necessitated by his friends' getting into jail. Thus when Matt Warner and William Wall were mixed up in a mine claim difficulty on Dry Fork, out of Vernal, Utah, and Sheriff John Poe caught and jailed them, Cassidy got in touch with the prisoners.

"I haven't a sou handy, myself," Cassidy said, "and all I have to eat is slow elk, but I'll get Preston for you."

Cassidy contacted Elza Lay and Bob Meeks. They rode to Lincoln county, Wyoming where they hired out as riders for the Emelley ranch. "They were the best cowboys we ever hired!" the Emelleys always declared. The ranch was fifteen miles over the border from Montpelier, Idaho, and the three cowboys rode the region in all directions, getting acquainted with the trails and the lie of the land.

On August 12, 1896, the three abruptly drew their time, and rode away. On the following afternoon, they rode into Montpelier, Idaho, had a drink in a saloon and loafed around. In the quiet of the noon hour, Cassidy and Lay crossed to the bank while Meeks held their horses.

Two men in the entrance to the bank were driven into the building, and Lay herded them, the stenographer and a third man against the wall. Cassidy pulled the money in sight into a jute bag—\$1,000 in gold, \$7,165 all told, according to the outlaw tally later.

"All set!" Cassidy remarked from behind his bandanna which covered his face below his eyes. The two ran to the horses, swung

into the saddles and raced away on blooded Kentucky breeds. Cashier Gray, Teller McIntosh, passersby, the stenographer all ran into the street, giving the alarm.

Within a few minutes Sheriff Davis led a posse into the outlaws' trail of dust. They found three "borrowed" horses—local brand animals, flecked with sweat. The robbers had taken their own animals there and vanished over the Wyoming line.

Cassidy went to attorney Douglas A. Preston in Rock Springs, a great specialist in the legal aspects of open range outlawry. The attorney took the task of defending Matt Warner, William Wall and E. B. Coleman, accused of killing two men, Milton and Staunton.

Matt Warner's horse had also been killed. Although it appeared that Coleman had hired Warner and Wall to kill the two men, the shooting of the horse was circumstantial evidence that Warner had killed them in self-defence. Moreover, it was indicated that the two human victims had jumped a mine claim, and needed killing, claim jumpers being ornery, anyhow. Also, the two dead men had always been friends of Warner, and the whole affair resolved itself into a mine country mistake. The killers were turned loose in due course. Cassidy always stood by his friends!

WITH the money left over Cassidy, Lay and Meeks rode south from Rock Springs to the Bear River bridge, where Old Hat Ward, widow of the crossing keeper on the old Warlins-Meeker Army trail, kept transients, ran a bar, served prompt meals and raised chickens.

Cassidy, seeing the chickens from a distance, tied his horse and still-hunted in range of the birds. He opened fire on them with his scabbard short-gun. He wasted no shots, but clipped the heads off several roosters and fat hens.

The birds scattered and squawked and Old Hat came out of her cabin, excited and yelping, and saw six of her chickens tumbling about, throwing ruby beads of blood in the bright sunshine. When the shooting began, Harvey Logan who was visiting, ducked for cover—he thought it was a posse come raiding. The shrill voice of Old Hat gave Cassidy the talking to and fun he sought. He paid the old girl two \$20 gold pieces for each bird he had decapitated.

"All I wanted was a chicken dinner!" Butch explained, and Old Hat cursed him more fondly.

Harvey Logan came in and the outlaws dressed the birds expertly by hand, saved the gizzards, and Old Hat mixed up a big batch of biscuits and gravy. While she cooked, the longriders took turns tending the bar, spend-

ing the surplus gold and paper of the Montpelier bank robbery and making no change, having a merry time.

Present were Cassidy, Logan, Flatnose George Curry, Longabaugh, Big Swede Johnson, Lonnie Logan, and a score of others—Elza Lay, the renegade "society man" riding with them.

In the lonely fastnesses of Vermillion Cliffs in southern Utah, some two score wastrels established themselves. Among them were Laura Bullion, Etta Longabaugh, perhaps one of the Stanley girls, and the establishment was kept by the Swazeys, a rancher family.

One can find accounts of scores of raids on small banks, stages, ranches, stores, and other victims in the regional accounts. To this day pigeonholes of county clerks and courts and sheriff's offices contain the complaints of victims, John Doe indictments, coroner's jury recommendations. A contemporary summary states (April, 1900):

The Cassidy gang does not make a descent from its mountain stronghold at irregular intervals. It keeps up a constant round of robberies, sometimes on a large scale, but generally on a small scale. The rank and file of the outlaws are not known by the settlers, and they assume the character of prospectors, cowboys, and itinerant mine laborers while they spy out things worth stealing. In the sparsely settled regions of Utah and along the border of southern Idaho and Wyoming the settlers have been so terrorized by the outlaws that they have for some years made regular contributions of a cow, a sheep, a hog or a colt to the Cassidy gang, rather than have their barns and homes burned and their stock driven off.

In 1898, so great had the loss to the outlaws become, that Governors Wells of Utah, Adams of Colorado, Richard of Wyoming, and Steunenburg of Idaho held a conference at Salt Lake, Utah, to find a remedy for the situation. State rewards of \$5,000 were offered for Cassidy's capture dead or alive. At one time, seven reward notices for Cassidy's capture hung on the St. George sheriff's office bulletin board. To quote again:

Meanwhile Cassidy's band stole cattle and horses near Paver Springs, Wyoming, held up two stage coaches at Teton Basin (\$500 loot in each), stole a lot of silver bullion at Amargosa and in December, 1899, made a good haul at the bank at St. George, Utah. These are some specimen robberies positively known to have been committed by Cassidy's men. Undoubtedly dozens more of acts of like nature may be justly attributed to the gang. For instance, the nine unknown men who appeared in northern Arizona, north of Chloride and White Hills in December, 1899,

and said they were cattlemen who were seeking investments in silver mining properties, were surely members of the Butch Cassidy band. Their identity was not suspected until a week later when the Wells-Fargo stage, which was known to be transporting some \$4,100 from the El Paso smelter to the White Hills Mining Company, was held up by four of the alleged cattlemen and the money taken from the treasure box.

Cassidy was too well known to show himself to strangers, or outside of his gang and their hosts. The depredations reached a scale never before or since reached by Western outlaws and until city gangsters obtained automobiles, Cassidy was unequaled as a freebooter.

IN SEPTEMBER, 1899, Jim Meehan, dying of consumption in St. George, Utah, confessed that he was a lay member of the gang, which then numbered about thirty-five captains, with about eighty members throughout Utah, Idaho, Colorado and Wyoming, who served as scouts and lookouts and received shares in raids within their own purviews. There were five subdivisions, known as squads, each with a leader—and the five leaders comprised the notorious Wild Bunch. Sheep and cattlemen reported the loss—in Utah alone—of \$200,000, according to the Utah Cattlemen's Association in that state.

They had five strongholds, two in Coconino county, Arizona, the Robbers' Roost in Utah, the old Hole-in-the-Wall in Wyoming, and Brown's Hole, in Colorado. The Shoshones, the Snake Mountains, the Grand Tetons, the Little Rockies, the Milk River Basin—wherever there was wilderness over more than 600,000 square miles, from Dakota Bad Lands to the plateaus of Nevada, from the springs of Thermopolae in the Continental Divide to Northern Mexico, they were the law's worst problem.

When the five governors of Western mountain states gathered to consider Cassidy and his band in 1898, the activities of the outlaws spread over western Colorado, (50,000 square miles), all of Utah (82,184 sq. m.), half of Idaho (40,000 sq. m.), all of Montana (146,131 sq. m.), north half of Arizona, (60,000 sq. m.), northeast corner of Nevada (30,000 sq. m.), west half of New Mexico (60,000 sq. m.), all of Wyoming (97,548 sq. m.), or, in round numbers 600,000 sq. miles. Only ocean pirates ever equaled this area in their forays. And, later, the Cassidy outlaws ranged from Peru, through Central South America and Brazil, down across the Argentine to the South American continent fastnesses of the Andes mountain slopes in Chubut, and on to the Straits of Magellan, adding nearly a million miles more to their domain.

Cassidy "did no wrong" in Wyoming; his

word to his friend, Governor Richards was good. Personally, he was a lone lobo. He came and went unexpectedly, unforeseeable, dashing whimsically hither and yon.

Castle Gate is a majestic mountain formation in Carbon county, Utah on the Denver & Rio Grande railroad. Cassidy, Elza Lay and Bob Meeks met down in the San Rafael Swell country south of the line and, after spending a few days near Castle Gate, looking it over, they staked out horses, went to a saloon and had a drink and then, on April 21, 1897, met the outbound Salt Lake City train. Paymaster E. L. Carpenter of the Pleasant Valley Coal Company with two guards, Lewis and Phelps, and carrying \$8,000 in cash, left the train and started across the street to the office of the company, large numbers of citizenry standing around, watching the excitement of the train passing, lively stuff in a dull, slow-moving community.

Cassidy slithered up to Carpenter, snatching the treasure handbag. Eliza Lay clipped Phelps smartly beside the head with his revolver barrel, snatching a bag of \$1,000 in gold. Meeks came riding up with the horses. Lewis, a guard, dropped his bag of silver and jumped for cover. Cassidy, handling twenty-five pounds of gold and paper, had trouble mounting the nervous thoroughbred horse. Lay picked up the bag of silver, but had to drop it in the excited confusion, yelping surprise and uncertainties.

"Let's go!" Cassidy shouted and the three straightened out, riding down the street—and hardly a spectator drew his scabbard guns. Tradition jubilantly reports that Cassidy not only returned the horse he had borrowed for the occasion, but gave \$30 for the hire—a good price. Also, he sent \$10 to the Castle Gate saloon to pay for three bottles of Old Black Bird whiskey which he had bought, after losing his pocket money, \$150, gambling while waiting the uncertain arrival of the paymaster.

One of the Swazey ranch boys reported of Cassidy:

He walked straight, with a long, quick step. That's unusual for a rider. They generally grow stiff and wobbly. Their hips get tied somewhat and they hitch along from their knees as if still standing in their stirrups. His legs were sort of bowed but not as much as you'd expect of legs that length.

"I heard you had a close call with the Castle Gate money?" old man Swazey greeted the robber.

"That I did!" Cassidy answered. "I've been on the run. They say Joe Bush was after me. It's cached. If it's ever found it'll be me does it."

Thus Cassidy kept his hand in, so they say.

The bank robbery at Telluride, in 1889, with the McCarthys, had been an adventure. The Castle Gate attack was more than half show-off, to prove that state governors and detectives, cattle associations and reward notices didn't scare him. If the new brand law inspections restored \$127,000 to astonished owners of cattle who hadn't shipped that beef, ruining the rustled cattle fence business, Cassidy wasn't going without money.

THE dreaded, despised, relentless detectives and blood-money hunters began to close in. Harvey Logan was hiding out at the old KaySee ranch in Wyoming when Deputy Sheriff William Deane of Sheriff Al Sproul's Johnson County force sneaked in on the ranch and got the drop on the outlaw.

Flat Nose George Curry and Lonnie Logan had seen the sneak approach, and came up themselves. They shot the deputy dead, and Harvey Logan roped the body and dragged it on a saddle horn hitch out into the brush. News of the Castle Gate holdup inspired the Logans and Curry to raid the Belle Fourche, court seat of Butte county, South Dakota, and rob the bank there. They sent Tom O'Day into town to case the job, and Tom got drunk. While he was asleep in a saloon chair, the robbers came in anyhow and, on June 28, 1897, performed a major robbery. The shooting and yelling awakened Tom and he ran into the street, shooting, too. He was caught, and when asked how he got the \$392 on him, he said he'd have to ask his lawyer to find out.

A posse pursued the raiders, Harvey Logan was hit in the wrist, acquiring a new scar among many old ones. O'Day was acquitted when his lawyer proved that, far from being an outlaw, he had tried to shoot or capture them, which is still a standing joke among the old-timers. The Logans were caught, but presently escaped and Cassidy heard that the government was sending \$200,000 in gold to pay off Idaho Indians for land, opened to settlement. He spread the word and it came to Harry Scott, a deputy marshal, that the outlaws were about to ride again. Cassidy came to Reno, Nevada, with Harvey Logan. They circled forth, picked up Harry Longabaugh, Ben Kilpatrick and Bill Carver in the Snake River county.

Harry Scott, a bold, handsome member of a refugee Portugese family, reputed brother of Death Valley Scotty, lured by the \$30,000 reward on Cassidy's head, learned that the outlaw would be at a certain railway station above Pocatello on a certain date. Accordingly, the deputy arrived there in the wilds. At a lunch room he ate lightly of coffee and apple pie.

The waiter-cook leaned over the counter and said, "Look't the station platform!"

"I looked over my shoulder," Harry told

me, "Sure enough there was a lithe, raw-boned man with white hair and restless disposition, watching the scenery. I paid and sauntered over. 'Howdy!' I greeted, 'Reckon you're Butch!'"

"If its anything to you!" Butch said, showing small white teeth in a grin.

"Sure. I've a paper you're interested in!" I reached my left hand into my pocket, and held my gun-butt handy. Butch took the paper, which was a warrant for his arrest—one of many duplicates. He read every word, and kept tapping the plank platform with his boot heel, sure nervous.

"All of a sudden a shadow fell on Butch from behind me. Others fell around me, men's shadows. I never knowed so well what a big mistake I'd made, seeing those shadows—big, burly Harry Longabaugh, dark and small Kid Curry, alias Harvey Logan, Ben Kilpatrick, big as I am, and handsome, too. Butch wasn't so fast on the draw. I could've beat him. But there I was plumb surrounded by the Wild Bunch five.

"Well, course, I shrank up, right much! Cassidy folded the warrant back carefully, nodding. He handed it back to me.

"Sure, Harry, very interesting!" Butch said, and I took it like a little man. I pulled my coat away back, open, so's he could see I didn't have a shoulder scabbard under it, and I put that warrant back into my pocket. Then I turned and headed back to my horse at the lunch tie-rail. I just kept going, slipping the tie and riding, right down the middle of that gawd-awful long, dusty street, kicking up the dust in yellow clouds. No, sir, they didn't shoot. They just laughed. But, of course, I'd spoiled their whack at that Indian gold shipment. You know, damn me, I needed killing—I never felt such cold shadows as those that fell on and around me there in the high Idaho sunshine!"

A cowboy riding night herd was lying down in the sage brush of a Montana pasture. The night was quiet, the starlight mysterious, the coyote calls far-carrying. Presently, far away, the cowboy heard horses running, coming for devil's orders—hell-bent! Four or five men came crowding down the long grade. Opposite the cowboy they all stopped, and he saw them from his brush, silhouetted against the pale alkali. They emptied pockets and bags into a blanket, the tinkle of metal clear in the night. They dug a hole, threw in a bundle, covered it, brushed the place over and whipped away.

The jug-head rider pondered, for something damned funny was going on. Presently he cooked breakfast by his waterhole and then saw, up the line, dust rolling up. Seven men, Old Sheriff Adams leading, were pounding down the trail of the midnight riders—a posse

(Continued on page 128)

MANHUNT

— By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS —

KEEPING his back turned, he rattled the shaving brush in the mug and thought about the man waiting in the chair to be shaved and about his wife, Jennie, and about his crooked hand. The hand was aching now, like a sore tooth, reminding him of how it had been hurt, rousing again the old but terrible anger in him. In order to keep himself under control, he had to think again and again of Jennie.

The man in the chair had a rough beard and his clothes showed signs of long wear, like he had been much on the move, but he had tied his horse in front of the barber shop and had entered with the careless indifference of a man who feels himself safe. Jim Northy had seen him the instant he had stopped his horse in front and had turned his head so the man would not see him. The man had slouched directly to the empty barber chair in the rear and had sat down in it without looking at the barber, grunting, "Shave and a haircut."

Now he was stretched at ease and his eyes were shut and Jim Northy was stirring lather in the mug and trying to make up his mind.

"Dammit, hurry up!" The man spoke without opening his eyes. "I ain't got all day."

"Right away," Jim Northy answered. He rattled the brush vigorously in the mug and tried not to look at the posters of wanted men tacked on the opposite wall. Almost every day the sheriff brought in a new dodger and tacked it on the wall.

Inwardly Northy was aware of a tremendous feeling of pressure, but he knew he had to make up his mind without further delay. He began to apply the lather, working it into the stiff beard, and by the time he had finished stropping the razor, he had decided on what he was going to do, for the sake of Jennie if for no other reason.

"Are you sure you want a shave?" he said.

At the sound of the voice, the man in the chair opened his eyes quickly, shaking off fatigue like a dog shaking off water. They were washed out blue in color, with little flecks of yellow in them. The flecks of yellow seemed to grow larger as startled recognition showed in them.

"You—huh?"

Under the cloth, a hand moved, then stopped and seemed to freeze as the washed out eyes came to focus on the edge of the razor poised

and held ready two inches above his throat.

"Me," Jim Northy nodded. He held the razor firmly in his crooked right hand. With his left hand he worked his fingers through the beard, softening the whiskers and at the same time tightening the skin across the throat.

"Uh!" the man grunted, an animal sound of shock and tremendous pressure. Beneath his fingers, Jim Northy felt the throat jerk. The yellow flecks in the eyes were growing larger and the eyes themselves were fixed with terrible intensity on the edge of the razor, held so firmly and so cunningly in that crooked hand above his face.

Jim Northy said mildly, "Before you can even touch your gun, I'll have your throat cut from ear to ear." He spoke very softly, keeping his voice below the hum of conversation in the two-man barber shop. His chair was at the back end of the shop and was separated from the front end by a big wood-burning stove, which kept the waiting customers from noticing what he was doing. "Just lay easy, Al." He rubbed lather into the beard.

The eyes relaxed into cunning. "I—I thought—"

"You thought I was dead?" Jim Northy said. "You thought I was dead and buried in West Texas, these past eight years? You didn't expect to run into me in a barber shop in Nevada? A Ranger turned barber! A laugh, ain't it?"

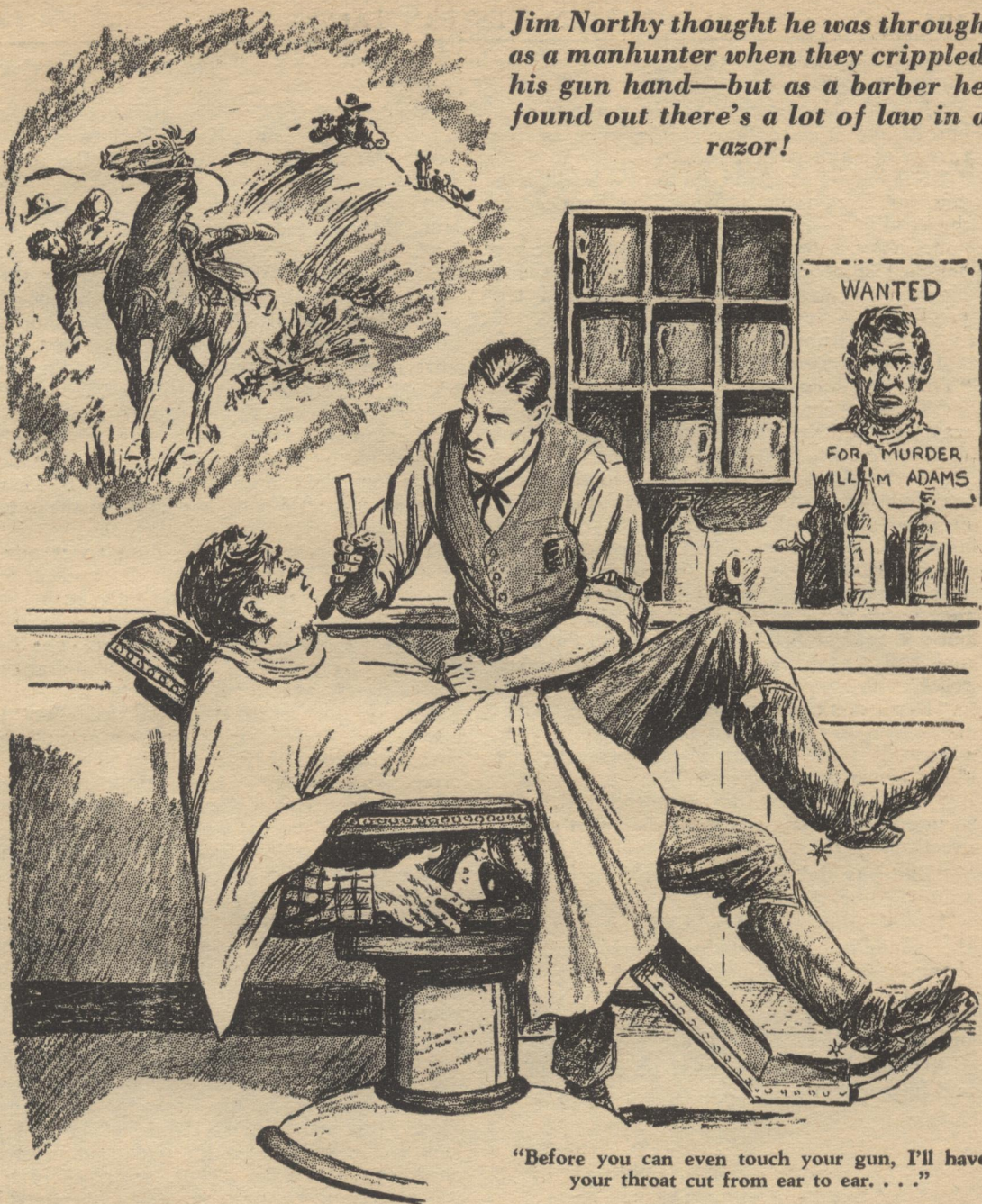
Al Berker didn't seem to find any reason to laugh. His eyes were hot with speculation. "What—what do you want?" he whispered.

JIM NORTHY thought about that. He had been thinking about it for a long time.

"Why, nothing," he said slowly. "If I had met you seven or eight years ago, I would have killed you, because you gave me this." He held up his crooked hand so Al Berker could see it clearly. "You ruined my gun hand, Al, and made me resign from the Rangers, because a Ranger who can't hold a gun ain't any good at all. You forced me out of the job I liked and you made a barber out of me. But I've learned to be a darned good barber, Al, and if you ask me what I want, I don't want anything, now."

"Jennie?" Al Berker whispered, as if grasping for an incomprehensible straw, but

Jim Northy thought he was through as a manhunter when they crippled his gun hand—but as a barber he found out there's a lot of law in a razor!



"Before you can even touch your gun, I'll have your throat cut from ear to ear. . . ."

ready to put his cunning to it. "She went on and married you, anyhow! She married you in spite of—"

Jim Northy nodded. "Uh-huh. And you're her brother."

"She married a damned Ranger!" Al Berker gasped.

"When she married me, I had quit being a Ranger and had become a barber," Northy explained. "You tried hard enough to keep her from marrying me, didn't you? You fig-

gered she couldn't marry a corpse!" He heard the rasp come into his voice and he felt the terrible waves of anger begin to move through him again. Memory rose in him and light glinted from the blade of the razor.

Fear flickered in Berker's eyes. "Jennie—wouldn't like it, was you to cut her brother's throat!" A whining note had crept into his voice.

"You wouldn't be hiding behind a woman's skirts, would you, Al?"

"She—she wouldn't like it."

"She knows what you are."

"But—" Desperation was in Berker's eyes but he didn't dare move. The edge of the razor held him powerless.

"She knows what you did to me. She knows you shot from ambush and left me for dead in the road."

"Northy, I swear—" The man in the chair clutched another straw. "That was Clem, Northy. It wasn't me. It was Clem, I tell you."

"Do you want a shave?" Jim Northy said.

The desperation grew in Al Berker's eyes. "You—you'll cut my throat!"

"That's a chance you've got to take. If it was your brother Clem who shot me, you got nothing to fear. Just make up your mind, Al."

Jim Northy watched the man in the chair make up his mind, saw him reach some sort of decision. Berker didn't relax but he permitted himself to be shaved. Jim Northy knew that the other was watching him with a fervid, fearful gaze as he went about his task. He took great pains not to inflict the tiniest nick, but not until he had laid his razor on the shelf and had washed off the lather, did Berker relax.

"I still don't understand it," he said, when the shave was finished. "If I'd been in your place, I'd a cut my throat if it was the last thing I ever done on earth."

"You and me are different men, Al." He swung up the chair so that Berker was sitting erect.

"But why did you keep on asking me if I wanted to be shaved?"

Jim Northy pointed with his chin toward the handbills tacked on the opposite wall. "I thought you was taking a big risk in getting shaved," he said. "I just wanted to be sure you knew what you were doing. The third one from the left," he ended.

Al Berker's eyes fastened on the handbill and he froze in the chair.

WANTED
for
MURDER AND ROBBERY
WILLIAM ADAMS

Although the handbill gave the name of William Adams as the wanted man, the smooth, unshaved face that looked out from the picture was the face of the man in the barber chair.

"YOU got to get me out of here," Al Berker said. He didn't pull the gun but his hand was very near it and his face showed that he would draw it at the slightest show of resistance. "I didn't know that damned handbill was out on me. You got

to get me out of here. The back door. Where is it?"

Northy, recognizing the growing threat of the gun, was silent. He nodded toward the door. Berker started toward it. "You forgot to pay me," Jim Northy whispered.

"Try and collect it!" Berker snarled. He went through the door, closed it quickly behind him.

Northy gazed after him for a moment, then slowly took a silver dollar out of his pocket and moved toward the front of the shop to put it in the cash drawer, just like he would have done if he had collected it from the customer. His hand was on the drawer of the money till when the guns started.

The sound of voices in the barber shop, the snick of the scissors, went into abrupt silence at the sound of the guns. "Holy hell!" somebody gasped. "What's happened in the sheriff's office?"

The guns roared on, the thunderous notes of the sheriff's old .44 Colt interposed between and overriding the snarling echoes of a smaller gun, a gun that could be carried under the clothes and out of sight. The big gun roared one final shot, like a period at the end of a sentence, then was silent.

Outside on the street of the little Nevada town people were already running around the corner toward the front door of the sheriff's office. Jim Northy did not run. He walked very slowly through the back door—the door Al Berker had taken—and into the back room of the sheriff's office. From there, he went the only way he could go, along the hall toward the front door that opened on the side street.

A dead man was lying in the hall. Northy looked down at him, then looked up into the astonished but grimly alert eyes of the old sheriff. "That son-of-a-gun came through your back door and into my office! Knew him the second I saw him."

"The devil!" Jim Northy said. He looked again at the dead man on the floor, a surprised whistle forming on his lips. "Why, I just shaved this man! After I finished, he took a look at the dodgers on the wall, and insisted on going out the back door. I thought there was something wrong from the way he acted."

"There was plenty wrong," the sheriff said. "I just posted that dodger on him yestreday. Oughta keep your eyes open, Northy."

"William Adams!" Jim Northy said. "I remember it now." By this time, people were pushing through the front door and the sheriff's office was becoming crowded. He didn't attempt to hold his place but allowed himself to be shoved aside. *Adams*, he thought. *Well, that's as good a name as any to die by, and better than some.* He thought of Jennie. The death of somebody named William Adams would not make her unhappy.

HUNGER RANGE

"What will it be, Jorgensen?" he heard Fortney asking. . . .



By
**PHILIP
KETCHUM**

I
Nothing for Christmas on that god-forsaken range was more than Chris Jorgensen dared to hope for —so he kept his sixes oiled!

THE fifteenth of December was Chris Jorgensen's wedding anniversary. On that day he and Thyra would have been married eleven years. He had always remembered the occasion with some kind of gift and this anniversary, in spite of the hard winter they faced, was to be no exception.

He had left his homestead on Easter Creek before sunup and early in the afternoon in Waggoner he stopped in at Carol Buford's. The dress he had ordered was ready. It was

high-waisted. It had lace at the collar and cuffs and long, flowing lines. Carol Buford was very proud of the dress.

"It's perfect for Thyra," she told him. It's—well, stylish—but your wife has the figure for it. She'll love it, Mr. Jorgensen."

Chris Jorgensen paid the modest sum Carol Buford named and watched critically while she folded and wrapped the dress. "Don't worry about the wrinkles," she smiled. "They'll hang out."

Jorgensen chuckled. He thanked her and, holding the package carefully, stepped outside. The weather was mild, almost warm. The four inches of snow which had fallen several days before had almost disappeared, leaving the street soggy with mud. Chris Jorgensen picked his way across to Herm Schwab's store. His grocery order was sacked. Herm carried it out to the porch and tied it across his horse, back of the saddle. It wasn't a large order but these groceries and the dress had taken almost every cent Jorgensen had.

"How are you folks making it up there on Easter Creek?" Herm asked.

"We're getting along," Jorgensen answered.

"Too bad about the flood," said Herm Schwab.

Chris Jorgensen shrugged his shoulders. The flood which had washed out his crops and the crops of the other five families who were homesteading on Easter Creek had been no ordinary flood. Reb Andrews, the cattleman on whose range they were homesteading, had deliberately, opened the flood gates of the creek dam.

"Had any trouble with Reb Andrews, lately?" Herm inquired.

"Not lately," said Jorgensen, scowling.

"Andrews is a stubborn man," said the storekeeper. "But he has his good points and they run deep. After a while he'll get used to the notion of homesteaders on Easter Creek. When he does, he'll make a good neighbor."

Jorgensen wondered if any of them could stick it out long enough to discover the neighborly side of Red Andrews. The other homesteaders were no better off than he was. Whether they could last through the winter was problematical. How they could get a crop in by spring, none of them knew.

"One sure way to get to Reb Andrews," Herm Schwab suggested, "is to talk to him about his Herefords. Have you ever seen his prize herd?"

"Never," said Chris Jorgensen. "but we saw a herd we didn't want to see, a herd which his men stampeded across our fields."

The storekeeper scowled. He shook his head. He said, "Hang on, Jorgensen. Andrews isn't half as bad as you think."

Chris Jorgensen climbed into the saddle.

He held the package containing Thyra's dress under his arm. "We'll hang on," he said bleakly, and started up the street.

The north road forked after a dozen miles, the west branch angling toward Easter Creek and the Indian Hills ranches. Jorgensen was well along this branch road when he saw four approaching horsemen. A frown crossed his face. He was a homesteader and alone. The four approaching riders were cattlemen. He was acutely aware of his disadvantage.

As the men drew closer Jorgensen recognized one as Reb Andrews. The frown settled deeper into his face. He pulled aside from the road and would have passed the men with only a curt nod and a "hello," if Andrews hadn't reined up and called him by name. He stopped, then. There was nothing else to do. He looked Andrews in the eye with a boldness he didn't feel.

"How many of you are still on Easter Creek?" Andrews asked bluntly. "How many are left?"

"All of us," Jorgensen answered. "Six families, Andrews."

"What'll you live on through the winter?"

Jorgensen shrugged his shoulders. "We'll get by."

There was a dry, humorless grin on Reb Andrews' face. He was a short man, stocky, well past fifty. He had a tight, brown skin. His eyes, small and hard, were set deep in his face.

"So you'll get by, huh?" he repeated. "What does it take to discourage you fellows?"

Jorgensen heard the sudden, sharp explosion of a gun. He felt the package under his arm jerk as a bullet ripped through it. His horse reared away but he quickly tightened up on the reins. He saw one of the men with Andrews holding a gun. There was a grin on the man's face.

"Sorry, boss," he heard the man saying, "My gun went off accidental."

The others laughed. Chris Jorgensen looked at his package. He didn't have to open it to know how completely the bullet had ruined Thyra's dress. He stared at Andrews and then at the man who had fired the shot. A hopeless and futile anger brought its touch of color to his face. His hands weren't very steady. He moistened his lips. He wanted to drive his horse against the man who had fired the shot, pull him from the saddle and take a physical satisfaction for the damage the man had caused, but a gnawing core of fear held him motionless.

"Put up your gun, Tod," Andrews was saying, "We'll give 'em a few weeks to starve before we get rough."

Chris Jorgensen shook his head. "We're not moving out," he said flatly.

Reb Andrews leaned toward him. "Get out, Jorgensen," he ordered, and the drive of the man's impatience was in his voice. "Get out while you've still got something left."

Jorgensen made no answer. He sat motionless in his saddle, a tall man with sagging shoulders, but with a square, stubborn jaw and thin, hard features. He said not a word as the men rode on. After a time he continued toward the Easter Creek settlement but he rode slowly and with no spirit.

THYRA spread the dress on the table. She looked up at Chris Jorgensen and her eyes were shining. "It's beautiful, Chris," she said slowly, and there was a breathless quality to her voice. "It's the most beautiful dress I ever had."

"It's ruined," said Chris, staring at the rents made by the bullet.

Thyra shook her head. "I can mend it. I can mend it so that you can never tell where it was torn. Let me try it on."

Chris Jorgensen crossed to the window. He stared moodily across the fields. They were still scarred by the flood. He had had a good crop, great plans for next year. Now he had nothing but this land, his cabin, his tools, a horse and enough food, maybe, for another month. The only near-by winter jobs were on cattle ranches and cattlemen weren't hiring homesteaders.

"Look Chris," Thyra called. "How do you like it?"

Jorgensen turned to face his wife. She was slender, still girlish. She did have a figure for the dress. She was smiling. Jorgensen realized, suddenly, that she was more attractive than when he had married her. He crossed over to where she was standing and took her in his arms, holding her with a fierce possessiveness which squeezed the breath from her body.

"Hey," Thyra whispered in his ear. "Take is easy, please. We can't afford any broken bones."

Jorgensen laughed. He stepped back and looked at her in frank admiration.

"Joe Fortney was here to see you yesterday," Thyra mentioned.

"Joe Fortney?" Jorgensen repeated. "What did he want?"

"He didn't say. He wants you to ride over and see him."

Joe Fortney was one of the Indian Hills cattlemen. This might mean a job. Jorgensen straightened. A job through the winter would tide them over and give them a new start in the spring. Even a short job would help. A grin came to his face and stayed there.

"We're going to make it, Thyra," he said suddenly. "We're going to make it."

"Of course we are," Thyra nodded. "Were there ever any doubts in your mind?"

Joe Fortney's ranch was at the north fringe of the Indian Hills toward the Toltec mountains. It was a good half day's ride from the settlement on Easter Creek. Jorgensen left early the next morning. He made it to the ranch house by noon. Joe Fortney wasn't there but Mrs. Fortney, a tired looking middle-aged woman directed him to what she called the low meadow where he found Joe Fortney and Ed Hupp.

Fortney was a tall, gaunt man with thin, gray hair and a tight-skinned bony face. Jorgensen didn't know him very well.

"Sorry I missed you the other day," Fortney said when he came up. "Too bad you had this long ride."

Jorgensen shrugged. "I'm not very busy right now. In fact I could handle a job."

"That's what I had in mind," Fortney nodded. "Did you ever work on a cattle drive?"

"Not exactly," Jorgensen admitted, "but I know cattle. I can handle a rope."

Fortney rubbed his jaw. He dug a sack of tobacco and cigarette papers from the pocket of his shirt. He started rolling a smoke. Ed Hupp lolled in his saddle. Hupp was younger than Fortney. He had sharp, almost ugly features. His skin was deeply tanned.

"Do you reckon there are a couple more homesteaders who could get away for two week's work?" Fortney asked.

Jorgensen nodded. "More if you need them."

"Three will be enough," Fortney answered. "I've sold some cattle to a man in Wind River valley on the other side of the hills. He's in a hurry for delivery. I'd like to start the drive tomorrow morning, early. Reckon that would do?"

Again Jorgensen nodded.

"A month's wages to each of you for the drive," Fortney offered. "It's going to be day and night work to push the herd through the hills before another snow hits us. You'll earn the money. Ed Hupp will go with you. He knows the way. Can I count on you and two more men?"

"We'll be here," Jorgensen promised.

"Make it Spring Crossing at sunup tomorrow."

"Spring Crossing," Jorgensen agreed.

ON HIS way back to the settlement Jorgensen decided to ask Sam Price and Fred Currier to ride with him. He stopped at Currier's first and Currier went with him to see Sam Price. It was agreed to leave for Spring Crossing at midnight.

Thyra made him sleep until just before time to go. She had hot coffee on the stove for him

when she woke him up. She had a lunch packed.

"This means Christmas for us, anyhow," Jorgensen said as he drank his coffee. "Maybe there will be more jobs after this one."

He felt pretty good about the days ahead as he rode toward Spring Crossing with Sam Price and Fred Currier. This was the first break. There would be more. The land on which he and the other homesteaders had filed didn't actually belong to Reb Andrews, although Andrews had counted it a part of his range. In time, Andrews would have to accept them. There was nothing else he could do. In another year there would be more homesteaders on Easter Creek. In two years the homesteaders would outnumber the cattlemen. There was good farm land here. It could be fenced. This was no longer only a cattle country. Andrews, just as other cattlemen, would have to adjust to a new order.

"What do you know about this man Fortney?" Currier asked suddenly.

"Not much," Jorgensen admitted. "Why?"

Currier shrugged his shoulders. "I just wondered. After all, a job's a job."

"Andrews won't like it," Sam Price mentioned, "but to hell with Andrews."

Jorgensen pulled his coat tighter against the cold air of the early morning. He lifted his horse to a trot. Just ahead was Spring Crossing. The sun would soon be up.

Joe Fortney was waiting for them, huddled over a fire. Jorgensen introduced the two men he had brought with him and Fortney nodded briefly. "The herd's a couple miles west," he mentioned. "Hupp's with them. You'll head up Carver Creek a ways and then as straight through the hills as possible. I want 'em pushed hard. If you can get 'em to Wind River Valley in three or four days you've just made your money that much faster. Hupp will pay off when the cattle are delivered."

Jorgensen nodded. He and Currier and Sam Price had dismounted and were warming their hands over the fire.

"Let's go," Fortney growled. "Hupp's anxious to get started."

He kicked out the fire as he said that and turned to his horse. Jorgensen climbed back into the saddle. He could have used a little more of the warmth of the fire. His fingers were almost too stiff to hold the reins.

Fortney led them west and, beyond the next hill, pulled up. "There they are," he said, pointing, "Think you can handle them?"

Jorgensen stared at the herd in the narrow valley. He glanced at Fortney, aware of the man's sharp, watchful look. He turned again to stare at the herd. It numbered twenty-five or thirty and it was no mere range herd. The cattle were white-faced, with a red body color and solid white markings on the legs and belly.

They were heavier than the average range stock.

"Herefords," Jorgensen said under his breath. "Reb Andrews' Herefords."

"Sure," Fortney nodded. I bought 'em a week ago, then sold 'em to this fellow over in Wind River valley."

Jorgensen stared at the man. There was a tight, humorless smile on Fortney's lips. His eyes had narrowed. There was a tension in his body which he couldn't hide. He was lying. Jorgensen was positive of that. Andrews hadn't sold him these cattle. The herd had been stolen.

"Well, Jorgensen?" Fortney asked dryly.

Chris Jorgensen shook his head. He said, "Count me out, Fortney. I don't need the kind of job you've offered."

"What's the matter with it?"

"I just don't want it."

"Why not, Jorgensen? What do you owe Reb Andrews? Who's been trying to drive you away from Easter Creek? Who opened Easter Creek Dam and ruined your crops?"

Chris Jorgensen glanced at Sam Price and Fred Currier. Price was nodding as though a deal like this and a chance to get even with Andrews appealed to him. Currier, however, didn't look pleased. He was biting his lips.

"You'll not run into any trouble," Fortney promised. "The trail made by that herd has been pretty well blotted. All you've got to do is push 'em through the hills. It's easy money for the three of you and a chance to hit back at Andrews at the same time."

Again Jorgensen shook his head. "It's no deal, Fortney."

"It sure is."

There was a harsh, grating note in Fortney's voice. His hand dropped back and rested on his gun. He drew it and stared across it at Chris Jorgensen.

"I hired you to drive some cattle through the hills," he said deliberately. "You'll keep your bargain or maybe you'll get hurt. It wouldn't be hard to convince Reb Andrews that his herd had been rustled by homesteaders. It's about what he would expect of you."

Jorgensen stared at the gun in Fortney's hand. He wondered if Fortney would really use it. Another look into the man's tight and ugly face convinced him that he would.

The sun had come up over the eastern horizon but there was as yet no warmth in it. Chris Jorgensen drew in a long, slow breath. The arguments were all against him. He owed Reb Andrews no consideration. He needed the money Fortney would pay. If he refused to help drive these cattle the blame for stealing them could easily be laid to the homesteaders. Fortney's gun and the man's grim need for help was a final trump card before which he had no defense. But he would drive no stolen

herd. That was clear in his mind. He wouldn't back down to Fortney any sooner than he would yield to Andrews. He was his own man. Any future security had to be built on that basis.

"What will it be, Jorgensen?" he heard Fortney asking. "Do you drive that herd?"

Jorgensen sat his horse, facing the cattleman. He shook his head. "I told you to count me out," he said sharply.

As he spoke he jerked up on the reins and drove his heels at the horse's flanks. The animal reared, lunged forward. Jorgensen heard the roar of Fortney's gun, the shrill scream of his horse as the bullet tore into its shoulder. He reached out toward Fortney as his horse came down, slamming the man's gun aside and wrapping his other arm around the man's neck. His feet were out of the stirrups and he threw his weight against Fortney as the horse twisted away. They tumbled heavily to the ground.

This fall drove all the air from Jorgensen's lungs. A rock-like fist slammed against the side of his head, and then smashed at him again. His arms wrapped around the man and pulled him down. He could seem to get no air into his lungs. He tried to squirm out from under Fortney's body and suddenly it was easy. Suddenly all the fight went out of the cattleman and Jorgensen rolled him away and sat up. Price was standing over them. Price was holding Joe Fortney's gun.

"I hope I broke his head open," Price said grimly. "He tried to kill you, Chris. I should have shot him."

Jorgensen got unsteadily to his feet. He felt groggy. The side of his face was swollen. He gulped in deep breaths of air. Fred Currier was kneeling at Fortney's side. A little distance away Jorgensen's horse was down. It was threshing from side to side.

"Give me the gun," Jorgensen said bluntly.

He crossed over to where his horse was lying. He fired the necessary shot and then stood looking down at the still quivering body of the gray which had been both a work and a saddle horse. A horse could be replaced but to break a saddle horse to farm work wasn't easy.

When he turned back, Sam Price and Fred Currier were staring into the valley toward the herd.

"Ed Hupp started this way," Currier said, "but I reckon he decided to play it safe. He turned back."

Jorgensen glanced into the valley, then looked at Fortney who was beginning to stir.

"He's all right," Currier said. "He's got a head like a rock. What do we do, Chris?"

"Turn back," Chris said bleakly.

"What about Andrews' Herefords?"

"Let Fortney worry about them. Let And-

rews worry. We're going home. I'll borrow Fortney's horse. Maybe I'll keep it. He owes me one."

"I'll switch saddles," Price offered.

Chris Jorgensen nodded. He touched the swelling on the side of his face. Here was the end of the job which had been going to mean so much to him Thyra and to their hopes of the future. The taste of this experience was bitter in his mouth.

DAN HOBART, the Antelope valley sheriff stopped by at Easter Creek the day before Christmas. He talked to Sam Price and Fred Currier and then to Chris Jorgensen.

"You're lucky you backed out of that deal with Fortney," Hobart stated. "Maybe he thought he had covered his trail but Andrews' crowd hit Spring Crossing an hour after you left there. They say Fortney put up a scrap. He didn't last very long."

This seemed to call for no particular comment. Jorgensen shrugged his shoulders.

"You're in the clear," said the sheriff. "Ed Hupp spilled the whole story. I thought you'd like to know."

"Sure," Jorgensen nodded. "Thanks a lot."

"Maybe Andrews will change his mind about you fellows now," said the sheriff.

He sounded doubtful and Chris Jorgensen had few hopes along that line. Tomorrow was Christmas. In a week it would be the New Year. It would be several months before he could get any crops in, several more months before he could count on an income. He had no money to finance himself that long. He didn't know where he could get a job without leaving the valley. He was afraid that if he left there would be no ranch here when he returned.

"Thyra came up and stood beside him after the sheriff had gone. She put her arm around his waist. 'We'll still make it,' she said bravely.

"How?" Jorgensen asked.

"I don't know but we will make it. I'm not worried at all. I have a good feeling about next year."

Chris Jorgensen shook his head. He turned back into the cabin. He tried to find some reason for feeling as hopeful as Thyra but it wasn't easy. Christmas, this year, would be a mockery.

Several men rode up outside. There was a knock on the door. Thyra opened it and stepped back, and Jorgensen came to his feet as Reb Andrews entered the room.

Andrews took off his hat. He nodded to Thyra and then looked at Jorgensen. There was nothing friendly in the expression. The

(Continued on page 129)

NEXT

*"Welcome to Colona,
stranger — hell's just
yonderly. Most folks
prefer it to here!"*



Ringo's coat jerked and
flame and smoke belched
from his hand. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Lead Hungry

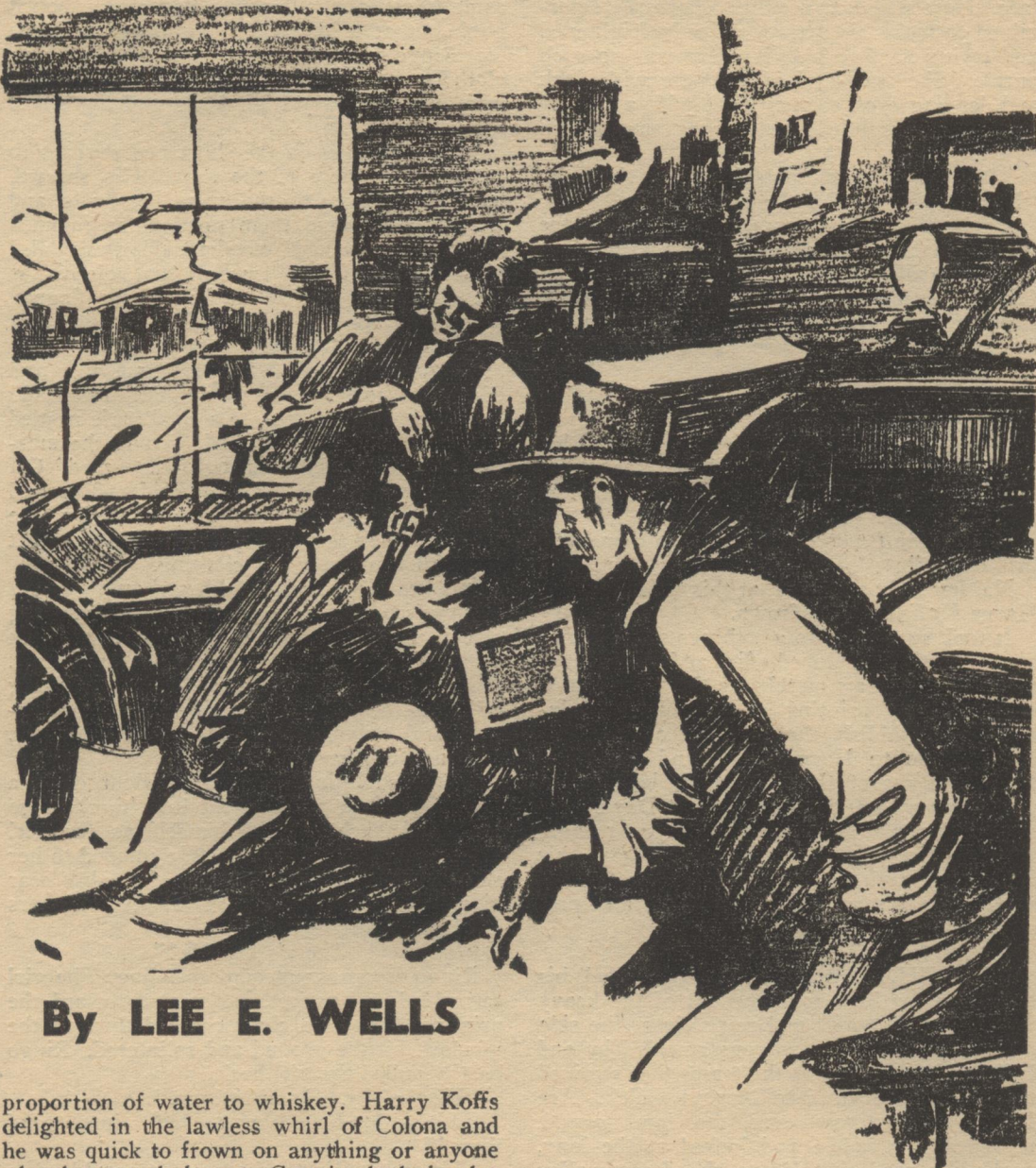
COLONA had five gold mines and more coming in. What had once been a cactus-studded ravine in the heat blasted Pelote Mountains was now a rutted, twisted street in a ramshackle town with an overwhelming sense of importance and an unshakable belief in the hair on its multitudinous chest. Six-guns neat for a shut-eye and men cold for breakfast were of the natural order of things.

For a time those older citizens carried to boothill threatened to outnumber the newcomers walking into the ravine. But, sensibly,

Colona finally achieved a safe ratio of the dead to the living and its shifting population started a slow but steady increase. More discoveries were made, pumping fresh, golden blood into the saloons and gambling halls that lined Nugget Gulch, and each second of the twenty-four lurid hours increased the wealth and power of Harry Koffs.

Koffs spun not, but he toiled mightily to bring Colona the best in ornate and highly crooked gambling layouts, percentage girls who were past masters at the art of clipping, bartenders who had a careful eye to the exact

STOP-HELL!



By **LEE E. WELLS**

proportion of water to whiskey. Harry Koffs delighted in the lawless whirl of Colona and he was quick to frown on anything or anyone who threatened change. Certain shady border gentry on Harry's payroll inevitably translated his frown into gunsmoke or knife thrust and life resumed its full, rich meaning.

In the midst of the boom, a printer set up shop in Colona and even Koffs felt pleased at this mark of progress. But shortly afterwards the printer started the *Colona Courier* and demanded law and order, less killings, less gambling, less drinking. Koffs read the editorial and frowned. The printer was buried the

next day, and his shop was closed awaiting the appearance of his heirs, if any. Koffs had a passing thought to buy the paper himself, but shrugged it off as too much of a bother and so made his first serious mistake.

Six months later, Bert Davis and his daughter, Elza, fought their way through the traffic up Nugget Gulch and pulled a battered buggy to a halt before the print shop. Davis stared

at the dusty windows and the high false front with deep-set burning eyes, bloodless lips set in a harsh line across a gaunt and angular face. Here was a man either adamantly determined to make his way or abjectly frightened and trying hard to hide it. Elza was no such puzzle. She was a vivid brunette with dark and dancing eyes, eagerly alive with a vitality that gave a subtle glow to her small, trim figure.

"It looks all right outside, dad," she said. "Hurry! Let's open the door!"

Davis lifted his sparse frame from the buggy seat and walked to the door with a disjointed stride, a black-coated scarecrow on Colona's seething, golden street. The two of them made a quick inspection of the equipment, desks, printing press, type cases, paper stock. At last Elza nodded.

"It is good, dad."

He read the unspoken words in her eyes. His eyes darkened and a muscle jumped in his cheek. He placed his hand on the girl's shoulder and his deep voice, though soft, had a core of steel.

"This time I won't sell. We'll sink or swim in Colona."

Neither Bert nor Elza, at this time, knew of Harry Koffs and his frown.

It took some time to get things straightened around in the abandoned office and even longer to inform Colona's merchants that Bert Davis welcomed job printing of all kinds and intended to publish the *Courier* once again. Word came to Harry Koffs and he had a twinge of regret that he hadn't bought the paper, but an interview with Bert Davis with some very plain talk would set everything aright again. He called for Fred Ekard, his bodyguard and monkey's paw, adjusted the stickpin in his watered silk cravat and prepared to go calling.

AT THAT moment a rider pulled his stubby little mustang out of the heavy flow of traffic and reined in at the side of the road. Freight wagons rumbled by and bullwhackers cursed at the teams that strained to the steep ascent into Nugget Gulch. Ace Ringo speculatively eyed the town ahead, turned in the saddle and looked at the long, snake-like road that led to the desert valley below on its way to distant Tucson.

Ringo was a small man with the devil's black eyes in a round, cherub face. Gray salted his raven black hair at the temples and belied the youthful red glow of his round cheeks. He had a short, straight nose, high-ridged and flaunting. A faint black wisp of mustache topped Ringo's full lips in whose corners lurked a wry and devilish humor.

He barely shaded five feet and he had the air of the fighting cock. Somewhat of the

plumage, too, in the fawn vest with the thin purple stripes that covered the slightly protruding paunch, the long black coat swept aside to reveal the dazzling vest and a looped gunbelt that held a Colt seemingly too large for Ringo's small and dimpled hands. Fine cloth trousers were stuffed into tooled boots with extraordinary high heels and big silver spurs.

Ringo stood up in the shortened stirrups to get a better view of the town. His shrewd, quick eyes assayed the gambling halls and saloons and found them good. The jammed street, the packed wooden sidewalks also pleased him. If Lady Luck did not side him in the cards with the aid of his nimble fingers, then there would be other outlets for his many and surprising talents.

Ringo settled back on the mustang and edged the horse into traffic again. Tired and dusty, he was glad to see a small cafe nestled against a printing office. He swung the mustang into the hitch-rack and dismounted. Off the horse, he looked almost midget-like and several men glanced curiously at him as he tied the horse and made vain attempts to beat the trail dust from his clothing.

His head lifted when he heard angry voices issuing from the open door of the printing office. One black brow arched high when something heavy crashed and splintered. Ringo lifted his shoulder slightly, knowing full well the value of minding his own business, and swung around the end of the rack, heading for the cafe.

He was within a step of the door when a girl rushed out and full tilt into him. Ringo staggered back, caught himself as the girl stumbled and fell headlong. He jumped to her side, murmuring apologies, but she didn't hear him. Her eyes were wide and her fingers sank into Ringo's arm.

"It's dad! There's trouble!"

Ringo frowned, uncomprehending. The girl scrambled to her feet and started toward the printing office as a chair crashed through the window, hit the ground and splintered. Ringo hastily pulled the girl back.

"Keep away. You'll be hurt."

"Then do something! Don't just stand there!"

"Ma'am," Ringo blinked, "it would seem you have called and I'm caught with a bob-tailed straight. I'll see what I can do."

A ring had formed around the printing office, the men keeping at a respectable distance. Ace daintily picked his way through the broken glass to the doorway, stepped inside.

A tall, gaunt man stood pressed against the wall, his harsh face working angrily, his long arms above his head. His burning eyes centered on a Colt that a second man lined on his stomach. A third happily spread destruc-

tion, a pleased grin on his coarse face while a fourth man stood looking on, fingering a watered cravat. Ringo recognized Fred Ekard.

"Morning Fred. The last time I saw you, you had a gun in your hand. It's a very bad habit."

Harry Koffs swung around, his hand dropping from his cravat. The other man stood still, his hands holding up one end of a type case that he was about to tip over. Ekard jerked, threw a glance over his shoulder at the black-coated bantam in the door. Koff's thin lips barely moved.

"Get out of here and mind your own business!"

"My own inclination, sir," Ringo answered pleasantly. "However, I've let myself in for this. Fred, there's a young lady outside who objects to this bit of horseplay."

"Get him, Fred," Koffs said tightly. Ekard licked his lips and looked unhappy. The man against the wall started to lower his arms, eyed Ekard's gun and hesitated. Ringo smiled.

"Fred won't mind."

The gunhawk dropped the type case back on the stand and his right hand slashed downward. Ringo's coat skirt jerked and flame and smoke belched from his hand. Instantly the gun muzzle moved slightly and lined on Fred Ekard's back. The gunhawk howled as his weapon flew from his hand and blood from his smashed fingers dropped to the floor. He grabbed his hand, looked sick and moaned. Harry Koffs took a deep breath, his harsh face showing stunned surprise.

"Now, Fred," Ringo said. "You've had your fun. Suppose you and the gentleman in the spats clean things up a little?"

Ekard swallowed and Koffs' face flamed red. He took an angry stride toward the door, pulled up short as the black gun muzzle lifted toward his eyes. Ringo's brows arched high.

"Drop your gun, Fred, and get busy. I can't eat until this is all cleaned up. You might tell your friend the damage is costly. He looks as though he can afford it."

"Just who in hell's lineup are you?" Koffs demanded.

"An apt expression, sir. The name is Ringo, Ace Ringo."

"He's Harry Koffs," Fred said. "He runs Colona, Ace. He's the big auger."

"A pleasure, sir," Ringo said with a slight smile and looked around the room. "Shall we begin? Mr. Koffs, you may roll up your sleeves after you have removed your coat and that shoulder holster. Tailored clothes, sir, bulge slightly over concealed weapons."

Koffs hesitated, green eyes spitting hate and futile anger. Bert Davis lowered his arms and Ringo's Colt swung toward him.

"Please remain against the wall, sir. I understand your urge to administer punish-

ment but it would only complicate things. You'll enjoy the labors of Mr. Koffs and Fred, I'm sure."

Under the steady threat of his gun, Fred moved away and started picking up the scattered papers. Ringo looked at Koffs and their glances locked in a silent struggle. Ringo's expression apparently did not change and yet suddenly the affable cherub was gone and Koffs looked deep into a pair of smoky, dangerous eyes. He carefully removed his coat and lifted a wicked derringer from his shoulder holster, placing it on top of the railing that divided the room.

He and Fred straightened things up as well as they could while the wounded gunhawk moaned. Davis remained against the wall and gradually the killing anger left his bony face. His bloodless lips actually formed the ghost of a smile as Koffs' delicate hands picked up a thickening coat of dirt and printer's ink. Ringo lounged against the wall just within the door. At last the two men straightened and Ringo's swift glance inspected the room.

"Cleaned as well as possible, considering the workers," he admitted. "Now, Mr. Koffs, before you go, leave the price of one broken window, one smashed chair, three type cases and a broken railing."

Koffs jerked a fat wallet from his pocket and pitched some yellow-backed bills on the desk. Ringo stepped to one side of the door.

"Until a more pleasant meeting, sir."

"The next meeting won't be healthy for you," Koffs snapped and Ringo looked hurt.

"You take this personally, sir. Perhaps I can persuade you to listen to my side of this little fiasco at a later date. Adios—and to you Fred."

"Ace, this time you've walked into something too damn' big for you," Ekard warned. "Take a friendly tip and get the hell out of Colona before someone carries you out."

"Same old Fred—always worrying about his friends," Ringo smiled. "I'll give it a thought. Take your friends and depart."

Koffs stalked out the door, leaving Fred to herd the wounded gunhawk onto the street and out of sight. Ringo holstered his Colt as Elza rushed in and Bert moved away from the wall. The girl threw herself on her father, holding him tight as though she feared he might disappear. Davis sought to pump Ringo's hand but the little man avoided him, picked up one of the gold notes that Koffs had dropped.

"Dinner, sir, will be on you. It has been a long ride and a strenuous morning for which there should be suitable profit. Ask your daughter to stop sniffing, sir. It's a most disconcerting sound."

He turned on his heel and walked to the door. He waited there, looking at the man

and the girl with the air of a querulous cherub. The brass glitter of the cartridges in his gun-belt gave a sinister cast to his almost angelic smile.

Elza wondered worriedly what manner of man he was, and she found herself hopelessly confused.

CHAPTER TWO

No Man's Kin

RINGO ate with the healthy appetite of a bullwhacker and the source of his rounded little paunch became apparent. Bert and Elza merely picked at their food, pausing to study Ringo now and then and to exchange puzzled glances. At last Ringo finished and pushed away from the table with a gratified sigh. He lit a crooked black cigar, one of which he offered to Davis.

"I'd like to talk to you," Davis said, "but there are too many people around."

"It concerns the estimable Mr. Koffs," Ringo hazarded. He shook his head and smiled at Elza to take the sting from his words. "Your daughter forced my hand, sir, in that instance and it is well over. My nose and other folks' business have nothing in common. That's why I've lived so long."

"I'm afraid you're in with us now," the girl said. Some of the cherub left Ringo's face and his lips had suddenly twisted into a harsh smile.

"Ma'am, I have only to breathe to keep on living. I'm in nothing."

Davis nudged her warningly and spoke to Ringo. "This is a business proposition, sir. To your interest."

Ringo studied the lean face with the faint trace of stubble on the jaw and chin. His dimpled fingers rippled lightly on the table top and his eyes became shrewd and penetrating.

"A lean and hungry look," he said half to himself and nodded. "Besides, I never liked Fred Ekard much since he tried to beat three of my aces with nothing, forty-five caliber high. We'll discuss it, sir, but that implies no promises."

"Understood." Davis arose and the three of them left the cafe. There were still many who glanced curiously at the broken window in the printing office and Davis told Elza to get a glazier to repair it.

She reluctantly walked off down the street and Davis led the way into the office. He pulled a chair to the desk for Ringo and sat down heavily himself. Ringo studied the end of his stogie, leaving the opening to Davis.

"This is a good plant," the man said at last, "and I intend to publish a paper that will pay its way and make a profit once it's estab-

lished." He paused, but Ringo said nothing. "I need help to put it across—not financial help but that of a man as fast with a six-gun as you are."

"That, sir, is merely a by-product of my other talents. You should hire men like Fred Ekard."

"Wait," Davis begged as Ringo started to arise. He studied his thumb, frowning deeply as Ringo sank back in his chair. "I used to publish a sheet in Tulare and I was run out of there by a man like Harry Koffs. I took his price, tucked my tail between my legs, and ran."

"An estimable habit under certain circumstances," Ringo said.

"Tulare's as wild as Colona and I demanded law and order. I had my choice of selling out or a trip to boothill. Harry Koffs had just given me the same choice. It's the old story repeating itself, but this time I'm not running—if it kills me."

"It probably will," Ringo said. "I'd leave."

Bert's face worked and his knobby hand clenched into a fist. "No! Ringo, Elza believes in me—believes in a decent world. She doesn't know about the threat in Tulare that ran me out. If it happens here in Colona, I won't be able to hide it. Ringo, I just can't let Elza know me for a man who'd run."

"A choice between your skin and your honor," Ringo said softly. He sighed and replaced the stogie, rolling it to one corner of his mouth. "I feel for you, sir, but—"

"One half of the plant is yours," Davis cut in. "I'll make you my full partner if you'll keep Koffs' gun dogs off my back."

Ringo remained silent, but his eyes circled the office, noting the equipment.

"I've been many things, but never a publisher. I think I'm a little late in starting such a venture. However, the financial angles appeal to me."

"Then you will?"

"Let me think it over, sir. I've just traveled many miles, a few of them in a hurry. I'll give you my answer this afternoon, late. He lifted his hand as Bert's ugly face lighted. "Do not assume I'll throw in, sir. There are many easier ways of making money than bucking sudden sixes. Until this evening, sir."

Ringo smiled and walked out of the office. He untied his mustang and lifted himself into the saddle. The flow of traffic was still heavy along the street and once more Ringo had to stand in the stirrups to locate the frame hotel before he plunged into the stream.

He pulled in to the hotel hitch-rack, noticed that the hotel abutted on the Golden Stope Saloon, whose batwings were constantly moving as men streamed in and out. There were five hard-eyed gunmen on the porch.

As he tied the reins, these five men stepped

off the saloon porch, one of them moving away from the others. At the same moment the daily stage came rattling down the street toward the hotel. Ringo circled the hitch-rack and started toward the hotel steps. Fred Ekard stepped out the door and smiled tightly down at the little man as he pulled up short.

"I hope you don't aim to stay in Colona, Ringo," Fred said. "Harry Koffs don't like you, none at all."

"Mutual, Fred," Ringo answered. The four men from the saloon had bunched behind him, but Ringo could not locate the fifth gunhawk. That worried him a little, though it didn't show on his bland face. "Nevertheless, Fred, Mr. Koffs can attend to his business while I will attend to mine."

"Such as siding a yellow-streaked printer, Ringo? Insulting Harry and shooting one of his boys? Now that ain't very friendly, is it?"

"Not on the face of it," Ringo admitted and his muscles tensed. The showdown would come in a matter of seconds and he had a bare chance if he could only locate that fifth man. The other four had made the sad mistake of bunching a few yards away. The crowd, sensing trouble, no longer pushed along the planked sidewalk. The stage came closer and pulled in toward the hotel.

"Ringo," Fred said evenly, "get back on that midget crowbait and ride out of Colona."

"I like it here, Fred. I desire to linger and enjoy the bright lights and see the sights. Sheer, innocent fun."

"You've named it, Ace," Fred snapped and deliberately turned on his heel.

It was the signal and it was also an unspoken statement that Ekard feared Ringo and did not want to face his guns. Ringo's dimpled hand flipped to his holster as the stage rolled up. The four men spread out a little and made their play. Ringo dropped to the ground and rolled under the hitch-rack.

Guns thundered. Two bullets thudded into the stagecoach and the driver swore luridly, clawing his way back up to the high seat.

Ringo fired from a crouched position and one of the four men caved in the middle, his Colt dropping to the ground. Ringo kept moving, coming to his feet beyond the horses and racing toward the coach. Bullets cut close around him and one of the gunhawks raced to cut him off. He took little Ringo's slug just above the knee, spilling to the dust.

A young man had just opened the coach door when the shooting began but he disappeared inside as the first slug ripped a long splinter from the frame. The driver had reached his seat and swept up the reins as Ringo gained the shelter of the coach. He was now protected from the two gunhawks and Fred Ekard, who might take a hand at any time.

Ringo grabbed for the door handle and step, swinging himself up as the driver applied the whip to the skittish horses. A bullet thudded into the paneling just beside Ringo's head—the fifth man he had worried about. But it took all of Ringo's strength and both hands to keep his precarious hold as the coach jerked forward.

Abruptly the young man appeared, leaning out the window, a heavy gun in his hand. His handsome face was tight, eyes narrowed and he fired the gun over Ringo's shoulder. A vicious jerk of the coach threw him back inside on the seat and Ringo clung grimly as the heavy vehicle slewed around a corner on two wheels. The driver applied the brakes, cursing as he pulled back on the reins.

The coach came to a halt and instantly Ringo dropped to the street, turning in a crouch to face the corner. There was no pursuit and he straightened slowly, his Colt hanging loosely in his hand.

The driver came storming up. "What in the name of hell's devils broke loose!" he demanded. "Ain't you got more sense'n to shoot at the stage! Damn' lucky there was no ladies this trip—"

"It was an argument," Ringo cut in coldly, "the time and place chosen by someone else."

The passenger opened the door and stepped out, the long barreled six-gun half raised, ready for trouble. He was tall, in his middle twenties, compactly built and powerful. He strode to Ringo and smiled down at the little man.

"You handle yourself, mister," he said, "but there were too many cards stacked against you. I eliminated one."

"My thanks, sir," Ringo said with a wide smile. He swiftly ejected spent cartridges and reloaded, keeping his sharp eyes on the corner. Still no one came in search of trouble and a curious crowd had started to gather. Ringo holstered his Colt.

"The eviction committee has ceased to function, it seems. Shall we return to the hotel?"

"Why not?" the young man chuckled. He had wide and mobile lips in a tanned face and there was a suggestion of the intellectual in the high, smooth forehead. He turned back to the coach and Ringo climbed in with him, leaving the river standing alone and uncertain. Ringo lit up another crooked stogy, offering one to his companion; then he called out the window to the driver.

"We can't sit here all day, my friend. You have passengers waiting at the hotel." He leaned back comfortably on the seat and studied the young man through a haze of blue tobacco smoke. "The name is Ace Ringo, rambler, all around no-good and opportunist. You, sir?"

"Vic Mason," the young man replied with a smile. "Formerly a cowboy but now supposedly a lawyer. I thought I'd hang out my shingle in Colona, since it has no lawyers and my uncle has considerable influence here."

"Quite laudable. Colona needs a legal hair combing and face washing if a man could live long enough to do it. By the way you handle that Colt, I'd say you have a chance. But by all means, use your uncle's influence. You'll need it."

"Uncle Harry," Vic said as the driver mounted to the seat and swung the coach around, "is pretty powerful from what I hear."

"Uncle Harry who?" Ringo asked.

"Koffs. He's in business here."

"So he is," Ringo said dryly. The coach rounded the corner and drove up to the hitch-rack. There was a crowd around the two dead men and the man with the punctured leg was being carried off. Ringo aroused himself and looked sharply at Vic Mason.

"Don't be surprised if your uncle lacks cordiality, sir. You had the extremely bad luck to shoot one of his men."

VIC stared at Ringo open-mouthed, stunned. The stage halted and Ringo opened the door. He stepped out, his right hand lightly brushing the coat skirt that covered his holster. His swift glance swept the crowd, lifted to the Golden Stope. Fred Ekard stood there, hotly arguing with a gunhawk. Ringo smiled tightly.

He started toward the saloon but had taken no more than a step when Bert Davis and Elza pushed through the crowd to his side. The girl looked pale and Davis himself was shaken.

"You're all right, Ringo?"

"I had unexpected help." He gestured at Vic Mason. "Elza, meet my good friend, Vic Mason. Miss Davis, sir, and her father."

"Howdy," Vic said sourly.

"Mr. Davis," Ringo said, "wishes to publish a paper much against the wishes of Mr. Koffs. The little fracas we just had is a result of his refusal. I wish all of you a pleasant day."

"Ringo!" Davis checked him. "You'll swing in with me?"

"Until I rest," Ringo said with a sharp edge to his voice, "I wouldn't even swing in with the Archangel Micheal!"

He marched like a pompous bantam up the hotel steps. Ekard and his man had disappeared and Vic Mason apparently couldn't decide whether to come after Ringo for further information or stay with the Davises. Ringo entered the hotel lobby and strode to the desk. He whirled the ledger around and signed his name.

"I want a room on the top floor, bullet proof and quiet. I wish to rest, sir, undisturbed.

Inform callers they awaken me at their own risk."

The clerk stared blankly at him until Ringo lifted the key from his hand. His room was to the rear and overlooked a collection of squat outbuildings. Ringo gave them a glance before he pulled down the blind. He peeled off coat and vest, looped his gunbelt over the bedpost. Boots off, he stretched out, then abruptly arose to place a chair solidly under the knob of the door. That done, he lay down again.

He was so tired that sleep refused to come and his brain monotonously reviewed all that had happened in the short time since he had entered Colona's narrow street. The rumble of the ore and freight wagons was a subdued murmur up here and Ringo soon reached that strange state that is half between full sleep and full consciousness. His mind clearly pictured events on the drowsy screen of his closed eyes and his ears registered every sound without fully arousing him.

The thunder on the door finally made his whole body jerk. Almost before his eyes were fully open, his hand had reached the convenient Colt and had it half out of the holster. His bare feet soundlessly touched the floor and he crossed the room. There was a moment's silence and then the rapping started again.

"Ringo! Ringo!" the voice sounded vaguely familiar.

"Who is it?"

"Vic Mason. Dammit, open up!"

Ringo considered the thick door, the chair firm under the knob. He dogged back the hammer of the gun. "No thanks, friend Mason. It's too neat a set-up for a gunhawk."

"I'm alone," Mason called. "Man, I've got to talk to you. Open up."

Ringo worked the chair from under the knob, turned the key in the lock and stepped back, the gun leveled on the door.

"All right, come in, Mason. But God help you if you're not alone!"

The door opened. Ringo's sharp eyes cut to the hallway behind Mason, saw that it was empty. The young man's face was troubled and anger rode in his eyes. Ringo made a gesture with his gun.

"Inside—and close the door." Mason complied and Ringo sank down on the edge of the bed, still holding the Colt. "A man should have privacy, both for his sleep and his sins, sir. Have your say and then be gone."

"What do you know about Uncle Harry?" Vic demanded. Ringo's lips pressed faintly and he took a deep breath.

"You've awakened me to ask fool questions!"

"Damn your sleep!" Mason exploded. "I come to Colona like a trusting doggie to a branding pen. I ride into a gunfight and side

you to even the odds, finding that I'm bucking an uncle in whom the whole family takes pride. You introduce me to a lovely girl and ten minutes later her father and me cuss each other out. Then I catch blazing hell from my uncle and find he has a sweet a collection of unhung murderers and gun-fanners around him. How can you sleep?"

Ringo turned and deliberately holstered his Colt. He lifted a knee and circled it with his arms, looked a touch regretful. "I suppose you've got something on your side, Vic. I'll say it short and sweet and bid you good afternoon. Here's what I know and it's damned little."

He then told of his coming to the town, such a short time before Vic's arrival, of the attempted destruction of the printing office, the gun trap before the hotel.

"I knew Fred Ekard along the Border," he finished. "His Colt's for sale to anybody as long as there's not bigger money somewhere else. The world would be well off without Ekard."

"I can't believe it of Uncle Harry," Vic said in a stunned, hurt voice. "I've heard so much good about him from the family."

"What do you aim to do?" Ringo asked sharply. Vic was silent for a long time, then looked up.

"Uncle Harry wouldn't talk to me except to curse me to everything he could lay his tongue to. He ordered me out of the Golden Stope and this man Ekard acted ugly, too. I figured it was best to leave him alone then. Mr. Davis ordered me never to speak to his daughter again and he treated me like I was some kin to a snake."

"Perhaps you are," Ringo said softly. Vic flushed and jumped to his feet.

"Then I'm finding it out—now! I'm going to the Stope and make Uncle Harry put his cards on the table. I'm calling a showdown."

"Wait a minute! How about Ekard and his boys? Suppose you live a while after you call taw on Harry Koffs? What then?"

"I'll answer that when I get to it."

HE TURNED on his heel and strode to the door. It slammed behind him and his steps died away down the corridor. Ringo groped for his boots, swearing as he struggled to get them on. He snapped the gun-belt around his paunch, shrugged into vest and coat.

Harry Koffs was the kind of man who would not let a little thing like kinship stand between himself and his ambitions. Ringo slammed his hat on his head and hurried after Vic Mason, swearing under his breath.

He pushed through the saloon batwings, ready for trouble. Midway of the bar Vic Mason had come to a stand before Harry

Koffs. Ekard stood to one side and there were half a dozen other gunmen forming a rough half circle around Vic and Koffs. Ringo leaned negligently against the door frame, willing to remain unnoticed for a while.

Koffs glared at his nephew, his face suffused, his lips flattened back against his teeth. Vic had speared his finger at the boss of Colona and he spoke tightly.

"... came to Colona because everyone in the family spoke well of you," Vic was saying. "But I find you trying to kill a man on the streets with this bunch of—of hired border scum you've gathered around you."

"By hell!" Ekard lunged forward but Koffs threw out his hand to check him.

"Wait, Fred. Let him finish."

"I aim to," Vic snapped. "I also find that you're persecuting a printer and his daughter, apparently for trying to start a newspaper. That's his right and privilege under the law and I can't understand why you're ready to kill and destroy unless you've got something damned black to hide!"

"Strong words," Koffs snapped. "Vic, maybe you're kin, but you're walking into something you don't know about. I'm willing to let this slide only if you keep your nose out of it."

"I'm a lawyer, Uncle Harry. I stand by the law."

"There's no law in this man's town but me, Vic. Get that in your head. I decide who stays and who goes. I decide what's best for the town." His voice dropped in a cold warning. "You might also say I decide who lives and who dies."

"By what right!"

"My own wish. You can stay in Colona on my terms—or you can leave."

"If I don't accept either alternative?"

Koffs took a deep breath and smiled tightly. He glanced at Ekard, a flick of his eyes to one side and back to Vic. "Show him, Fred, but don't hurt him too much."

Fred chuckled and his face lighted. His hand dropped to his side and froze as Ringo's quiet voice spoke from the door.

"Yes, show him, Fred. Show him how to stand hitched the way you did back in that printing office."

Ekard jerked half around, froze. One of the gunhawks cursed in surprise and his hand started toward his holster. Ringo's gun thundered and the man spun half around with the impact of the slug in his shoulder. Ringo smiled through the gunsmoke.

"Anyone else? No? Vic, you've seen the cards now. I'd advise you to ride out of Colona and forget your estimable uncle. That's such excellent advice, I'm following it myself."

Koffs shook his head. "Not you, Ringo. I've got a grave marked out for you."

Ringo's dark brows arched. Vic Mason made a disgusted sound and looked scornfully at his uncle.

"I don't intend to leave Colona. I intend to see that Davis and his daughter get a fair deal. A good newspaper might do wonders for this town."

"I'm warning you!" Koffs snapped.

Vic shook his head. "Save your breath. Thank God, you're related to the family only by marriage, and so the Mason name isn't muddled. When I'm through here in Colona, no one will claim you as kin."

"Vic," Ringo cut in, "I think we've roweled uncle considerable, and I don't think uncle likes it. If you and I are to keep out of boot-hill, we'd better make plans. Come straight back toward me, Vic, so I can keep all those skunks in plain gunsight."

CHAPTER THREE

Guns Make Good Night

RINGO led the way back to the hotel and up to his room. He admitted Vic, bolted the door and sailed his hat onto the bed, then wearily sat down. Vic paced from the door to the window and back again. Ringo watched him with growing impatience, then he moved to the bed, removed his boots and stretched full length.

"While you're doing your thinking, *amigo*, I'll grab that sleep I've been needing. Don't let anyone come in. We'll have a talk after a while."

"How can you sleep at a time like this!"

"I've traveled since yesterday evening, sir," Ringo said patiently, "I've stopped the destruction of the Davis printing plant. I've managed to get out of your lovable uncle's gun trap, and I just pulled you out of another. My dear sir, I assure you sleep is not hard to envision."

He rolled over closed his eyes. Vic stood uncertainly for a moment, shrugged and started pacing again. After a few moments Ringo opened his eyes and glared over his shoulder.

"If you're doing sentry-go, sir, may I suggest you remove your shoes? They make a terrific clatter."

Vic settled down in a chair. In a short time Ringo slept.

Colona darkened but the restless traffic of the street did not stop. At last, about eight, Ringo's eyes opened, clear and sharp on the instant. Vic snored and Ringo rolled over to find the man sprawled out in a chair, practically resting on his shoulderblades.

Ringo arose and walked to the window without lighting the lamp. The squat buildings

below were dark and silent, but he could see the glow of lights from the other street. Vic snorted and awoke, pulling himself upright. Ringo turned from the window.

"Still want to buck your uncle?" he demanded.

"Certainly. What about you? You're not a very good insurance risk yourself."

"No," Ringo said, "but that's a normal condition. Mr. Davis made me a business proposition that I had no intention of taking up. But now I think Uncle Harry has forced me into it. Let's call on Davis and daughter, sir."

"With pleasure."

A short time later they descended to the street. Twice during the short walk, Ringo thought they were followed but he found nothing suspicious when he turned.

When they reached the printing plant, Ringo saw that light escaped through cracks between the blinds and the bottom of the windows. He rapped sharply on the door and Bert Davis instantly opened it. The man's ugly face lighted when he saw Ringo and then darkened into an angry scowl when he saw Vic Mason.

"Don't bet until you look at your cards, sir," Ringo said before Davis could speak. "You'll need Mason before this is over."

"The nephew of Harry Koffs!"

"Mason just declared war on his uncle. I was there when it happened."

"Well—all right, we'll listen," Davis stepped aside. "I've called in the leading citizens of the town for a meeting. They're tired of gun rule and want to do something about it."

The dozen or so men and a couple of stout women with forbidding features were seated about the room beyond the barrier, crowded into the aisle between the type cases. Ringo walked slowly to the barrier, taking time to study the group. They looked prosperous and grimly certain of their right to be called upstanding and virtuous. Bert Davis looked uncertain for a moment and then he introduced the newcomers.

Presently he said, "I intend to start publication of the old *Courier*. I have heard what happened to my predecessor. He tried to buck Koffs' power all alone and he was beaten. So, therefore, I call on your support in the coming battle. You are the real power of the town if you would assert your rights. Without you, I can do nothing."

"What are your plans?" a pompous man up to the front asked.

"Simplicity itself," Davis answered. He glanced over toward Ace. "I have already taken steps to protect my life and my printing plant. In my first issue, I shall call the attention of the whole Gulch to the lawless state of affairs. I shall state we have an

organization ready to make a change and call on every citizen to support law and order."

One of the stout matrons applauded grimly. Ringo stepped forward.

"You're going to have a fight on your hands," he said. "You're going to need legal advice in addition to a few well placed forty-four slugs. Therefore I suggest that you consider Mr. Mason here as legal counsel, not only for his training but because he'll probably rush in where most of you will fear to tread. He'll probably have more sense as—and if—he lives. But right now he's at your service."

A lantern-jawed man stood up. "We'll have no violence, no shedding of blood."

Ringo said with a twisted smile, "Harry Koffs' gunhawks won't hold back. You can depend on that."

"The gentleman means it," a quiet voice said from the door. Every head swiveled and a collective gasp broke the silence. Harry Koffs stood just within the office and Fred Ekard's sinister bulk filled the doorway. Davis paled and Vic's jaw tightened. He straightened but Ringo gave him a swift sign to remain where he was.

"This concerns you mostly, Koffs," Ringo said evenly. "If you didn't come here for gunsmoke, we'll be glad to have you around."

"No trouble." Koffs shook his head. He smiled, but his eyes held a hard and triumphant glitter as he regarded Ringo. He gave Vic no more than a contemptuous glance.

Ringo moved a little to one side, keeping a close eye on Fred Ekard. Harry Koffs moved to the barrier, rested the tips of his fingers lightly on the smooth wood. He held first one man, then another with a hard smile for a second. The men squirmed uncomfortably. Koff's smile widened.

"I did some listening just before I came in, gentlemen. Your voices carry very well through flimsy walls. It is certainly fine to see a collection of businessmen, civic leaders and yellow-bellied cowards, such as we have gathered here."

A merchant started to rise but Koffs glared him down. His contemptuous eyes swept over the group and Ringo gave the man credit for his cold nerve. Vic made a strangling noise and Koffs lifted his eyes to the young man.

"My nephew is present, I see. Four years ago he punched cows in New Mexico and he's never tried a case in a law court in his life. He's impetuous and, like most very young men, doesn't think very deeply or clearly. You have certainly the best legal counsel available in him."

"I resent that!" Vic took a stride forward. Ekard tensed and Ringo narrowly watched him, speaking swiftly to one side.

"Calm down, Vic. Koffs wants someone to start trouble here and he hopes it's you, me or

Bert Davis. A little gunplay right now would take care of a lot of his troubles."

"Smart!" Koffs equably answered Ringo's charge. Vic stood white-lipped, but he made no further move. "I do have a few men around, Ringo."

"You've still got the floor," Ringo said quietly. "We'll discuss the men later."

"So there's your legal counsel," Koffs scoffed, "he's just been prevented from making his first error by a common huckster. Now what about Mr. Davis? He's a fighter and he proved it at Tulare. He started this same sort of a deal there, but what happened? He was run out. I'm sure you can depend on him."

"That's not so!" Elza blazed. "He was not run out!"

"Ask your father," Koffs said quietly and every eye turned to Bert Davis. The man stood in the corner, twisting his bony hands, his deep eyes burning.

"I ran once, but not again! Make no mistake about that."

Koffs shot a quick glance at the group and correctly read the surprise in their faces. "Perhaps you won't, but I think I can make you. Bet how you like, gentlemen. Now as to Mr. Ace Ringo—"

"The people know me," Ringo stated dryly. "I hide less than you. But ask Ekard if he's ever known me as other than a man who finishes a job he starts."

"Perhaps he hasn't—up to now," Koffs faced the group. "There you have the three men who are trying to bring law and order to Colona. You have law and order now—mine. Don't go against it. You're busy getting rich. I aim to hold this town. I aim to run my games and my saloons how I please and when I please. I'm giving you until morning to make up your minds to fight or let things ride. Decide by then, for I'm starting on Davis and Ringo; then I'll decide what to do about my hot-headed nephew. *Buenos noches, amigos.*"

He bowed mockingly and walked out the door. Ekard followed, closing the door behind him. There was a moment of stunned silence and then voices lifted in a crazy babble. Davis stood with his head down. Elza stared at him, her face tortured. Abruptly the Reverend Blake lifted his arms.

"A pip-squeak lawyer, a cowardly journalist and a gambler! I, personally, withdraw."

He turned and stalked out. One of the women sniffed, lifted her chin and marched out, the plume on her hat waving like a challenge. Ringo stood to one side, quietly watching the exodus, a cynical smile on his lips. He was back where he started from.

At last everyone had left. Ringo drew a crooked stogy from his pocket and carefully trimmed the end. He lit it carefully, drew deeply, then moved over to stand before Elza.

She sensed his presence and looked up, startled at the expression on his face.

"You're like the rest of them," Ringo said quietly. "Your father has made a move to redeem himself, but you can only see that he failed once and you'd walk out on his as quick as any of the others. Why don't you grow up? Haven't you found out yet a man can make a mistake and still be a gent to ride the river with!"

She made a choked sound, but it was of anger, not grief. Smiling faintly, Ringo moved over to talk to Vic.

BERT DAVIS looked up, a new light in his eyes. He moved to his desk, opened a bottom drawer and pulled out a belt and gun that he strapped around his waist. Elza's eyes grew wide and she came up out of the chair.

Bert said slowly, "If I don't take this way, I'm the same as dead in Colona anyhow. No one will have anything to do with me and I'll be running again."

"He's right, Elza," Ringo said gently. He became crisp and business like. "Vic, when I go into the Golden Stope, you stay on the porch. Don't let any guns get behind me. Bert, you follow my lead."

"I'm sure glad you're taking a hand, Ringo."
"Not out of charity, sir," Ringo snapped.
"It's to save my own skin. Ready, sir?"

"Ready," Davis snapped.

The little gambler led the way out the door. Davis shook his head at Elza's pleading and followed Ringo, Vic bringing up the rear. By the time they reached the Stope, the porch was clear and miraculously no one appeared on the sidewalk before the building. Ringo sensed a tension along the street and his sharp eyes probed the shadows of the porch beyond the brilliant light that splashed out over the batwings.

"Vic, stay on the porch," he said under his breath. "Bert, I'm first through the batwings and I'll step to the left. You watch the tables and I'll keep a tight rope on the gents at the bar. Ekard is the man who'll start things rolling. Leave him to me—and good luck."

"We'll need it," Davis said and his voice was firm.

Ringo mounted to the porch and started toward the batwings. He caught a sudden movement in the shadows to the right and Ekard's voice shattered the silence from another corner.

"Cut him down!"

Ringo whirled, throwing himself toward the building wall, his hand sweeping the Colt from the holster. He fired to the right, a shot meant to disconcert while he plunged on toward the left. He saw a man rise from behind a bench and Ringo's Colt dropped, spitting flame. The man coughed, fell and Ringo

threw himself toward the far edge of the porch.

Gunfire ripped the shadows all along the front of the building. Koffs had not passively allowed the war to come to him, Ringo thought—he'd been waiting for this chance. He heard a gun blast steadily behind him but he had no time to find who did the firing.

A head popped up over the edge of the porch and simultaneously a gun spat flame and smoke. The bullet whipped close to Ringo's head but did not check his speed. He vaulted over the end of the porch and hit the ground, smashing a shot a crouching figure. The man screamed and rolled to one side.

Ringo moved fast, his short stature making an uncertain and difficult target. He heard Bert Davis roar angrily and then the thunder of gunfire drowned out all other sound. Ringo caught another gunhawk in his sights and downed the man.

He raced down the dark and empty passageway between the saloon and the hotel. Davis and Vic Mason evidently put up a good fight, for the Colts still roared out in front. Ringo's jaw set as he raced to the rear of the saloon, ejecting and reloading as he ran.

He swung around the far corner, saw the narrow door but a few feet away. Ringo jerked it open and stepped into a narrow room, empty except for beer kegs and stacks of whiskey cases. Light seeped around a closed door not far away. Ringo felt for the knob, grasped it and carefully eased open the door.

Instantly the gun thunder grew louder. Ringo stood at the far end and just behind the bar. The percentage girls and the gamblers stood toward the front, their attention centered on the batwings. Ekard stood by the door, peering around the casing now and then, placing his shots and bawling orders to his gunmen. Harry Koffs nervously chewed on a cigar, well out of the line of fire.

Ringo smiled tightly and moved forward behind the bar. The gun battle out front drowned Ringo's approach. He stood for a split second just behind Koffs and then he jabbed his barrel viciously into the man's side. Koffs jumped, half turned, saw Ringo and froze, fright flooding his face.

"I hope you haven't killed anyone out there," Ringo said. "You'll join them in boot-hill."

Koffs lips moved and at last he found his voice. "No—no one yet."

Ringo, with a glance, called Koff's attention to his thumb that held the heavy hammer partially dogged back. The thumb looked too small to withstand the straining pressure of the spring and Koffs instantly understood the implication. Any bullet in Ringo's body would mean the thumb would drop from the hammer. That would smash a slug into Harry Koffs.

Ringo waited until the man once more looked up at him.

"Tell Ekard to call off his gundogs and to drop his Colt right over there by the door."

For a split second Ringo thought the man intended to refuse. His lips flattened and his nostrils flared. Ringo increased the pressure of the gun muzzle. Koffs placed his hands flat on the bar.

"Fred! Fred!" he called above the gunfire. "Call off the men!"

Ekard looked around, surprised, and saw Ringo. His jaw dropped and he half lifted his six. A spasm of fear swept across Koff's face.

"Fred—don't! Drop you gun. Don't any of you others take a hand!"

Ekard waited and tension piled up. Ringo saw that Koffs' forehead was lined with little beads of sweat. At last Ekard dropped his six and he yelled sharp orders over the batwings. The firing outside died down.

"Now you and Ekard and me are taking a little walk," Ringo said. "Tell Davis and Mason how it is."

"They'll think it's a trap," Koffs said.

"That will be your bad luck, my friend. Fred, stand hitched by the door until your boss gets there. Then fall in beside him and march right out on the porch, savvy?"

"You can't get away with this, Ace," Ekard warned.

"I will so long as my Colt is stroking Uncle Harry's ribs. All right, Koffs, march."

The man moved like one doomed out beyond the bar, turned and started toward the doors. Ekard waited and now every man in the room could see on what a slender thread Koff's life hung. Ringo marched with easy unconcern that was more of a threat than the gun he held.

They reached the door and Ekard, with a furious scowl, fell in beside Koffs. Out on the porch, Ringo saw the dim, sprawled shapes of two fallen men. He searched the outer darkness but could not see his friends.

"Davis!" he called. "Vic! I've pulled the fangs of the head sidewinders. I'm bringing them out."

A shadow moved across the street and Vic's tall form raised from behind a big barrel not far away. With a low order, Ringo moved his captives off the porch and onto the street. Behind him, the saloon porch filled but no one made a move to interfere. Vic and Davis joined Ringo.

"Hold your gun on Koffs, Davis," Ringo ordered. He holstered his six when Davis shoved his Colt into Koff's ribs, and faced Ekard. "Fred, you're the gent that keeps Uncle Harry's brand blazing on the town. You've tried your damn'dest to gun me down.

You're a menace to me and to Colona."

"I'll keep on," Ekard growled and Ringo smiled.

"Perhaps, Fred, we'll find something out now. You gone, Uncle Harry won't talk so loud and his gunslammers will figure it's much healthier somewhere else. Vic, give Fred your Colt."

"What!" Vic exclaimed.

"Give him your Colt. Shove it in his holster and then step clear. I'm giving you more of a chance than you ever gave me, Ferd. You can make your play when you're ready—or you can run right out of town."

Vic reluctantly shoved the weapon in Ekard's holster and stepped back. Koffs watched, held anchored by Bert's gun. Ekard stared at Ringo then looked over his shoulder toward the saloon. Ringo's words had carried very clearly along the street and there was no evading the decision. Ekard knew it, and knew he had to make his bid or slink out of town.

Without warning his hand blurred toward the weapon. Ringo hardly seemed to move, yet his coat skirt flicked a split second before flame spat from his hand fisted about the Colt. Ekard's shot went wild and the man spun half around, his legs folding under him. Ringo stepped close and bent over the renegade. He straightened and his words could plainly be heard back at the saloon.

"Dead, Mr. Koffs, very dead. If any of your gunmen are in Colona by sunup, I'll personally hunt them up. Now let's get on with our business."

THE trio went unmolested to the printing office. Elza looked up and relief flooded her face when she saw her father. Koffs looked pale and drawn, uncertain. He sat down on Ringo's order.

"Your Uncle Harry," Ringo said pleasantly to Vic, "is very fortunate to be alive. His hired killer is gone and he won't have a gun on his payroll by morning."

"What do you want?" Koffs growled and Ringo smiled.

"The nub of the argument seems to be law and order, and the difficulties Mr. Davis encountered in getting a paper started. You are the block in both cases. I suggest that you withdraw opposition to both items, sir, or I shall be forced to put a gun in your holster for a final settlement."

Koffs chewed on his lower lip and finally slapped his palm down on the desk. "All right, bring your law to Colona! Start your damn' paper!"

"Well said, sir," Ringo nodded and lit up a stogy. "But to make sure of your sincerity I

(Continued on page 130)

SHOOT-OR



The stranger stepped in quickly and hit hard. . .

A man has his choice for his last meal on earth—all except eatin' crow!

By

JAMES O. GOODWIN

122

THERE were pleasant little grin wrinkles about the eyes of the travel-dusted stranger as he listened intently to the instructions of Big John Braggos. He had the ageless appearance common to men who battle the elements. East of the Mississippi, when a man was thirty, he looked thirty, but the sun and the wind put an old mask on a young face in the West.

The hard, whang-leather look of the stranger, coupled with the natural manner in which he wore the heavy six-gun at his belt, had been Braggos' reason for singling him out.

Big John pointed out the trail to Flagstaff. "You sure, though," he fretted, "that you can do what I want done?"

The stranger's lips smiled without emotion. "The stage rolls in," he said flatly. "The man steps off and I gun him down. That's what you're payin' me to do, ain't it?"

Big John fidgeted nervously. "That's it," he admitted. "You better let me have a look at your gun, though, I wouldn't want any slip-up in this business."

SHOW YELLOW

While Braggos was carefully examining the stranger's gun and checking the bullets in it, young Slade Kragle swaggered out of the saloon. His face was flushed partly from anger and partly from too much fiery liquor. He sent an angry stare toward the cold-eyed stranger.

"Hell of a note, Braggos," he snarled. "Hirin' a plumb outsider to throw a gun for yuh. Whyn't yuh give me your money and let me do the job?" He slapped the black-butted gun in his belt loudly. "I ain't exactly slow with one of these things you know."

John Braggos shook his head stubbornly. "I run my own business the way I want, Slade. I know what I'm doin'."

The newcomer was leaning hip-shot against the tie rail when the stage from Flagstaff rattled in. He noted that it was filled for the most part with Easterners. When he spotted a range-worn John B. and a hickory shirt among them he hitched his gun into easy reach of his browned hand.

The cowboy came out of the stage, hit the board walk and stopped momentarily.

The stranger stepped away from the rail. "Yore name Clinton?" he asked sharply.

The waddy let a cold steel look enter his eyes. "I reckon I'm yore hairpin," he said loudly, "and I know what yo're here for. I can spot a hired gun-thrower a mile off. I'm ready whenever you are, feller!"

One of the women passengers, sensing what was about to transpire, uttered a helpless little scream. The waddy from the stage gave a little grunt and shot his hand holsterward.

The trail-dusted stranger seemed to lift his gun and shoot without noticeable effort. One minute he was standing spread-legged, the next second the big gun was kicking against his palm.

The cowboy coughed weakly, folded in the middle and crashed to the board walk.

THE stranger shouldered his way back into the saloon. Inside, he allowed a slow grin to break the somberness of his face. He took the folded bill that Big John Braggos shoved into his hand and thumbed it into the pocket of his calfskin vest.

Big John grinned happily. "Yuh shore put on a show for them Eastern visitors. I reckon they're shiverin' in their boots now. Soon's they leave we'll have Jimmy Clinton in to drink up with us. I reckon it didn't hurt Jimmy none to be shot in th' belly with a blank cartridge."

The newcomer toyed with his drink. A little frown pulled at his eyes. "Any particular reason yuh picked me for this gun throwin' job? Why didn't you let somebody like th' younker that got so edgy a while ago do it for yuh?"

Braggos shook his head. "I picked you because you looked hard and cold, the way I figure these Eastern tenderfeet expect a gunman to look. I didn't want to spoil Slade Kragle worse than he is. Slade comes of a good ranch family, but he's got th' idea that he's a ring-tailed catamount with a gun. He's scalp huntin' for real. I don't want to humor him none."

Slade Kragle strode up to the bar. His eyes were wicked with drink. He put a challenging stare upon the stranger, nudged the big gun at his belt. "I ain't carryin' blanks in this. Any two-bit maverick can look fast when he knows he's safe and just puttin' on a show for a bunch of women folks."

John Braggos ordered up another drink. "No need to get edgy Slade," he counseled. "You got no beef with this gent. He rode in here and I hired him to do a job. Not much of a job." Braggos smiled tightly. "He done right good on it, though. Hell of a note, ain't it, when a respectable rancher has to pay money to stage a fake gun fight so's his paying guests will get th' right impression. I can recollect th' time when you wouldn't a had to fake a fight." Braggos tossed his drink down with a shrug. "All the real ringy gun-handlers are gone along with the Texas Longhorn, Slade. Forget 'em—there ain't none of them left now."

Slade Kragle swallowed his drink and bristled. "Hell they ain't," he snarled. "What about men like Marshal Jack Dawson and Pedro Ortinga? Either one of them would have shot this tramp rider's ears off before his gun cleared leather. I'd like to see him stand up to a man like Dawson and put on his little show, or Pedro Ortinga, either one."

Braggos nodded soberly. "Still a few of them down along th' border," he admitted. "I reckon Dawson is about tops with a gun. Some folks say he's faster than any of the old-timers. No danger of meetin' Dawson. He's already got his reputation. He don't go huntin' trouble. Might some day meet up with Pedro Ortinga though. He's still on the build."

Slade Kragle smiled importantly. "I know Ortinga personally," he bragged. "Met him when I made a trip down to El Paso. Told him some day he'd be hearin' about me. He took er' right easy."

The trail rider punched the blank cartridges from his gun and reloaded it with live ones. He shook his head. "I'd say you got the wrong slant youngster," he advised. "Once you'd get a rep as a fast gun thrower, they'd always be somebody tryin' to ventilate you in order to make a bigger name for himself. I'm willing to let somebody else have them honors. A quiet little ranch where I can run a few head of cattle and settle down is good enough for me. That's what I'm ridin' the trail for—lookin' for a spread I can buy reasonable."

John Braggos nodded agreement. "The gent's right Slade. You got good ranch stock in your blood. Whyn't yuh settle down?"

Slade Kragle let his anger build up within him. He drank three whiskeys in a row, then turned to face the stranger. His eyes were bloodshot and he was unsteady on his feet. He raised his voice so that the occupants of the saloon could plainly hear. "I still think you're a yellah-bellied rat," he hiccuped. "You wouldn't have guts enough to face a real gunman. I'm plenty fast myself. Why don't yuh try throwin' down on me?"

The stranger smiled tightly and shook his head. "Take it easy, kid," he counseled. "I ain't lookin' for no trouble. Let's forget it?"

Kragle lurched away from the bar. "Y'see folks," he sneered, "he's yellah plumb through, but he ain't gettin' away with it."

The trail rider saw that Slade was drunk enough to be mean. He realized that he was in a tight. Slade's fingers were twitching nervously.

Suddenly Slade made a grab for his gun.

The stranger stepped in quickly and hit hard. His balled fist caught Slade squarely on the chin. He went down like a tree with its base suddenly dynamited away.

IT WAS some time the next day before Slade Kragle sobered up enough to realize what had happened. The newcomer had taken a job with John Braggos, working at one of Braggos' line camps, with a puncher called Dusty Rhoades, until he could find the little ranch that he sought.

The barkeep broke the news sympathetically. "Damn shame that Braggos couldn't 'a hired you to put on his shows for him. He done hired this new gent to put on the same kind of a fake gun fight with Jimmy Clinton every week when th' stage comes in from Flagstaff. Too bad Jimmy Clinton ain't fast with a gun. He could make the stranger look right silly couldn't he?"

As Slade Kragle drank, an idea began building up in his mind. Suddenly he tossed back his head and roared with laughter. "Jimmy Clinton ain't fast enough," he grinned "but I know a gent who is."

The barkeep evinced some curiosity and a little excitement, but Kragle refused to elucidate.

During the next week, Kragle made several futile attempts to egg the sober-faced stranger into an open gunfight. On each occasion the other cleverly side-stepped the issue. Kragle had to content himself with bragging to the townsmen of his conquest and the cowardice of the newcomer.

John Braggos jumped Slade in the saloon one evening. "Kragle," he said sternly, "why don't you lay off of this new man I hired? Anybody can see that he ain't a gun-thrower. All he wants is a peaceful life and a small ranch. Why don't you saddle up and ride down to the Border country where you can meet some real gunmen?" He grinned his contempt. "Why stay here and pick on an easy-going gent that wants to live to be a rancher?"

Kragle snorted his disgust. "I aim to ride for the Border," he admitted, "but not until I've made this blank-shootin' hero eat plenty of crow. I'm gonna see him show yellah and say uncle right in front of all the people he's been showin' off for."

Twice more the stage came in and each time the new man stood brace-legged and flipped his old gun into action with seemingly no effort. Each time Jimmy Clinton was dutifully "killed" before the horrified eyes of a party of Eastern visitors.

It was the third arrival of the stage that created a quiet stir in the little town. Slade Kragle had secretly noised it around that it would pay any and all to be present to see the show. He had hinted that this time they would see something more than the usual fake affair.

John Braggos was busy at the ranch; so there was none to tell the stranger differently when the barkeep, acting upon Slade Kragle's orders, stepped quietly up to him and told him that there had been a slight change in the usual procedure.

"Jimmy Clinton had a little trouble," he confided, "so you won't put on your show with him today. Instead there'll be a different hombre. You won't have no trouble recognizin' him. He's a Spanish gent—wears a set of pearl-handled guns."

The newcomer nodded soberly. "S'all right with me," he grunted. "So long as he knows what kind of a show to put on."

The barkeep smiled slightly. "He'll put on a show all right. He knows what it's all about."

The sides of the road in front of the Wells Fargo office were fairly packed by the time the stage showed far out in the desert.

The barkeep sidled over to Slade Kragle. "Hell, Slade," he squirmed. "I don't like this any at all. It ain't right to let Pedro Ortinga

shoot this feller down when he ain't got nothin' more'n blanks in his gun."

Kragle grinned. "Pedro ain't gonna kill him," he said. "I asked him to just shoot his ears down for him. Maybe shoot his hat off and nick him just enough to make him look silly in front of all the folks."

There was the usual load of Easterners on the stage. Pedro Ortinga stood out among them like a lean wolf in a flock of sheep. He was dressed in an ornate Spanish costume, heavily garnished with hammered silver. His Colts swung easily on crossed belts.

Kragle clamped down upon the barkeep's shoulder when he saw Ortinga swing lithely off the stage. "Here it comes, fella," he said eagerly. "Just watch th' tenderfoot's face when he gets an eyeful of Ortinga's gun speed."

Kragle locked his gaze on the slouching figure of the lean-faced trail rider. He didn't intend to miss any of the sick, beaten look that would soon appear on his frightened features.

The new man had been talking quietly to Dusty Rhoades. He glanced casually toward the dapperly attired Ortinga; then he straightened slowly. With a deft little flipping motion that was almost too fast for the eye to follow, he lifted the old single action Colt from Dusty's holster and substituted the one that contained the blanks.

There was a queer little smile on his face as he shoved Dusty's fully loaded gun into his holster and straightened almost lazily to face Pedro Ortinga.

A hushed silence fell like a pall over the crowd. Most of them had seen the lightning-like exchange of guns. Subconsciously they realized that something had gone amiss. This wasn't going to be the blank cartridge farce that they had expected.

Pedro Ortinga had a cocksure smile on his olive complexioned face. He swung about, balancing easily on the balls of his feet. Then he looked squarely into the face of the man standing easily before him.

The egotistical smile vanished instantly. His face blanched to a sickly mud color. He gave a gurgling little gasp; then raised both of his hands quickly above his shoulders. He shook

his head weakly and backed into the waiting stage.

WHEN Slade Kragle reached the stage and peered inside, he found a badly shaken man.

"What th' hell—" he started to bluster.

Ortinga regained some of his composure. "Señor," he shuddered, "you have nearly got Pedro Ortinga killed." He wiped a trembling hand across a perspiring brow. "Pedro Ortinga," he stammered, "have always considered himself fast with the gun. He have made many wild brags while full of tequila, but Pedro Ortinga is not yet the fool who would willingly commit suicide. Pedro still have the desire to live. That is not showing the yellow. A man does not shoot the ears off the famous Marshal Jack Dawson!"

Slade Kragle looked suddenly as though he had been kicked in the pit of the stomach by a sixteen hand mule. "Dawson?" he mumbled weakly. "You mean—"

Ortinga nodded. "Many times along the border I have seen this man. A striking rattlesnake is a turtle—I should kill you for asking me to come here, but instead I will hang up my guns, go back to El Paso and open up an *enchilada* parlor, for has not Jack Dawson permitted you to live? This day I have had enough scare so that I could never again be the wild one. *Adios amigo!*"

Dusty Rhoades met Slade Kragle as Slade was walking slowly, but determinedly toward the tanned figure of the man he had vowed publicly to insult. Rhoades laid a hand on Slade's shoulder. He frowned.

"What's wrong, Slade," he asked. "yuh look kinda white. Couldn't a been somethin' yuh et, could it?"

Slade Kragle stared ahead to where Jack Dawson was lounging against the hitch-rail. He grinned feebly and took off his heavy gun. He handed it to Rhoades. "Take this and sell it to some waddy that's got sense enough to use it only for coyotes. Ain't nothin' I ate that's makin' me look sick. It's something I'm gonna have to eat right away. The biggest plate of crowmeat any cowboy ever saw."



(Continued from page 5)

THE stories recalled by the names of mining towns which mushroomed to thousands, and long since have become ghost towns—Emigrant Gap, Dutch Flat, Brandy City, Boston Gulch, Rough and Ready, Gouge Eye and You Bet, to name a few—are humdingers.

Take Rough and Ready, founded by a twelve-wagon train from Shellsburg, Wisconsin. They unhitched at Squirrel Creek and inside a week pans were yielding as high as \$400 a day's washing. One chap named Slim Judson washed out a single nugget weighing in at \$1,200.

By the November elections of 1850 Rough and Ready had 1000 votes. That winter a typical camp tale came out of the town. Many had died with "lung fever." One of the numerous mourners at a funeral spied a nugget in the earth beside the grave. The parson, looking up a few minutes later, saw all the mourners pacing off fifteen-foot claims in the graveyard.

"Hey, boys," he said, "you've got to give me a show when I finish with our brother here."

Rough and Ready's permanent contribution to the high-colored pattern of the days of gold took the form of a bold essay at sedition. The population had a strong Democratic and pro-slavery complexion.

The larger and rival camp of Nevada City, eight miles up the road from Rough and Ready, were preponderantly Northern Whig and Black Abolitionist. These partisans coined a scornful word for the hot-headed Southerners. They were "Chivs"—the party of chivalry and the Bowie knife.

On September 9, 1850, Congress made California a state—and free. In course of time this shocking news reached the Chivs of Rough and Ready and the fire-eaters began to get rough with the American Eagle.

Finally Colonel Horatio Brundage of New Orleans proclaimed the independence of the City and Township of Rough and Ready. Not only did Rough and Ready secede from the Union ten years before South Carolina and the other Southern states, it seceded from California as well and proclaimed itself "a free and self-governing independency."

The report of this action spread to the sheriff of Nevada City—himself a Northerner—carrying with it implications that the new government intended sending its forces against that camp. All four women and children were removed to Banner Mountain under guard and the night was passed in great suspense.

In the graying dawn a sentry pacing before the sheriff's tent spied a shadowy figure approaching—one which bore between its hands something that might have been a bomb.

The sentry leveled his old Sharps. "Halt! Who comes here?"

"Friend, with a jug of O-Be-Joyful for the sheriff and his sentry."

"Advance, friend, with a jug of O-Be-Joyful—and to hell with the countersign!"

Whereupon Nevada City entered upon a large day.

High tragedy and low comedy were found in the "diggin's." Sometimes the raw animal spirits of these strange men stirred them to acts of utter savagery.

Downieville was a tough town—a bad town and proud of it. But on the Fourth of July, 1851, something happened of which Downieville was not so proud later on.

There were big doings that holiday. A Democratic county convention had a three-day session, presided over by William Walker, the fighting Tennessean, who was shortly after to conquer Nicaragua and make himself its legally elected president.

Among the delegates were a future United States Supreme Court Justice, a State Senator and the last Lord Fairfax. After three days of drinking and whoopla, the pack of miners were in a fierce mood, half insane with the curdling passion for gold, for gambling, for whiskey.

A Sonora girl called Juanita played monte in Jack Craycroft's place, scornful of the encircling mob. Big Jock Cannon from up river, drunk and dangerous, slapped her on the shoulder. She drew a knife and cursed him well in Spanish. Others intervened and trouble was avoided for the moment. But late that night the drunken Scot kicked in the door of Juanita's cabin and she stabbed him dead.

There was a mock trial. Sane men pleaded for the girl's life, were howled down. Walker, who could have handled the mob if any man could, had left at dawn and couldn't be reached. A noose about her neck, Juanita was hung from a beam. All of which inspired a poet of the period to write:

The sun sank low in the West

And tinged with gold each mountain ridge.

The crowd closed in and, eager, prest

Onward toward the fatal bridge

That spanned the rapid mountain stream,

And thousands darkly lined each shore.

The noose was dangling from the beam—

Her dream of life would soon be o'er.

Gayly she climbed the fatal pile;

To one she knew, with graceful bend,

Flung out her hat and with a smile:

"Adios, amigo"—good-bye, friend;

And pressed the noose beneath her hair

And smoothed it down with steady palms;

Like making up her toilet there,

Ere death embraced her in his arms.

THE DEATH RIDER

(Continued from page 87)

Cass knelt beside him, his own gun hammering.

Here was the remnant of the rustler gang, Cass knew. They were making one last play before leaving the valley.

A man cried out hoarsely and spilled out of his saddle; his horse ran on, dragging him crazily along the ground. Tod Rory grunted suddenly and sat down hard. Cass fired and another bandit slumped forward across his horse's neck, his life pouring out of him into the dust.

The third bandit, a youngster with a fear-crazed face, reined in his big black sharply. Tod Rory murmured, "I shouldn't have given him that chance before—but I didn't know."

Cass squeezed trigger and his gun was empty. He reached for his other gun. The big black skidded, its front legs braced and rigid; then it wheeled and started racing away. Tod Rory lifted his gun, let it fall. He said, "I won't shoot a man in the back."

And in that moment Cass knew something for a certainty, something he should have known all along. Tod Rory had not shot his father in the back intentionally. But Big Joe Carlin's pride would not let him admit that he had been bested fairly.

And Cass thought, *My promise to him has no meaning now.*

The black raced up the street. Then its step faltered and broke, and Cass knew the big horse had been hit. The youngster pitched out of the saddle, rolled, came to his feet. He fired swiftly. Tod Rory grunted again and fell over on his side.

Cass walked toward the youngster, his own gun lifted. A bullet whined past. Carefully, Cass squeezed trigger and saw the youngster twist slowly forward and die before his body struck the earth.

Kneeling, Cass lifted Tod Rory's shoulders. The sheriff had been hit in the leg and in the shoulder. Townspeople were running toward them now, and in the distance a man hurried closer, carrying a black bag.

"I'm all right, Carlin," Tod Rory said strongly.

"You knew who I was all along."

The sheriff smiled faintly. "You ran a fever and you talked some. Damned if you don't look better without that beard."

"Did I say why I was here?" Cass asked.

"Come to think of it—you did."

"And you did nothing?"

Tod Rory shrugged, and a flicker of pain crossed his face. He said, "Nothing much I could do. A man has a right to his own ideas. I figured I'd worry about it when the time came."

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

There was a crowd around them now. The doctor bent over the wounded sheriff. Cass stood there a moment at the edge of the crowd; then he turned toward the Tullala House.

"I got back quicker than I expected," he said.

The blonde girl's face was pale. "I saw it out there. At first it looked as if you were going to fight Tod Rory, and then—" She put a hand to her smooth forehead. "I still don't understand."

"Don't try to, ma'am," said Cass Carlin.

"Do you have to call me 'ma'am'?"

Cass grinned. "I don't know your name. We better rectify that error right now."

(Continued from page 101)

after bank robbers. Had the cowboy seen them?

"No, suh, I was down in the deep wash," Jughead shook his head, cautiously. Knowing things didn't do a cowboy any good.

The posse rode on, and the cowboys dug up the cache the robbers had made. He filled his pockets, and then emptied the rest of the gold into his pants legs. When he had all the gold aboard, he sure felt funny, not being able, for the weight, to mount his horse. However, leading the horse beside a low bench, he slumped into the saddle and headed for Helena, Montana. In town, he could hardly waddle, but he could spend his money, slapping down gold on bars and tables, spending right for once in his life. He was going good when the city marshal heard the news and came scurrying.

The marshal started to yank Jughead but the light-weight cowboy was practically anchored where he stood—even now. A hack carried him and his find to the city jail, and he yielded some \$25,000 in gold, a good hundred weight to begin with.

Jughead's employer, an old rancher, came in. "Bank robber—that danged Jughead?" the old man laughed. "How 'bout it, Jughead?"

The cowboy couldn't invent anything, and he told the truth.

"Hell, go home!" the rancher said, and the cowboy went, "You're entitled to ten per cent, marshal. Why the Hell'd that rider have to bring all that cache to town?"

Even the robbers, escaping by the difference between good horses and better ones, had to laugh when they heard of Jughead being caught up as a bank raider! The real robbers were Will o' Wisps of the range, and the detectives gathered descriptions, and names didn't tally with them. However, cowboy detectives were riding, now.

(To be continued)

HUNGER RANGE

(Continued from page 109)

usual, tight scowl was on the cattleman's face. "I heard you wouldn't drive my stolen cattle the other day," he said abruptly. "What was the matter? Were you afraid?"

Jorgensen's lips tightened. "Maybe."

"The sheriff says you bucked Joe Fortney. He has a notion I owe you something. I don't. Even if you hadn't interfered we would have found those cattle and taken them back."

Jorgensen nodded. He offered no comment. "Maybe you're straight," Andrews conceded, "but I still don't like homesteaders."

Chris Jorgensen's smoldering anger boiled over.

"You're still going to have to put up with us," he snapped.

One of Andrews' men appeared suddenly in the doorway. He was carrying a muslin-wrapped side of beef. "What do I do with this, Reb?" he asked, grinning.

Reb Andrews looked around. "That's an extra side of beef we can't use, Mrs. Jorgensen," he growled. "I thought maybe you folks would like it. It's frozen and if hung in the shed in this weather it'll keep a long time."

Thyra was smiling. She nodded her head. "Thank you very much, Mr. Andrews. Yes, it can be hung in the shed."

The man carrying the side of beef left the room. Andrews turned toward the door. When he reached it he looked back. He was still scowling. "Don't get the notion that I've changed in the way I feel about homesteaders," he said bluntly. "I haven't. I still hate 'em. Bringing this beef here doesn't mean a thing."

Thyra was still smiling. "Of course not, Mr. Andrews."

"After the first of the year," Andrews continued, looking at Jorgensen, "I'm going to need another man for a little extra work. If you're still around, why don't you come and see me?"

Jorgensen nodded gravely, "I'll be over."

Andrews grunted. He said, "Merry Christmas, if you can find anything to be merry about."

"It's going to be a wonderful Christmas," Thyra answered.

Andrews opened the door. He stepped outside and closed it behind him.

Thyra flew across the room and into Chris Jorgensen's arms. There were tears in her eyes but she was close to laughter.

"He's just a softie," she whispered. "Why—why I even like him. I think he likes you."

Chris Jorgensen chuckled. His arms tightened around Thyra. He kissed her. It had been a long time coming, but tomorrow was Christmas.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 121)

shall remain in town until an election is held and the paper is well started. I think your nephew will make a good mayor since he has the legal training and has a certain new interest in Colona."

"What interest?" Koffs sneered. Ringo chuckled and looked at Elza. She flushed scarlet and turned away but not before all of them saw her eyes soften as she looked at Vic. Davis scratched his head.

"Never thought of that!" he said. "Yesterday, I'd have raised the roof, if she even looked at a kin of Harry Koffs. But, shucks, I found out tonight he is a straight-shooter and a man."

"So Vic will stay," Ringo cut in smoothly. Koffs started to get up but Ringo waved him back down again. "There is another little item, sir."

"In his extremity, Mr. Davis offered me half partnership in his paper-to-be. I would judge that at—say, five thousand dollars. Under the circumstances I believe that should be your cost, sir, since you forced Davis to make this offer."

"Are you crazy?"

Ringo smiled like an innocent cherub. "You have invested heavily in Colona, sir—saloons and such things. I'm sure you wouldn't want our new mayor to close you down simply because you refused to meet a minor expense."

"Damn you! I'll pay."

"Now—here!" Ringo held out his palm. Koffs stared at him and then reached inside his coat, pulling out a thick wallet. He counted off some gold notes and fairly slammed them into Ringo's palm.

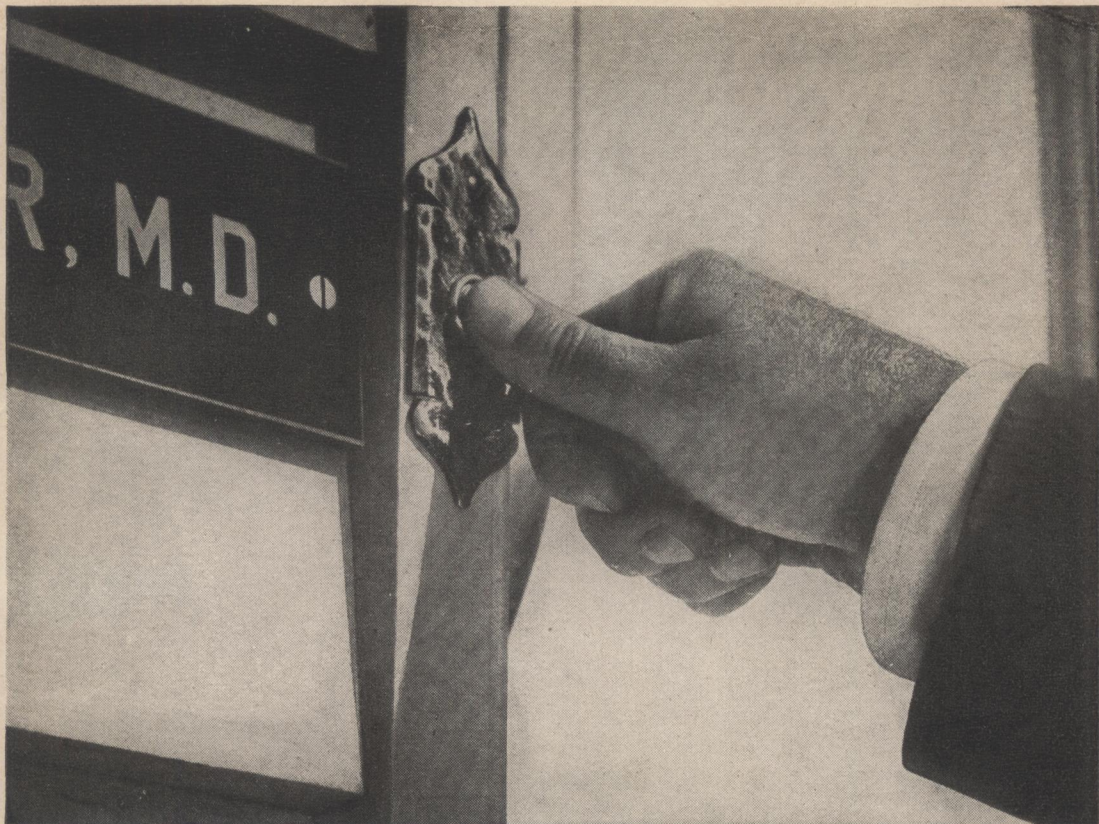
"Now may I go?" he asked, voice thick with sarcasm.

"Certainly, sir," Ringo looked up from the bills. "But remember that your health depends on mine and the unobstructed arrival of law in Colona. A pleasant evening, sir."

Koffs cursed, wheeled and strode out of the office. Davis stood grinning widely and Vic gave a whoop of triumph. Wheeling, he faced Elza and sobered. He looked searchingly at her a moment, then presented his arm. The girl took it promptly, and Vic led the way outside.

"About time we talked things over," he said. "Young love, sir!" Ringo said to Davis. "Have you ever seen anything more beautiful? Unless it's five crisp new thousand dollar gold notes." His eyes grew dreamy and he added, "Or a soft bed where a man can get a rest from trouble and gunsmoke. I bid you good night, sir."

He walked out of the office, cigar at a jaunty angle.



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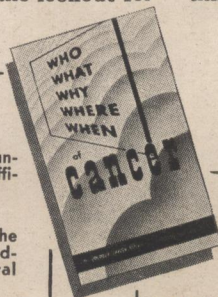
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3. Progressive change in the color or size of a wart, mole or birthmark.
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7. Any change in the normal bowel habits.



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