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WESTERN TALES

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BULLETS BAR HELL'S CANYON!

A NOVEL OF
RED RECKONING

by **T. C. McCLARY**

DEATH IS MY BROTHER

by **KENNETH
FOWLER**

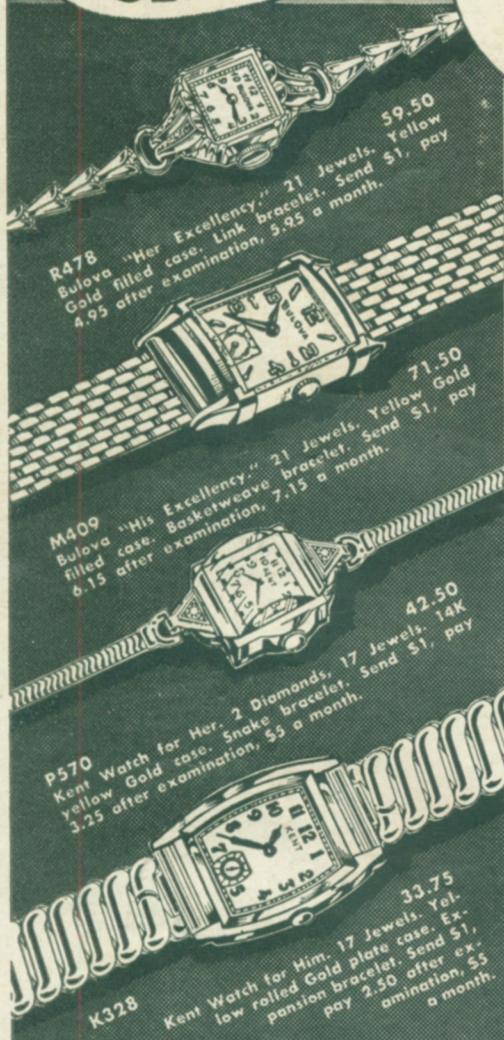
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

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VOLUME 15, No. 3



APRIL, 1948

A Smashing Full-Length Trailblazer

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Where yellow shone brighter than courage—and a coward's blood ran redder than a man's!

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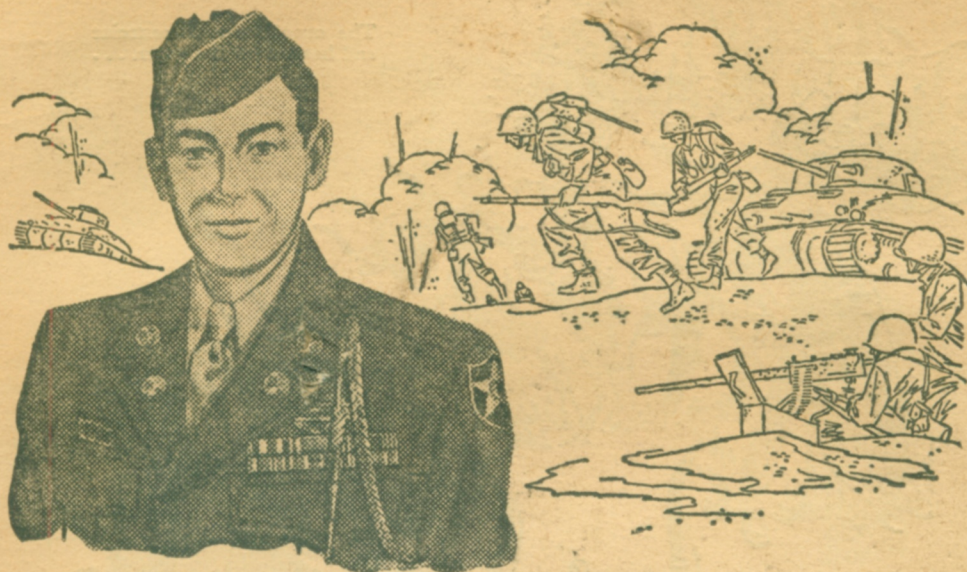
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The oxen broke all restraint
and headed for the water. . . .

ON THE TRAIL

ONE spring morning in 1850, a caravan of weary mormons filed slowly over the alkali of Twelve Mile toward Spafford Hall's Station on the Carson River in Nevada. John Orr was leading his weary followers to El Dorado—"that land of gold"—California. The worst of their journey was over. They had passed the Humboldt, the "river of death," and the Forty Mile Desert, forty godforsaken miles haunted by hunger and thirst, death and dust.

For countless days Orr had been directing his party toward Sun Mountain. At its foot, he knew, ran the Carson River

and close beside it the immigrant trail to California. By noon his wagons were moving up that trail in the very shadow of Sun Mountain. Finally they came upon a canyon, twisted and deep, through which a creek tumbled. Orr's heart rejoiced at the sight of the cool water. He shouted a command through his parched lips. The oxen broke all restraint and bolted for the bunch grass in the creek bottom before they could be unyoked.

While Orr went to Spafford Hall's Station, William Prouse, one of the young mormons in the party, took a tin milk-pan

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Match up the people and the horns

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BULLETS BAR Hell's Canyon!

CHAPTER ONE

Buzzard Killer

HALF a mile below the prairie rim, Gila Candler laid a gnarled, flat-backed hand upon his pony's rump and looked back through the shimmering saffron glare of heat. The moon-shaped crescent was almost perfect, a horn-flecked red crest pulling a billowing wave of raw sienna dust up the pitch of a sage studded beach. Eleven hundred miles of hell and high water and drybeds and all the ills that beset a trail—but the herd was still intact and healthy; as a matter of fact it was a little larger than when it started, he considered with dry humor.

He was a graying giant, solid and tough-knit as a desert oak with the desert's slashing light in his bleached eyes and a face seamed and dark as malpais. Nothing in his life had ever stopped him in his tracks, but now he needed a son-in-law because he wanted a grandson. And the problem found him with no experience or understanding to cope with it.

His steady gaze swept the herd, bunch



In every pause Red would draw a breath and say, "I smell rattle-snake—thick like a pit of 'em. . . ."

It was a strange, new powdersmoke trail for old Gila—a trail where yellow shone brighter than courage—and a coward's blood ran redder than a man's!



By T. C. McCLARY

by bunch. Even at this distance, he sensed the precise timber of its mood and humor. Methodically he noted where each rider was keeping station, unconsciously judging every man's ability to handle trouble if it came, and its chances of coming at that bulge.

He watched Red Singer buzzing with self-importance on the opposite wing from where he should be, and frowned, feeling the pinch of the compromises necessity puts upon a man. Red was not one of his riders, but a neighboring rancher who had thrown in for the drive. He was a man built like a bull with most of a bull's characteristics; not a bad man, but rough and tough and coarse of feelings with a brutal streak that Gila distrusted. But their home range was lonely, bounded on one side by the Border and on the other by treacherous Apache. It was a country short on shooting men at best, and shorter on men who put down roots to stay.

Gila blew against his upper lip, putting the item against his judgement of the man, but holding no rancor because of it. From long habit, his mind etched an accurate map of every crease and draw and brush-crowded gully on that hill. Then he sang down a deep chested call to bunch the herd into column for the hump over the gold and rust-fringed rim onto the prairie.

Red elected himself to repeat the orders with details every Candler rider knew by instinct. The rangelord turned back forward, grunting, "I dunno but what I'll have to rope and throw that snorting bull myself one of these days!"

He got no answer and glanced sidewise at his daughter, Gail. She wore a flat-crowned hat and fringed buckskin and ordinarily looked like a boy on trail. But they had moved through rain that morning and the costume had dried tight upon her, emphasizing her compact mould, and reminding him again that time was

passing and he needed a grandson to avoid the waste of his life's toil.

The girl's attention was upon a glare-screened rider moving along the rim. Out of sheer high spirits she wigwagged to him. Getting no response, she frowned and added, "Hey, you up there, ain't you alive?"

The rider twisted, looking for whom this was meant, then realizing it was himself, lifted up his hand. He drew a gun out of a saddle boot and swept the sky. Gilla glanced out at where two vultures were making their interminable circles and grunted, "What's he trying to do? He can't reach 'em with a shotgun and he won't hit 'em with a rifle."

A puff of smoke came from the rim and the sharp smack of a rifle rolled down to them. One of the big birds flopped upon its back and started to plummet. Gila muttered with faint surprise, "That is danged good shooting!"

Almost unconsciously, he gave the shot other values, considering the practice, the patience, the steadiness and determination it took to achieve that skill. By such items was much of a man's history shown.

THE rim rider was tall and angular and dark of flesh and a smile eased the gravity of his wide mouth. He had been beaten up by four men at Independence for helping a strange young lady across a mudhole of a street. At Hays, he had been robbed of every dime he possessed. Now at Dodge, two drunken farmers he suspected of having fixed his robbery at Hays had built themselves a fight and been shot dead, and the other farmers of the immigrant train were blaming him for not siding them.

But here was the spontaneous friendship of the West offered at last, and he had returned sign of his own merit. It was a new life, and he felt the rough stir of a man's emotions at suddenly breaking loose of bad luck that had haunted him.

He thought Gail a boy or he would not have ventured to think of friendship, but for that instant, the dark loneliness of his own youth was lifted.

Then his smile, his whole body froze. He sat motionless and watched the bird show life and flop off crazily at an angle for the bunching herd. A big, red-headed man was angling across the herd's face, and the bird piled smack atop of him. The rider let go a startled roar and bolted his horse, riding like the very devil was atop of him.

Red's bellow and getaway were all that was needed to spook the herd into a stampede. The rim rider sat appalled at the sudden violence that could seize five thousand weird looking longhorns simultaneously and turn them into a wave of berserk horns and hoofs and red flesh thundering under a solid cloud of yellow dust smoke.

For three hours, Zach Tillman watched the stampede in all its frenzy, feeling the throb of the earth, the bellow of hurt cattle, the raw-throated curses of riders, the flat bark of whips and pistols, striking upon his misery and guilt with a lash that was physical and personal. Yet not even black guilt could kill the thrill of that wild scene, and admiration for the gray giant of a man who marshaled his men to turn the rushing tide of crazed violence into side waves that spilled off into the creases of the hill. It was probably his whole fortune going to hell, but nothing broke the iron quiet of his command.

The stampede was broken as suddenly as it had started. Before the dust had settled, the herd was fanning out through the shadowing land swells of the prairie. Harsh curses had turned to cow lullabies and hard humored calls. Already, the men's minds were on getting into Dodge.

Zach's gaze narrowed out at the vast reach of country struggling clear of the thinning haze until it ran into the cooling sky. It was incredible that a man, the

individual, stood so big against all that space. One man, and one man only, had kept that stampede from turning into a cauldron of gore and guts and ruin.

His mouth compressed and his past pulled through his feelings with a thousand hot, sawing wires of memory. Whatever he'd done since his mother died seemed to have been wrong, or else whatever went wrong was his fault. It was so again and shame was a great black sea of thoughtlessness into which he thirsted to plunge, at least until tomorrow. But this was something a man had to own up and do what he could about, at least. Sucking a great breath through his teeth, he set out across the plain toward the camp, already made while the stampede was still seething.

GAIL CANDLER had thrown off her hat and pitched into making camp and getting coffee and hot water started, range born and range bred, and, unbidden, doing her part in readiness for what might turn out a little fun or a big funeral. She heard the crunch of gravel and turned with a smile meant for her dad, the soft brightness of relief a gold shine in her eyes, and with her woman's guards forgotten.

The dark stranger sat staring, catching the rush of her gentleness and the loneliness of her own life across the sensitivity of his raw feeling. Then he remembered himself suddenly and touched his hat. He blurted out of his drift of thoughts, "I didn't figure you for a girl, m'am."

She bridled, instantly conscious of her trail outfit and hot dusty look. "What did you think I was, a two legged ladino?" she demanded sharply.

His dark flesh turned to the hue of hot charcoal. "Oh, no m'am. At half a mile and through that heat—" he started to explain.

Her eyes turned deadily. Her voice fell to a whisper with hell's threat in it. "By

gum, yo're the empty headed, dim-witted, booby mudloon, tinhorn, dude jasper that shot that buzzard!"

He looked down at his white-knuckled hands clamping his saddle bow. "Yes-sum." He swallowed hard. "I'm Zach Tillman from Connecticut."

"So help me Hannah!" she fumed. "They forgot to cut you up for phoney nutmegs! You've got a nerve even staying on the prairie after what you did!"

He nodded abjectly. "Yessum. But I had to come try to square things, least-ways."

She stared at him. She probed his honesty and came to the astonished conclusion that he meant it. The range's hard, realistic humor broke through her anger. *By golly, he is all those things I called him—and ones I thought besides that.* . . . She laughed inwardly.

Aloud, she asked, "You figure this is a good time to come talk about it?"

He made a gesture. "Our wagon train rolls out at dawn."

"Oh," she murmured. She hadn't thought about him personally at all, but now all at once she thought of the gentleness in his hands and the way he'd looked at her before he realized, and the lonely misery and spectre of some deep bitterness in his voice. It would be kind of nice to know a man that honest and modest and gentle just for once; a man that looked as if he might want a woman's nearness and need her now and then for something beside cooking vittles and putting him back together when he came in busted up or drunk.

She brought her mind back to the present. "How would you aim to settle for the damage?"

He turned his lean, strong-boned face away, trying to lock his expression and steady his voice against a man's deep, corroding emotions. He slapped a hand upon his pony's neck. The animal's ears cocked instantly, listening, feeling, trying

to sense what it was the rider wanted.

He said, "Ginger here and my rifle are about all I've got to offer."

She saw he wore no six-gun. Probably like so many of the Yankee greenhorns, he'd never even shot one. She caught the love and closeness he bore the horse, and the infinite trust and loyalty the animal had for him.

"Why, my pa wouldn't take your hoss!" she said.

He misunderstood her. He said, "Oh Ginger ain't so young but she is good for a few foals yet!" He tugged dismally at her mane. "She's blooded and high-spirited but gentle as a kitten, and she'll darned near train a colt herself."

A certain grimness came into his eyes. "She ain't ever been rough handled," he added tightly.

It was then Gail noticed he wore no spurs, just light shanks without point or rowel, and he carried no quirt, and had an idea his bit was nothing but a simple snaffle. She thought of the rough mustang stock their ponies came from and the heavy quirts and Spanish rowels and spade bits that were the custom. It gave her a twinge of shame—not for her harshness, but her horsemanship!

A rider came down the bank at full tilt, slacking his horse roughly to call in, "Miss Gail, yore pa says leave camp as 'tis and ride your duds over to Stamm's. We're moving the herd over for checkin. . . . It's by them chocolate cake sandhills."

"Anybody get hurt?" she asked.

The waddy gave a high humored grin. "A certain party sure got his sensibilities mangled! He's still looking around for the devil was atop of him!" He filled the air with his dust raw chuckle and let his pony out, slapping headlong across the creek and up the other bank.

She whistled her horse in, tightened cinches and swung up into the saddle. To Zach, she said, "You can ride along if

yo're sot to, but yo're taking chances afore pa's simmered down and gets a look at Stamm's money!"

"I'll ride with you," he murmured doggedly, and they moved out into the gold slashed crimson spokes of evening light.

There was nothing harder on a horse than long, steady riding to an ox train pace, but his pony's hoofs were light and her sides sleek and there was a flowing rhythm to its gait that made her mustang seem like a rock crusher. At a canter, some of the bleak, spiritless misery drained from him. He was like a fiddler taking joy in the piece he played, part of it himself, and still listening for some way to better it.

They swung into the horse corrals where Stamm and her father were palavering while the cattle were run into the big wet pasture behind the frame house. Mrs Stamm stood in the oblong kitchen door and called to her and she wigwagged back, but found excuse with her horse to see how Zach came out.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Feud

GILA gave him a flat, inscrutable glance and said before Zach could open his mouth, "Yo're the hombre stampeded me to kingdom come and back!"

"I didn't figure. . . ." Zach started, then drew his shoulders up and his jaw-line hardened. He said straight out, "Yes-sir."

"Damned good shot," Gila allowed. He thought of Red, bellowing like his tail-feathers were afire and humor danced in his eyes, but that didn't prove anything with Gila.

Zach stared at him, not able to pierce the wall of the ranglord's self containment. Hope and misery were alternately

slamming through him like echoes in a canyon.

The girl took pity and gave her father a prod. "Pa!" she muttered. "He come riding over to try and even up the damages, and all he's got to offer is his horse and rifle."

She saw a bare flicker, a shift of the quality of light, in her father's eyes. He spat and studied the horse, by which she knew he was giving Zach a thorough once-over. It was not a country where a man admitted his faults unasked or pushed his troubles ahead of him, and this was an indication of unusual honesty or an act meant to save a man's face and shame. Or, it could be plain cold fear that if he didn't come with an offer Gila might send after him.

Gila grunted noncommittally, "Right nice hoss." He cut sign on the points, the blood, the breeding, but most of all he put store by the animal's pride to do her master's slightest bidding. He looked at Zach. "What's she wuth back East?"

"Ginger?" Zach asked with the surprise of a question he'd never thought about. "Why I don't rightly know, Mr. Candler. I raised and gentled her. I never thought of price more'n you would a queen."

Gila looked at Stamm. He allowed, "Sounds like he kinda likes his critter."

Stamm said dryly, "Yeah. He was standing in town in front of Benson's wiping her down when two of the toughs shot down two men from his wagon train in front of Green's. From what I heard, you kept right on wiping her, Tillman?"

Zach reddened. "They weren't friends of mine," he muttered sullenly. "They wanted a fight and they got it!"

"I'm kinda surprised the whole wagon train don't want to fight!" Stamm grated, mostly to Gila. "If it was a cow outfit, they'd have burned the town down by now."

Gila gave him a questioning glance.

"Two of their women were kidnapped in broad daylight," Stamm said. "And ain't been seen since."

Gila said across his shoulder, "Hear that, Gail? I don't want you in Dodge alone after even light."

He looked at Zach without friendliness, but without Stamm's harsh contempt, probing, feeling, trying to fathom why Zach had not helped the men from his own train. Zach's restraint might be a good sign, or a bad sign, and upon Gila's estimate hung his consideration of what to do about scoring off the stampede damage.

Shadows were turning the golden grasses and gray sage into purple feathers and filling the hollows with thickening dark blues. Red Singer galloped in from the dusk, jerking his horse cruelly from dead run to a rearing stop. Violence was still a red flame in his eyes, and the harsh ring of black pride was in his voice.

"Gila," he rasped, "I aim to take the boys over and bust every wagon in that damned nester train off its axles for the stampede!"

"Furst off," Gila grunted, "you ain't taking my boys on any jamboree like that! The hombre that shot that buzzard's offered to pay damages. Second, I've got a question to ask you . . . why in hell weren't you with your own cattle coming into a bottle at a rim?"

Red flared but couldn't hold Gila's ice-gray gaze and dropped his head. "I'm no hired hand!" he growled. "I reckon I know what I was doing."

"I reckon I know, too, and next time you start running my business for me, mister, yo're going to get something tougher than a flopping turkey on yore back."

Red's breathing sounded like the grate of a desert wind. His pride had been pulled down twice and kicked in front of the girl and Stamm. "Blame it on me and side a bunch of damned nesters then!"

Zach had paled a little, unused to the flareups of range violence and the harshness of its men. He put in apologetically. "Mister Candler, I didn't meant to go causing trouble betwixt you two—"

Red's head spun; he turned his horse on Zach. His eyes were flaming pools of wicked, brutal anger. "Yo're the hombre— He jumped his pony forward with a vicious slash of spurs. He grabbed Zach by the vest and shirt and smashed him back down hard upon his pommel. Grabbing his hair with his left hand, he began to cuff him cruelly with his bradded gauntlet. An experienced man would have kicked both of them to the ground and used that chance to even things. But Zach just sprawled there, grabbing Red's left wrist and babbling something about fair fighting until his gasps turned thick with the blood filling his mouth.

THE girl had been raised by men and with men and knew their flares of brutal violence, and was not going to turn womanish and hysterical at this. But her face grew strained and her lips tightened. She finally turned an appealing look at her father.

He scowled with irritation at horning in, but flicked his wrist and his bull whip uncoiled, landing on Red's pony with an explosion like a pistol shot. The horse jumped and bolted, carrying Red clean out of the yard before he got the bit again. He sawed the horse to a stop, cursing it violently, and turned to call back, "You standing up for the gutless skunk now, Gila?"

"Just reminding you," Gila told him, "not to go getting rough in front of my daughter!"

It struck her as incongruous, but she thought of the time Red left her sitting in a cloudburst while he had a fight, and then drunk with pride and glory, went off to strut and snort and soak up the whiskey and the homage of the boys.

Red was muttering, cursing, but dared not test Gila's temper further. He swung his horse and clapped spurs and quirt upon it, and galloped over into the rising darkness, taking his temper out on the poor animal.

Gila flicked Zach with a cold gaze and said to Gail, "Tell the simpering green-horn that squares things and to take his hoss along if she ain't got too much pride to tote him." He swung away to the holding pasture with Stamm.

Zach had regained his balance and sat mopping at his pulped face. The girl looked at him with blazing scorn and hurt, and then saw he couldn't even see for the blood, and softened grudgingly. "Get down there," she said brittly.

"I'm all right," he told her hollowly. "I'm just plumb sorry I shamed myself before yore pa atop the trouble I caused you and nice like he took it."

Even after her father's cold insult, she thought, he was thanking them for their generosity! There was no meanness in him, no picayune rancor. "Get down!" she commanded again, "And let me patch that face before it falls clean off of you!"

He got down like a big kid muttering he didn't need any help and she got fixings from the crippled Mrs. Stamm and came back through the velvet dusk. She could feel some deep puzzle on his mind and finally it blurted out, "If he wanted to fight, why didn't he say so and get down?"

She went dead still, sensing him, sure there was no bluff or attempted excuse in his question. He was just so plumb green, he didn't know men fought rough!

She pressed a piece of salt pork against his eyebrows. "Didn't you ever have a real fight, Zach?" she asked.

"There were those four brothers at Independence—" he muttered.

"No," she said. "I mean one man. I mean fighting so you didn't care what you did as long as you hurt him bad—or killed him, even?"

His mind went back over the barnyard and schoolday fights of which he'd held a man's decent pride up to now. They weren't what she meant, and he shook his head. "No, I reckon not," he admitted. "But I never run off, Miss Gail."

"I believe that, Zach," she told him, moved. She finished the job and there was nothing to hold him now, and the yellow lamplight from the open kitchen door was a long oblong nearly out into the darkness of the corral. She stood there with a woman's thoughtful smile, a little maternal, a little unhappy at what had happened and at the parting, a little happy to know what her simple belief in what he said had meant to him.

He came to his feet, moving awkwardly, some thought beating against his shy, dispirited restraints until it exploded. "Miss Gail," he said, "don't go riding into town alone even in broad daylight. You don't know the wickedness of Dodge."

She was glad that he'd said it, glad he thought that much of her after what had happened. But because of his own honesty, she would not deceive him. She didn't answer. She said with a smile, "Don't shoot too many turkeys over the wrong herd now!"

He forced a grin that wasn't very good and swung into the saddle. On a sudden impulse, she ripped the carved bone ring from her bandanna and pressed it into his hand. "That's to remember me, Zach!" she murmured.

"M'am," he said with something akin to worship in his voice. "I wouldn't need anything ever to remember you!"

She heard him, but she didn't turn. She was running against the suddenly damp mist of the kitchen light with the hand he'd touched pressing to her mouth.

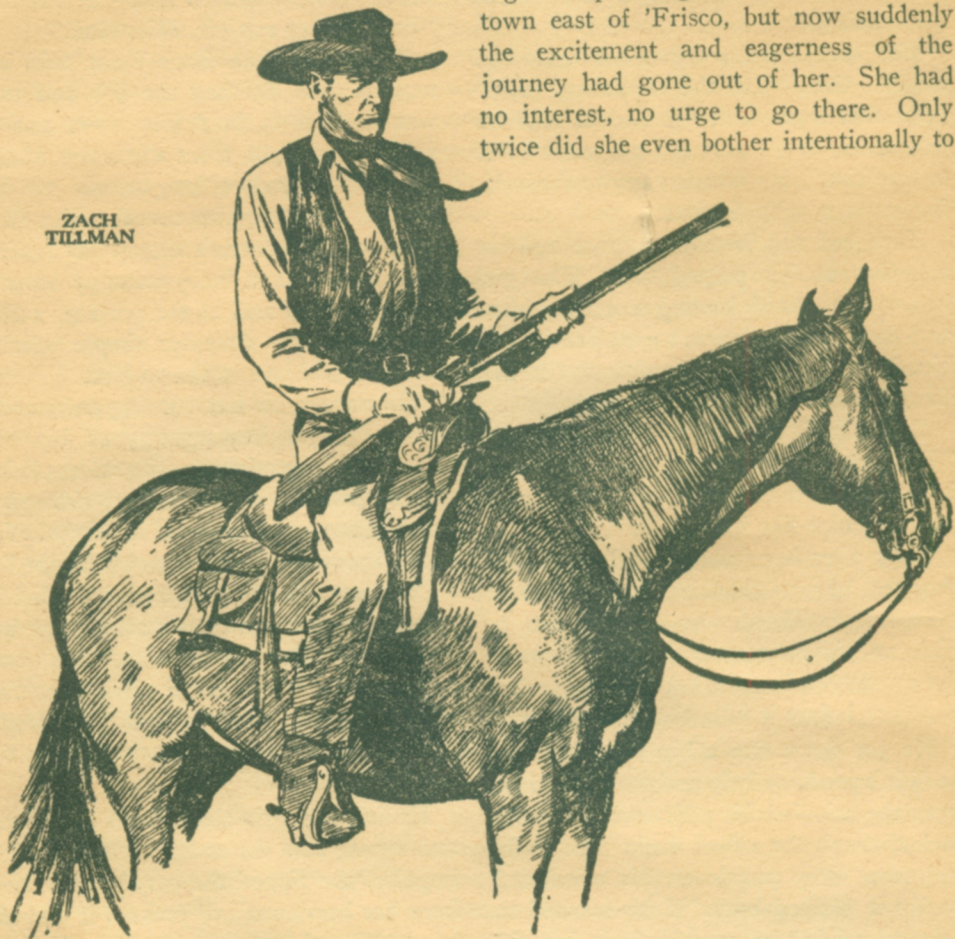
AT DAWN, she stood in her bedroom watching the high dust of the immigrant train billow and smudge against the sky. At breakfast, her

father looked at her three times, which was unusual. They were the last to eat and, rising, he stood a moment with his back turned to her, looking at the floor.

that, harsh as he was in his judgments, he was not too proud to own up where he might be mistaken.

For a year, the girl had planned on seeing the uproaring, reckless, wildest hell-town east of 'Frisco, but now suddenly the excitement and eagerness of the journey had gone out of her. She had no interest, no urge to go there. Only twice did she even bother intentionally to

ZACH
TILLMAN



"I learned in town last night," he said, "the man Tillman had bad feeling with those two farmers who got shot and figured them in cahoots on getting him robbed back at Hays."

His tone was casual.

She watched his broad, burly back move out the door. It was not an apology for what he'd said, it showed no definite switch of his opinion. But it was a decent admission that one thing that might stand against a man's courage had another side to be considered. It was like her father

look at the boiling dust smoke that hung over Dodge all day and the wicked glow of its lurid lights at night.

Word came suddenly from her father that he'd made a deal with a new immigrant train to take its big mixed remuda through the Apache country and she was to be back at camp at three o'clock. It gave her less than half a day for shopping, and she borrowed Mrs. Stamm's buckboard.

Mrs. Stamm hobbled with her lame gait to see her into the buggy. She stood a

moment clutching Gail's hard young hand, a frail and withered and very gentle lady, but with the steel in her eyes that comes to those who have lived long in pain. She had been Gail's mother's closest girlhood friend and now she took the privilege to tell Gail earnestly, "Dear, whatever you do, don't weaken and marry a man who has no gentleness and consideration! Don't ever weaken—kindness means so much more against the raw and lonely frontier." Her voice caught and the light of her eyes turned in upon herself. "So much more," she whispered, "than I hope you'll ever know!"

Then she patted Gail's arm and stood back and smiled and wigwagged as she pulled over the hump of the tawny hill.

Gail drove in with the words echoing through the sterile canyons of her mood. Where would you find gentleness and consideration on this merciless, tough and treacherous range? she wondered. Even if it were in a man, the deserts and harshness of life would grind it out of anyone less indomitable than her father. Of all of them, Red was the only one with a thought beyond the primitive demands made of an outright squaw; Red had, on occasions when he had not altogether forgotten her, brought her a ribbon or some candy or taken a spring scrubdown just for the occasion of taking her to a winter dance.

It was eleven A. M. when she hit the tent and packing case fringe of shanty town and came into the main drag. Dodge City had already caught its second wind from the night before and was going full tilt with the lid off. Barkers called out the gaudy allurements of their particular establishments in no uncertain terms on some of the narrow side streets, the tinny jangle of nickelodeons making a background for the chunk of dollar slot machines and the high-edged laughter of painted dance girls and the deep-throated roars of men in liquored humor or anger.

A week before she would have been carried like a chip on a cataract at the mere feel of excitement and robust life and the steadily drifting crowd. But now she looked at the rutted streets and dust-soaked walls and cheap, painted, flimsy false fronts and found the place raw and drab and garish, and grim and sordid. A corner of hell would have had the clean smell of sulphur by comparison to this human sink.

At a quagmired crossing, a man berserk with rotgut fury at an overburdened mule that could not move drew his gun and shot it, and left it only half dead, and nobody even bothered until some boys found it for a target. A bootless drunk sprawled senseless and grotesque behind a pile of barrels where he'd been beaten and robbed, and from a dirty-curtained window came a woman's shrill abuse until it was chopped dead in mid-crescendo. A patently honest traveler was heaved bodily down a flight of outside stairs, and in a stagnant shadowed alley, a circle of men grinned viciously and there was that terrible sound, the hollow break of a man's gasping when he can stand no more pain.

This was the main drag and her nerves pulled like a rawhide lariat at what must be happening along the narrow side streets and in the deadfalls. She saw no solitary relieving sign of decent glory or clean-cut adventure or high-spirited gallantry. Tombstone was rough and tough, but had the clean violence of the winds—this was something brutal, cruel and vicious.

She sat stiff as a ramrod, her face bloodless as she stared dead ahead, feeling a woman's outrage at unbridled manhood, and the eternal stain of future distrust in man's inherent decency.

Then the tail of her eye caught sight of Red Singer's horse near a corner. She dropped her face into the shadow of her bonnet, flaming with shame that men she knew and liked were part of the design and color of this sordid picture.

DAY'S heat built into a throttling airless sea, and out of consideration for the team, she drove on to a grove to hitch. The grove was crowded with the motley assortment of every kind of vehicle ever made—the surface sign of a nation on the move, driven by robust spirit and adventure and want of a new life to surge out in the fastest wilderness conquest and settlement ever known.

At any other time she would have stopped to thrill and marvel at this array of transportation's flexibility and progress. But the inward heartsickness at the town's brutal license was still in her. She was sharp at the fretting horses until she saw Red Singer had sneaked out from somewhere and, crouched low, was pulling against her off rein.

She let the reins go slack, too moody even to bother flaring out at him. He stood up grinning and hitched her team and swaggered back to help her down from the wheel rim . . . not a really bad man at all, but a coarse and blowing and bullying man that a woman might think of as she would.

He might, of course, have come by Stamm's and offered to take her somewhere. But he had not bothered with that, being more concerned with his own hell-raising, and in the full week they'd been there, she did not think he'd even bothered to dress up. He was above the dudes, scornful and suspicious of a man who made a practice of daily shaving and clean hands, but there was still a brutal power to him that could eventually beat down a woman's sensibilities and smother her hungers. The plains were dotted with women old and gaunt and bitter at thirty because they had been taken by the brute power of men like Red.

There was no step on the buckboard and she had no choice but to lean into his outstretched arms. It was not until she felt the bold, familiar press of his

hands upon her that she looked sharply at him and saw the raw redness of his eyes and caught the sour smell of a full week's drinking.

He let her down and held her just off balance, rough and arrogant in the way of a man who is in a mood for recklessness. She said tightly, off key, "Red, you're stoked with liquor!"

He laughed, low and gritty and careless of her feelings. "You'd best get used to that! And we might as well make sure of it right here before we hit the back trail."

There was no sense in calling out in a town where there was not even a word for murder. But she would not have called in any case—she had too arrogant a pride herself, and now she simply shoved futilely at his bellows chest, trying desperately to think of some way out that would not cross his pride too deeply.

There was no way and she knew it even as she thought, and with it knew that what happened now would be the first and decisive break in their relations. This would begin the sheer brute dominance that eventually breaks a woman into not caring, or the beginning of a feud that would eventually involve her father.

Her back was gouged against the wheel; she could feel the raw animal heat beat out of his iron muscled body as he pressed against her. Threading the sour smell of whiskey, she caught the fainter scent of some woman's cheap perfume. His face was stubbled; there was a blot of rice powder in his beard, and she thought with something akin to the weakness of a faint spell, *He hasn't even washed since he spent the night in that saloon.* . . .

A voice cut through this darkening abyss of primitive animal possession. A voice saying, "Ginger, no animal should drink when it's overheated."

Red went dead still. He stood motionless, brute senses reaching out and locating and knowing the speaker and seeking

to find if the remark were random coincidence or meant to break in. Anger was a quick and instinctive reaction in him, but his brain could not shift as fast, and now he was not quite certain of his course of action.

The girl knew that, and knew he was waiting for blind animal emotions to guide him. It crossed her mind that a man like her father would never, at any time under any conditions, have a doubt of what he should, and meant, to do.

In that instant, she twisted loose, steadying her voice to call, "Why, it's the greenhorn!"

He stepped into clearer view as if with surprise, but his horse was dry and he was afoot, and she knew that from some outpost, he had followed her into the grove and had seen the whole thing, but built this little act to save her feelings.

She moved away from Red, threading the wagons to stroke Ginger's nose. "I think pa was an idiot not to grab yore hoss!" she told him lightly. "How come yo're not halfway to Oregon?"

COLOR spread slowly through his dark-hued skin, and a screen of deception he was obviously not used to dropped across his honest gaze. As plain as if he'd told her, the truth rushed through her that he had stayed on guard at the edge of town to follow her and protect her if she rode in alone.

Red's gritty snort crashed through the gentleness of her feelings. "They likely kicked him out of the wagon train afore he got 'em all scalped!"

He spur-dragged over, moving slowly, eyes small and blazing flames of baffled anger. Truculence hung over the breaking line as slow-rising water tops a dam before a wind starts it sluicing down the spillway.

Zach Tillman swung his attention upon Red. The girl saw tightness pull at his eyes, the strain that holds a man deadly

quiet. He was a man whose precise years were uncertain; he might be twenty-two or twenty-six, but life and experience had not fully toughened him into manhood yet, and he faced violence with a still boyish uncertainty. It could not be fright, she told herself, for his eyes were level, even though there was careful control to his breathing, and if the line of his jaw was not self-assured, it was determined.

"Or," Red growled, eyes getting closer and more piglike, "mebbe he was kicked out of the train for being plain yella!"

Zach's lips compressed but he did not do what Red hoped and expected. He threw no hot insult back; he did not move to strike. Red's lips were twisted with rising cruelty and the big vein in his neck bulged and began to throb.

Inwardly, the girl prayed her voice was right and told Red tauntingly, "They sure didn't leave him for a sour temper or a bum rifle shot!"

The churning anger of Red's face stilled. He turned and glared. "Pistols or rifles," he bit out, "I could shoot the cork out of his bottle!"

It was a local expresion meaning to drill a man through the head, but the greenhorn forgot the cheapness of life and depth of violence on the frontier. He took it as he would have said it, a colorful boast that he could outshoot another man. The coiled tightness in him came loose with an expelled breath. Readiness to meet challenge came into his face; he had the look of a man suddenly on sure ground, and it was in his voice and manner.

"Rifles? I'd take you there, and mebbe teach you something, mister."

The swift change to self-assurance was like a bullet puncturing Red's swaggering, bullying anger. He was still ready with the challenge, but hot lead was a thing that gave a man caution, and he recalled the almost babyish eccentricities of unquestionable gun kings who could not stand to fight any other way than with

their chosen weapon. Maybe this sniveling dude was a different man with a rifle in his hands. Still ready for the fight and eager for glory, Red yet wanted to test his nerve and mettle.

He spread his boots in the dirt and stood with his big thumbs resting on his belts, and sneered, "Why, purty boy, that is fine and dandy, but we ought to give the boys a chance to work up some excitement! I'd like to toughen you up in a turkey shoot."

Red was pleased with himself, pleased with the idea of putting a thing so that Zach had to show his hand in advance. But then fury blazed through him fresh with black suspicion. "Why ya danged creeping tinhorn!" he burst out. "Ya' heard somewhere we're leaving with the immigrant train this evening!"

The structure of Zach's self-assurance shimmered. He glanced at the girl and saw it was true, and the misery of losing a chance to prove his manhood was a fresh tide from the old sea of futility.

"Unless ya got yerself a grub job tending fire and watering!" Red taunted.

The girl's expression sharpened. She looked at Zach, reading his desire, but with it, the fear of what her father would say and the comments he'd make even if Zach tried to get a job with another part of the train. He looked like a kid getting a lecture and not knowing if it would be followed with a licking—all full of hope, but still cringing.

She used her feminine wiles now . . . she put out a hand upon Red's iron-muscled arm. "He can ride," she said. "Mebbe pa'd hire him for grub, Red, if he figured you boys were going to behave and only have a little turkey shoot along the way."

She could sense Red's mind stop and think this over and then fill with some cruel and wicked anticipation. "Why, sure enough," he allowed with a contemptuous grin, "if he ain't scared of Apache coun-

try, I'll see he's fitted in. It's his say-so."

She looked at Zach. "If you'd help me load up when I'm finished, you could ride out with me."

Red's harsh face broke with a laugh of scorn. "That is jist about what he's good for," he allowed. "Womenfolk's chores!"

ZACH loaded her up and got his horse and they left the town's dust and headed into the prairie's mid-day glare. From time to time she studied him, riding beside the buckboard. He was a very plain and honest person to read in one way, but it was hard to be sure about him. He had been forged, but not tempered, and mind and body and spirit were not yet cooled into one clear, ringing unit.

"Don't you want to hire out, Zach?" she asked him.

"Oh, yessum. It was mighty good of you to think of that," he told her gratefully.

"You'll have to eat humble pie," she warned. "At least until the turkey shoot."

"Oh, that ain't nothing atall, Miss Gail," he muttered. "I reckon I'm used to that." Later, she'd find out that his pa had given him a step-mother with her own brood when he was eight, and that accounted for a lot of things, even in a grown man.

They fell silent, but in a mile he asked worriedly, "A turkey shoot wasn't the only kind of shoot Red meant, was it?"

Her face hardened, partly against her own woman's hatred of hurt and violence and death, and partly against the strain of worry in his voice. She didn't look at him as she answered, "No, Zach. Sooner or later he'll force you to another kind of shoot, or he'll make you crawl over red hot coals and grovel in yore shame."

He can't be yellow! she kept telling herself, thinking of the way he waited around Dodge and the risk he must have realized when he horned in on Red's play. And still, that worry was in his voice, and she

could feel it pulsing out of him like heat through a stove.

She stopped the team abruptly, her gaze cool and probing as her father's. "If yo're afraid," she said straight out, "you'd best quit right here, Zach."

He gave her a sick, miserable effort at a smile. "I don't rightly know," he told her. "I never kilt a man."

She stared at him. Then she laughed and, filled with a woman's secret humor, flirted the team along.

She found her father talking with Eben Tait, the train master. "Come dry country," he was grunting, "and we'll split the train; ten miles, a half day's ox march, apart. Heavy wagons in the lead, and we'll bring up the remuda in part two."

Eben Tait, a stolid farmer, looked uneasy. "Won't the Apaches ambush us, knowing the best shooting men are way back out of hearing and sight? It's the womenfolk I'm thinking of!"

Gila Chandler tugged at his iron gray mustaches to cover the contempt that tore at his mouth. "If they attack at all, it will be us," he grunted. "Mebbe it will ease the women's feelings if you tell 'em an Apache is more interested in beef and horses."

The girl waited and got a private word. She caught the instant resistance in Gila, his dislike of hiring a man of whom he did not approve. "He can't do nothing but chores, and there's a hundred farmers

here can do them as well," he growled.

"He can ride," she pointed out.

Gila snorted. "I've got ten too many riders now."

She put the attempt at a build-up from her and came straight out. She said, "Pa, he did me a favor back in town, and I reckon it's my fault he ain't with that train to Oregon, and he took Red's challenge to a turkey shoot—"

The centers of Gila's bleached eyes sprang wide and colorless, and then were cloaked like pure light by fast driving leaden clouds. "Red made *that* challenge?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Things had gotten kind of hot about rifle play," she murmured. "And I horned in my say. But that's the challenge Red made and Zach will have to come along to take it."

Her father was gazing off inscrutably. "Well," he grunted, "it will show either way and a feud like that will bring the boys out of town—I had figured they'd be some trouble to get moving."

CHAPTER THREE

The No-Guts Kid

AT FOUR o'clock the order sang out to roll. The prairie's stillness was shattered by the crack of whips and raw, hot-tempered curses of sullen farmers, and creaking of white-topped



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Conestogas lurching into movement. To make things good, the boys put up a farewell fusillade of shots at Dodge and, over the rim, fanned out the mixed stock for a little grazing as they traveled abreast of the train's slow pace.

It was a queer hour to start out, but Gila's reason was a smart one. His own boys were tough enough to get out of a trail town at dawn, but the thick-bodied farmers were impossible. After a heavy night, come hell and high water, a farmer had to have his sleep. That was something went with 'em like their dirt smell. And for all their piety and lectures, these farmer men would find ten thousand excuses to get off for a last ogling look and pinch of some dance girl.

At nine o'clock they made camp and Gila saw that the boys had already started to needle Red and Zach. Red was gloating, boasting, swaggering and making muscles, but Zach stayed apart as much as he could, quiet and grave and somber. For a full week nothing changed his mood, except the gentleness that came over him when he was doing some chore for her or talking with his horse.

Gila allowed to his daughter briefly, "That ain't jist modesty's a-holding that boy in. He's got something frettin' him."

"Aw, pa, he's green as grass. Give him a chance—"

He scowled and popped his broad thin lips. "Kinda irritating to see a man ride and handle a hoss that way, but get all screwed down in hisself when somebody ribs him about a turkey hunt he may get bested at."

Red's self important yell as he circled out to chase a stray in took Gila's mind to him. "He ain't right either. It's a damn funny thing when that pawin' bull gets to challenging turkey contests!"

He drifted off, but the two men were in the background of his thoughts, and later he found occasion to stop by Zach. They'd camped and done their chores, except for

supper, and the boys were already at rope and knife and lady play, but Zach wasn't even hovering on the outskirts of Gail's fire. He was paring his pony's hoofs with a hoof set upon his knee, and considering the flies and a horse's tendency to put its weight down, that took either damn foolishness, or close understanding betwixt a man and animal.

Gila watched a spell, softened against his inclination. "That's a right risky way to do it, ain't it?" he asked finally.

"Shucks, there ain't no risk atall with Ginger," Zach said modestly. He balanced the paring knife and looked up at Gila, but the thing he saw was a dream far back in his mind. "Way I figure," he allowed, "these steep cold mountains and dry burning deserts have built some toughness in the mustang that when it's good, danged few blooded hosses can ever match. But a blooded hoss has got all that pride and rhythm and strain of breeding—some are better, but most all blooded hosses follow out their line."

Gila growled, "They'd never stand cattle work."

"No sir. But neither will just any mustang. It's hit or miss until you find a good one, and then its foal may be a throwback. My idea is to cross 'em and get the best and keep it. Take the power of the mountain horse and the free run of the desert ones, and put 'em together with Ginger's heart and pride, and hold yore strain in a quarterbred."

Gila stared down at him as if he'd broken a lifelong secret. "Who's going to do all that?" he demanded roughly.

Zach came conscious of himself and made an awkward gesture, modest, but ridged with uncertainty of himself again. "I'd kinda figure I might be able to, some time," he admitted.

"Mister," Gila told him harshly, "that ain't nothing to mess up unless you mean to stick with it—and win out. If a man was to flop, he'd kill the hope of breeding,

but even if he sticks with his idea through good and tough, he won't know if he's right or not for twenty years."

"You figure it would work?" Zach asked self consciously.

"That's in the man who tries it," Gila snapped.

He swung his horse off roughly. His supper was ready; Gail was calling. But he angled off from the wagon, riding out beyond the fence line on the remuda and sat on a rise with the sundown light slashing from his eyes.

The idea of the quarterbreed was what had brought him to that dry desert pocket footing the thundering, snow-capped mountains twenty-five years back. Taming a tough range and fighting a never ending war with Apache and the wilderness had turned him aside. But the idea was still like the morning star hanging in bright clean spendor over a still and cloudless horizon.

His idea—and now the idea was brought home to him in an untried, soft-cored greenhorn who maybe was cold yellow besides!

"By God!" he muttered to himself. "I'll try him and test him, and mangle him myself if need be, as Red alone would never be able to!"

BUT RED was the instrument, and besides that, Gila wanted to know why Red, who was forever beating or kicking down or shooting up some desert town, had thrown out the harmless challenge of a turkey shoot.

Gila found quick reason after that for the train to stop and rest and patch. The first signal smokes had laid like lightest brush mark against the brassy yellow sky that evening. From here on they would be in Injun country, without much risk for a train that size, but never certainty, and both outfits and cattle should be in the best condition possible for a fast run or hard pull out of some creek bed. It was

an easy argument for the jangle-tempered farmers to accept, and they camped for four days, electing the last one for the big turkey shoot and a dance.

There were no turkeys, but the name clung to a type of contest peculiar to the southwest. Prairie chickens, with the devil's quickness in them, were snared and buried up to the neck with one wing out on the very crest of some hill at proper distance. Thus in the clear light just before sundown, they formed a definite, but damned small and wildly moving target.

The rules were laid down, five, eight and a thousand yards, the latter distance the limit-reach of most rifles below a buffalo gun. Two shots to the target, one practice shot to test powder and wind, and the scoring agreed upon.

Red was no mean shot and he had boasted himself up better, but the cowboy money wavered until Red threw a flat dare at Zach to bet his horse upon the outcome. Gila sat by in his saddle, eyes thinned and senses keyed to the two men. With the heat of the contest and the audience of the crowd, Red's arrogant conceit had bulled him out of any fear of losing. Gila concluded that in his present mood, Red didn't even know he could lose.

Zach was a different matter. He was waiting around with a sure step, an easy relaxation in his soulders, and a thoughtfulness in him that almost excluded the crowd. But now at Red's taunting dare, he looked out at his horse, and darkness came upon his brow and he shook his head. The jeers and hoots and rough jokes of the range country dinned on his ears and the cowboy money dumped down on Red, and Zach drew off somberly by himself.

There was no wind where they stood and Red jeered at the idea of a practice shot. Zach took his shot dead seriously, drawing his load, counting every grain of powder, cleaning his gun before he reloaded. That was all right in spite of the

cowboy grins and jibes, but when he wet his finger and held it in the air, and hunkered down to study the bend of a distant clump of rust tipped grass, that was too much for even the farmer gravity. The whole train broke into an uproar, with two or three cowhands doing an Injun dance with fingers lifted high into the wind.

Gila called Red for his first target and, swaggering to the box with a confident grin, Red took a snap shot that was a hit, but not a head. It was good shooting and brought cheers and he took another confident snap shot and severed his target's neck. It brought argument among the crowd, but the judges gave him only two hits and his arrogant good humor turned a little rough, but eased immediately into his previous taunting expression when Zach, after extreme care in sighting, puffed dust dead in front of his target.

For an instant, Zach did not move his shooting position. He held still as ice, studying along the sight. Then he put down his gun and repeated his careful measuring and cleaning. This time he added something, a rather ludicrous stretch to flex every tightness in his shooting muscles. The he carefully sighted and the crowd's high humor toned down a little as he took his target's head off clean. That made the two contestants neck and neck.

Gila said with a thoughtful scowl, "He knows what he is doing, but he is kind of overdoing it. What's he fixing to prove?"

Maybe, she thought, he was thinking of Red's raw temper and the other shooting that might be in store if Red lost. But she did not say that.

Red got a few barbed taunts himself after Zach's clean marksmanship. To cover them, he came up for second target like an Indian hunkering along a hot trail, mocking all the troubles Zach had taken and making a fool of him. But he did not snap shoot this time; he took aim. He hit

to the side of the target and cussed the wind. His next shot severed its neck again, but the bird's reflex tore the head clear and the judges scored a head to make up for argument the other time.

ZACH came to the box, eyes almost closed, head reaching forward to scan his target as if he were trying to smell it. Again he measured his powder, he cleaned his gun, he tested the wind afresh, he carefully smoothed a space. Gila's gaze was intent upon his trigger finger, watching for a hesitancy, a jerk, some sign of nervousness in the muscles. The squeeze was slow and steady and without fault. Again Zach hit dead in front of his target, and again on his second shot, he got a clean head.

Whatever the tomfoolery of all Zach's precautions, this was shooting, and humor sank into the tenseness of the big test. At a thousand yards, the target's head was a bare black dot atop the horizon, with its free wing but a flashing blur of light. The men were still neck and neck, and Red sensed the shift of feeling in the crowd, the now increasing, even if grudging, respect in the cowhands for Zach, and the cool scorn of the better element for his bullish mockery. Cold sobriety wiped the taunting pride from his face. This time he cleaned his own gun, and measured powder, and took time for careful aim.

He shot wide and damned near threw down the gun in sudden flaring anger. Gila watched him with cold detachment. Red pivoted on one heel and glared at Zach. "Suppose you show us how the wind blows?" he sneered.

Zach shook his head with a grave look. "That's what I use my first shot for. The wind may shift."

For an instant, Red looked as if he'd club him with the rifle. Then the jibing comments started and he realized his dignity and respect were at stake. He set

about his second shot as a dead hush ran through the crowd, and he took careful aim and drew and held his breath. But his finger tightened just a shade short of the mark.

Gila saw that and was more interested in that than in the marker's cry, "Wing hit!" But the crowd didn't have his acid judgement. This was good shooting and it gave its unstinted admiration. Red swaggered, some of his bravado washing back. But under that, he knew what had happened and he was rip-roaring mad. He had thrown a perfect shot away and he was just damned lucky to have made a hit.

He planted his feet wide in the dust and watched Zach, eyes wicked and pig-like. "Mebbe," he allowed, "you need a mite of Oregon b'ar grease or a St. Louis lady's pink silk petticoat for special patches for this shot, you mountain man from the Connecticut! Or maybe you'd shoot better if we hushed that moving sand out on the Mohave, only a thousand miles away!"

Zach didn't even look up. His concentration was entirely upon his loading. He leaned his gun aside with infinite care, and stood slowly stretching and loosely fisting his long, strong fingers as he studied both sides of his target. He picked up the gun and stepped into the box, and drawing a sure, fast bead, drew his finger back steadily upon the trigger.

The shot kicked up dust directly in front of the target. The marker's shout sang back excitedly, "Two inches higher'n you'd picked its head off clean!"

The last raw mockery went out of Red's bearded face. Zach was no liar; he'd used those first shots for sure sighting. Had he swapped surety for show, he might have made all first shots head scores at that rate.

Caution came like the grip of a solid hand at the base of Red's bull neck. Caution of an animal kind that was not fear,

but could turn to fear and that pulled at his eyesockets and dried the spittle in his mouth. Caution that reminded Red that this deadly man with a gun was useless with his fists and that this might be his last chance to make Zach remember it.

Zach was cleaning and loading now, and counted grains of powder over again in his loading spoon. Red sucked a deep breath and allowed, "'Course I wouldn't vouch I'd cut out a man's liver and make him eat it for besting me at dude long gun tricks. But I might remind him of a cuffing he took in public now and then. Just kind of edge his memory with a little sanding."

Men felt some private taunt in this and looked at Zach, and Zach, from looking dead still at his powder ration, lifted his head and looked at Red. Something shifted inside him, something so vital that it gave the effect of a definite sound.

Gail fired on a sucked breath, "That was rotten of Red!"

"No," her father muttered. "A man must live with his defeats and weaknesses as well as his hopes and victories. They are all part of him and the man who cannot face them steadily is not worth the bothering with."

Zach closed his eyes for a moment. He squeezed them tight, and lifted his face straight up to the sky, as if trying to breathe and sense the movement of the airs high above him. Then he loaded and flexed and stepped back into the box. He held the gun lightly in slack arms and said to Red, "You wouldn't give any credit to an excuse, would you?"

"Friend," Red grated softly, "I'd ride to hell and back to see no man agin me ever got away with an excuse!"

Zach nodded his head. "I figured that."

He lifted the gun, aimed very high and pulled the trigger. Dust puffed in dead line, but fifty yards short of his target. There was a moment's utter, disbelieving silence that he had fallen so short. Then

like a wave thundering in upon a beach, the crowd lifted its cheers and homage, and the cowboys tossed Red upon their shoulders and stomped around wildly in a war dance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Yellow Courage

RED'S victorious chuckle ripped through the wild racket of the crowd. "Ya think he kinda took the idea of a cuffing serious to heart?" he guffawed.

Dampness was a mirror shine on the surfaces of Gail's eyes. "Did his nerves pull, pa?" she asked huskily. "Red's did—anybody's could have!"

"No," he stated with the utter contempt of dead finality. "His nerve broke, but nothing pulled. His finger was steady as scratching his nose, Gail."

She looked her puzzlement at him. "I don't get you."

"He's yellow as a Chinaman," Gila rasped on a flat, inflexible note. "He was scared of another cuffing. He threw that shot—he made a rainbow of it purposely!"

For one shaking instant, a cry of denial hung in her throat, then the gentleness of a woman's nature was washed under by the indomitable and relentless code of the range. Even a shiftless, lying, saddlebum might be welcomed upon his manners or his humor, or his singing, but in all that empty, lonely wilderness, there was not a fire at which a man with the yellow brand was tolerated.

The crowd piled off to find refreshment and left Zach standing upon the field of his defeat—as alone as if he were marooned upon the space-swept ice of Mt. Whitney.

Gila looked at him with the implacable hatred of a man whose dream has been dreamed by a weakling not worthy of its

secret. His low opinion exploded in one vital breath and he turned his horse away.

Zach looked up, eyes deep sunk in their sockets, lips compressed into a wire thin line. He looked at the girl and the barest shade of a smile that she had stayed touched him. Then he saw that the thing in her face was pity and not liking, and he gave a grim gesture and bowed his head and moved dispiritedly toward his horse.

It was Gila who rode out from behind a wagon and halted him as he started to ride back toward Dodge; Gila, who said as impersonally as talking to a stranger, "Yore trail's with us, Tillman."

Zach's head snapped up. "What do you want of me after what you think?" he demanded.

Gila nodded off toward signal smokes rising against the savage pageantry of the sundown sky. "But there are Indians waiting for any strays."

Zach gave a bitter breath. "You wouldn't worry about my hide!"

"No," Gila granted. "I'd like it most stretched upon some teepee. But each white scalp is like a keg of firewater to them. The smell of yore blood might start ranches burning for five hundred miles away."

He watched Zach steadily, but he did not find exactly what he expected. He thought Zach would turn back precisely as he had started out to Dodge—in spiritless fear and crawling in the excuse that he was doing it to save trouble. What he saw was Zach pause and consider the statement and weigh it in his private judgement. Weigh it, and weigh something else against it, and then nod with bitter but firm decision, "All right."

It bothered Gila for a space; the fact that the man showed spirit enough to think and make up his own mind, and he probed for the thing Zach had weighed against returning. Methodically, he ticked off the items that Zach might have been

thinking of. Then it came to him with the putrid taste of seeing another man—a good horseman—use his very shame and yellowness as a defense.

The only thing Zach could have thought of was another, and an unstopped, beating at Red's hands. And what he had seen was that he was safe—safe because Red knew he'd scared him out of the contest, and a man that yellow was too damned low to even kick.

Trouble began when they rolled out of that camp. The worn and sullen-tempered farmers were snapping with minor feuds and dislikes and jealousies under the constancy of strain. Red's arrogance and roving eye had stirred up trouble, and the never deep buried fear and hatred of the cowboy was smouldering in the men of the wagon train against Gila's whole outfit. Cholera struck, and dust colic right atop of it, and they had to stop in a valley plagued with blister flies.

The mixed farm stock began to fret and gaunt and play out in a dozen ways, and the wagons were beginning to break up, and the heat pressed down upon them in new throttling blankets every hour of the day, with night only a black hell instead of white blinding glare with never any letup.

There was sodden drinking and fights became a steady thing and a woman walked within the guard lines of camp and shrieked, and was swollen black and died from snakebite in an hour. Men's tempers grew raw and savage and their humor vicious, and Zach was the point upon which much of the harshness exploded.

He took the taunts, the jibes, the insults and the raw mockery in tight silence, and the kicks and cuffs with grim forbearance. At times, the very cruelty of the treatment cracked the girl's range hardness, touching her with pity. But Zach would not accept even the pity of her glance, and held alone in his shame until he was almost forgotten.

They crossed the Canadian and split the train a half day apart for faster traveling and water, and all this time the signal smokes hung like doom upon the horizon each dawn and evening. But the first section was too big for attack and Gila's outfit were experienced and hardy. There was no worry until the day smokes showed dead in the trail ahead in late afternoon, and Gila grunted with grim, but emotionless surprise, "We're cut off and ambushed!"

They had a few wagons and he picked his spot and ordered a run for it. Sweeping his stock into the center of the wagon fort while it was still closing he watched savagely painted Apache come shrilling down upon them from the other side.

"Eighty-two of 'em and all with rifles," Red rasped, firing over a wheelspoke beside Gila. He was using his six-gun with a patent loader that loaded all chambers at once, and he half-turned to reload, and stopped dead with a thick-throated grunt.

Gila glanced at him and followed his gaze and saw another band, a bigger band, coming down off through the crease of another hill. They charged once, their war whoops guttural and savage and merciless, and suffered for their rashness and fell back to circling at a thousand yards, just beyond the range of rifles.

GILA called a powwow in the center of their fort, eyes grim and unwavering upon the eighteen women in their section. The only thing in heaven or hell an Apache feared was the white man's ability with the long gun. There was a chance, one chance in a thousand, that one light wagon with a six horse team might make a break for it and survive, but it would have to go half loaded with riflemen, and that left half the women there.

A hair-tingling wave of savage shouts burst in at them, and men heaved themselves back into station, firing. In every

pause, Red would draw a deep smell of the powder filling airs and say, "I smell rattlesnake—thick, like a pit of 'em!"

Each time he looked around the fort, bothered by this smell in the midst of warfare. Reckless bucks were beginning to dart in with fire-arrows, and one with a torch had crawled nearly to the circle before he sank upon his own flame from the very weight of lead. Three men were wounded and Deke Crisp had been drilled through the head standing against a wagon wheel and was caught there, eyes open, mouth gaping, a grotesque corpse looking like a drunken man.

Gail crawled over, smudged with powder marks and soot from the fire she had calmly started for hot water. Above the bark and rip and whine of fire she shouted about Deke, "What shall I do with him?"

"Take his gunbelt off and prop him over a wagon tongue to draw fire as a target!" Gila snapped.

Red scowled around at her, "You smell rattlesnake?"

She made a face that showed agreement. Under the pressing, stagnant trap of heat it was a growing stench of sickening sweetness like a pile of rotten melons spoiling.

"Mebbe it's him!" Red growled with a jerk of his head toward Zach.

Zach wasn't even shooting. He was trying to get something out of the loading women and was being roughly snubbed, or in their concentration they did not hear him. He moved by three wounded men, stopped to pick up a pistol and look at it, and Gila rasped at Gail, "Gawd-almighty, take that away from him! If he don't shoot us all up, he'll burn up half our powder."

She turned and bellied back to where she could stand. That was no exaggeration. Pistol shooting was a game for men with whom it was an instinct. She would not even waste pistol shots herself at more than a hundred paces. She took the pistol

out of Zach's hand and shoved it in her belt and saw the bitter tightness that dragged at his set mouth.

"All I wanted was the loads!" he muttered as if she had accused him of trying to steal it. He was pretty well licked in his self-opinion by the cruel rawhiding that he'd taken.

It was a funny statement, but she had no time for it and she ordered curtly, "Gimme a hand," and had him help her with Deke's corpse. Red crawled out from his position for a drink and, watching, called with raw humor, "Set that other hombre in there with Deke and he'll be more use, Gail!"

This was wild, colorful, savage, with full trapping and not too hot yet for jests and swaggering. There was an audience, and Red strutted for it. It was in his eyes and the brutal excitement of his face and the arch of his chest and the way his arms swung from the shoulders. It was in his voice when he roared, "Coax the devils in and we'll salivate the bunch!"

He gave a wild, deep chested laugh and yell, but Gila had crawled back and he wasn't laughing. He looked the camp over and inspected their powder, and told them at the next powwow, "We'll be lucky to hold them off to sundown. Even if we do, they'll come like a floodhead with the first dusk. We're finished unless we get help back from ahead."

Tough men looked intently at the ground, tough enough to face death laughing or damning it, but not tough enough to face capture and torture alone.

Red scowled at his gun, looking at it like he'd never seen it. "I could make the ride, but I'm one of the best shots. My place is here!" he grated.

Gila said nothing. He had made his say and now he waited for a volunteer.

Silence held them and Zach broke the silence, tight with resentment and bitter knowledge of their opinion of him. Even facing Apache and massacre, they'd

shunned him—they wouldn't even let him get into the fight. All of that bitterness and the weeks of cruel hazing was in his voice, but he blurted, "I'd make a try!"

RED'S head snapped up like he'd been hit. Blazing affront was deep in him as his contempt. "You?" he snarled. "You'd ride out and play dead for them to scalp you!"

A muscle quivered once along Zach's jaw and then he dropped his head,

Red yelled hoarsely, "Hell, I'll ride it then!" and straight-armed two men out of the way. A man ran after him holding out their only repeating cartridge gun, a Henry. Red rasped, "To hell with it! I've got my gun!" and waved his pistol, drunk with ego, blind with vanity, a thick-hided bull on the rampage.

He gouged his horse and cleared a wagon tongue, and Gila snapped an order to break a hole in the savage circle and cover him. He went through a break with gun blazing. There was a breathless moment when he dropped along his horse, but then they saw it was but cover against the Indian's third rate shooting. Actually, they were better with arrow or spear.

A smile of relief wavered over the girl's lips. "Thank God, he's safe now!" she murmured.

Gila growled with a frown, "We can't count on that. He'll get away from those that chase him, but they'll have scouts

out on every hill for miles. He should have taken the long gun to keep them at their distance. They'll trap him in some hollow."

The Apache had stopped and were milling in a bunch, making savage guttural sounds of humor. A half dozen bucks were on Red's trail, but without great haste, and suddenly Red discovered the reason at the narrow bottle to the canyon. They saw him drag his horse up in a rear that almost turned them and they heard his hoarse blast of breath through all that savage din. A quality of wild horror was in his voice and his horse was going almost crazy. The Apache bucks had stopped and were watching, laughing.

Red had his gun raised as if to shoot something they could not see, then his horse bucked frantically and almost threw him, and even at that distance, Gila saw Red's iron crack. He wheeled his horse and came thundering back, so fast the Apache could not intercept him, and none of their bullets hit him.

He came in dead white of face, breath coming in sobbing gasps. He got hold of himself, but his eyes stayed wide and staring; he was not the same man as had left.

"Nobody could get through there!" he gasped. "They must have dumped down a thousand rattlesnakes!"

Somebody asked, "The hill?"

Gila shook his head. "Not with a patrol on top of it!" He glanced at his

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE

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work; "King Cole Trio
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daughter and the expression of his eyes was leaden. He chewed at his mustache and dragged his gaze away.

Zack stood with his boots planted wide, staring at the dirt between his feet. Nobody looked at him even with contempt now. He was so low in their opinion as to be non-existent. The girl flashed him a look, but it was simple nervous action. Consciously, she did not even see him.

But he saw the turn of her head and the Apache were yelling and riding and shooting again and he muttered savagely, "Why don't you let me try? You ain't going to use me here anyway."

Somebody rasped, "By gum, them rattlers might not even notice you at that!" and laughed roughly.

Gila gave a half decided nod and for the first time in thirty days, Zack smiled as he flung himself into the saddle. Gila rasped, "By God, I hate to waste that Henry! It's the only repeater in the outfit!"

Zack looked at the rifle he carried. He said hollowly, "I reckon one shot will do as good.

"No," Gila growled. "Give him the Henry. And give me that long gun and yore powder horn, Tillman."

The swap was made and Gila found a moving hole in the Apache circle and judged it carefully and gave his instruction. "Mebbe he figures it's better to die a hero than die in contempt," the rangeford growled as Zack pressed his horse into a gallop to clear the bar. "But I hate to lose that repeater for the sake of painting his liver a different color."

GINGER jumped and gunfire crackled and Gila started to load Zach's fine hunting gun with the outfit Zach had handed him. There was an automatic measuring device and he pinched out a heavy load and rammed it home—and caught the vibration and sound of the ramrod striking bare metal.

Puzzled, he pinched the different measurements on the horn and shook it into his hand. Not a grain was in there, not a grain came out. He lifted his rockhewn face, looking back along their trail and finding memory of no place along the way where Zach had the chance to shoot.

Gail came bringing coffee to him but mostly to stand beside him as they watched the Apache circle fall back upon itself and mill, but with no great effort to interrupt the new rider. They knew the snakes were there and they knew how rattler smell panicked a horse, and they waited savagely to see a white man thrown, and fighting frenziedly in that stinking, slithering, writhing death.

The train had stopped firing and the Apache stopped yelling and no sound but the harsh, ripping suck of breaths broke the stillness of that valley. Zach rode hard, then angled, running his horse along the edge of the coiling mass. Snakes covered the floor of the bottleneck, but they had gathered into islands, still drawn by the habits of the hill of nests from which they'd been taken. Dead calm, and with sixty feet of eternal luck, a horse could get through there.

From the train, they saw the horse spook and flurry, and quiet under Zach's voice and hand. It flurried again, and then, tense but determined as if making a high dive, started forward.

Gila watched with a face like graven lava. There was just one chance in a million if the horse didn't spook and shy or try to stomp a rattler in that thick carpet of them. And there was just one chance in the whole world the horse wouldn't spook—the chance that its rider could so control its fear and nerves.

"He'll never get through!" Red belowed, suddenly wet with sweat. His face was working, his eyes bulging with fear of what he'd seen, but deeper than that, fear that another might prove himself a better man. "He'll crack."

Gila said on a dead flat note, "I'm looking at a man who ate dirt and muck and all the dirty insults we could think up because he ran out of powder on that last turkey shot and wouldn't stoop to say so!"

Red's head came around slowly. He stared at the hard truth on Gila's face.

His lips began to quiver and his eyes went loco wild. He yelled at the top of his lungs, "It's a lie, Gila Candler—he's yella and he'll go down in them snakes!" Lurching suddenly forward, he grabbed the gun he had just seen Gila load and aimed it at the mottled mass around Zack's horse. His voice changed, grew vicious and deadly. "Or by gawdamighty, he'll go down anyway!" he gritted out and pulled the trigger.

Nothing answered him but that metallic click. He stared at the gun and suddenly recognized it, and the echo of that dead striking hammer cracked something in him as a violin can smash thick glass. He threw the gun down.

"Thank God!" Gila muttered.

Zach was through and racing under a protecting overhang of rocks. At the far end of the canyon they heard his rifle crack once. A solid shape came away from a hilltop rock, threw out its arms and pitched downward.

"By gum, they'll see that and stay out of his range, I'll bet!" Gila yelled.

That was all there was to it but the fight, and Gila's judgment had been right almost like a time clock. By sundown the Apache had weakened the fort and stampered some of the stock, and had started wagons burning with their fire arrows. They were circling closer, worked into a reckless savage frenzy.

Then shots sounded from the bare rim of the hills. An Apache patrol fell back from the other side and, on the very crest, a half-naked rider jerked straight up from his horse and for an instant was poised in solid black against the saffron yellow sky before he fell.

The rest of the patrol raced down into the valley, and suddenly horsemen were a black fringe clean across the hilltop before they sank into shadow and their wicked rifles were spitting orange red death out of night's purple.

Gila wearily crawled out from under a burning wagon and threw down his gun. Grabbing a dipper of water he spewed out dirt and splinters and wheel rust and a few pieces of lead he'd eaten. "It's over," he grunted, although it sounded as if it had just begun.

The orange flames were more than halfway down the hill. The Apache firing ceased at a yell, and then there was nothing but a fluid blur of shadow and the pulse of unshod hoofs sinking into dusk.

Gail searched the black forms of men as they came through the wagon circle and he came up finally, putting a strong gentle hand upon her shoulder and asking huskily, "Are you all right?"

"Just kind of weak with pride," she told him and thought "the devil with the gaping crowd!" and lifted her face up to him without a single restraint or woman's guard.

He squeezed her shoulder then and nodded with a quietly wicked grin. "Save that," he told her, "I've got some business!" and pulled at a pair of vicious bradded gauntlets that he'd borrowed.

He moved off into the dark toward a shrinking bulk of solid shadow.

Her father looked at the expression on her face and grinned. "Left waiting in a cloudburst agin, daughter?"

Her nose went up, her eyes spat fire. "Yore darned male animal conceits and pride!" she flared. Then she softened and dropped her face and a warm glow stole down the round, smooth column of her neck and its reason was in her voice. "You wouldn't call him all greenhorn now, would you, pa?"

"That one man hailstorm?" he grunted. "I aim to call him Quarterbred!"

*It's easier to hate a friend than it is to forget his memory
—and Old Zeb knew that if he waited long enough, he
would some day catch up with the bullet his best enemy
—had ridden to eternity!*

I RECKON there ain't a man don't try and throw a little dust in his eyes when he starts to dry up in the stifle-joints and get wrinkles on his horns. At sixty-four he may try to fool himself, but he can't fool that patient old gent with the scythe. He knows he's gettin' on a short rope, so what's the use of cloudin' the trail about it, is what I say. A few more years, now, and I'll be cinchin' up to follow my old pardner on to that green range up yonder. And I'll know him there, like I would anywhere, by the thistles in his britches and that Texas droop in his shoulders. He got that comin' up the trail ridin' on three joints of his backbone, same as I did, and it's a sign you can tell any sun-cured, smoke-tanned old Texican by.

I told Gil and Molly I was aimin' to put this on paper, because I want it right down in the tally book how it was at the end between Tom and me, and maybe because I get a kind of ache in the gut every time I think about the long years when a pair of old grissel-heels was too ornery proud to say sic 'em to each other, when they should have been gettin' along like two pups in a basket.

But here I go, settin' this down hind-end first like you'd expect of a gotcheared old maverick who rides a rockin' chair horse these days, and spends most of his time back-trackin' down the old trails. The time this rightly begins was the morning my daughter, Molly, rode up to my front door at Slash Z to ask would I ride over to Arrow and talk with her husband, Gil. That was a jolt, right there. Molly and me have only been talking over the fence, so to speak, these last ten, eleven years, and she knows I

won't have nothing to do with Gil, or any damned Trimbull that breathes. But up on that little poverty spread of theirs in the Mobeetie country she's stuck by him through hard times and good, and whatever skin it's been off my hide she's wore her brand big enough to read in the moonlight, and the devil with anybody didn't like it.

I was out on the gallery, swappin' a bit of tongue oil with Deputy Sheriff Al Cluff, when Molly reined up her little chin-spotted pinto and looked down at us.

She said, "Hi," and speared me with a look of her keen blue eyes, ignoring Cluff completely. "I'd admire to talk with you, dad, if you could spare a minute."

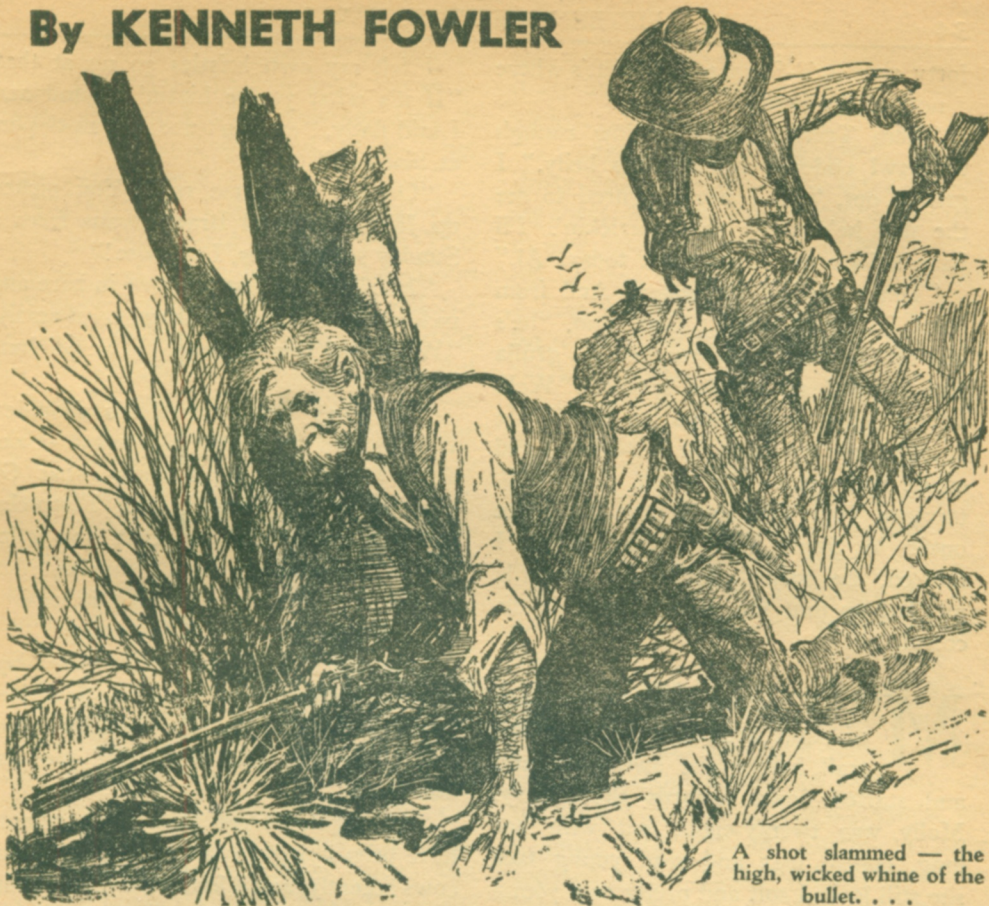
She looked pretty as a painted wagon in her blue cotton shirt and black Californy pants, and I saw Cluff's glance go up to the cowlick of dark red hair that had slipped down from the sweatband of her back-tilted Stetson, curling out from her forehead like a crisp cedar shaving.

"I was just leaving anyway," Cluff said. He sounded reluctant. Cluff had courted Molly once, and when she ditched him for Gil Trimbull, he'd gone off on a week's high lonesome. There'd been bad blood between Al and Gil ever since, and some said Al still had the daunsy over Molly.

"Me and Al," I told Molly now, "was just exercisin' our talkin' talents. Tie up at the corral, and I'll git Miz Caulkins to put on a pot of Arbuckle's."

Molly nodded, tightlike, and swung the pinto, and that's when I noticed how dead white her cheeks looked. "Drop in again, Al," I said to Cluff. Al and me had always got on good enough, but if I

By **KENNETH FOWLER**



A shot slammed — the high, wicked whine of the bullet. . . .

— **DEATH** **IS MY BROTHER**

was due for another whittle-whangin' match with Molly, I didn't hanker to have no outsiders hornin' in on it. But for a second, Cluff didn't seem to hear me. Absent-like, his eyes was runnin' after Molly as she steered her little chin-spot up towards the corral.

"Sure," he breathed out, after a minute. "Sure, I'll do that, Zeb." He started down the steps then, but at the bottom

he swung around suddenly and stared back at me. "Molly looked a little worried about something," he remarked. "Anything I can do, Zeb, let me know."

"Whatever 'tis, nothing you can do," I said shortly. "But thanks for droppin' in, Al. I'll have Reno ride a little tighter line, from here out."

Cluff nodded. "Better do that. You got a lot of calves down in that easy

forty, next to T-Square. And that's where I noticed the break."

"Tom Trimbull may be low enough to crawl under a sidewinder's belly," I gritted out, "but I never figured to see the day he'd stoop to maverickin'. I'll have a look-see down there today, Al."

"Tom's bad off for water. And from what I hear in town," Cluff said, "he's bad off for cash." He reached his grulla and stepped up to the saddle. "Well, let me know how things go, Zeb." He brought up his hand in a two-fingered salute and headed the grulla down-trail, towards Tom Trimbull's little T-Square outfit in Skull Valley. But twice, I noticed, he looked back—not towards me, but up past the gallery, towards the corral.

MOLLY waited until he was out of sight around a bend in the trail before she swung around and started down towards the gallery. Molly was twenty-eight, but with her long, coltish legs and slim young face she still looked soft and pretty as a young calf's ear.

"Come up and set," I invited, as she came around the side of the house, but she halted, instead, and stood at the bottom step, staring up at me with a kind of hard frozen look.

"I haven't got time," she said. Then she took a deep breath and got it out. "Dad, will you ride back to Arrow with me and talk to Gil?"

I stiffened. "You know damned well I won't."

Her lip trembled. "Dad, somebody tried to ambush Gil yesterday, up in the Flatrock badlands. They—shot him."

I jerked forward in my chair. "Shot him! What for? Who done it?"

Molly kept that cold, steady glance on me. "If I knew that, I wouldn't be here. Or maybe I would," she added, her voice flaring up into bitterness suddenly.

I felt my own bristles go up at that. "If it's what you're hintin' around at," I said flatly, "we don't use no gun-tippers at Slash Z."

"Oh no, of course not! You picked up Jake Reno and Brace Evans from a Sunday school class, I suppose!"

"Maybe you'd like to come in here and pick my crew for me," I suggested acidly. "When did this happen? Was Gil hurt bad?"

"No, they just creased his shoulder. It happened yesterday afternoon—about three o'clock. I don't know what Gil was doing up there in the Flatrocks, but he's been riding up that way a lot lately. Something's been troubling him, but he wouldn't tell me what it was. I—I think he was afraid I'd worry."

"Humph! At three o'clock yesterday, Brace Evans was in Mobeetie Junction, buyin' provisions for Miz Caulkins. Jake was right here with me, ridin' the east line fence."

"All right, forget that. But rumors have been flying around you've lost some cows recently, and I know we've lost some calves—more than we can afford. Maybe it was rustlers who shot Gil. And maybe if you'd come up and just talk with him—"

"Let Gil kill his own snakes, and I'll kill mine."

For a minute she stood there stiff as a ramrod, her mouth tight, her hands balled up at her sides into hard-knuckled little fists. Then she bogged that red-headed little topknot of hers and really came apart.

"I might have known!" she blurted out tensely. "You'll go right into your grave hating Tom Trimbull, won't you? And you'll go on hating Gil, because he's Tom Trimbull's flesh and blood! All right, go on and hate then! But count me in on it, because I'm a Trimbull, now. And don't forget, you started this ridiculous feud—Tom Trimbull didn't. You started it be-

cause Tom Trimbull took your woman away from you, and you were too stubborn hell-necked proud to admit Tom or any other man ever could get anything you couldn't get!"

She pulled in a tight breath and then give me the second barrel. "But Tom got her, and that's why you've hated him all these years. If you'd been half the man you think you are, you'd have gone to that wedding as Tom's best man. But no—oh no, not you! You had to advertise what a rotten loser you were by cutting Tom off from the water you'd always shared with him. You had to put up spite fences. You tried to drag him down, break him, wither him up with your hatred. But it wasn't Tom Trimbull who withered. It was you!"

She choked back a sob and then the angry tears came scalding into her eyes and I felt my belly twist up in a cold knot. "Well, you've got what you wanted, haven't you?" She jerked out her arm. "You've got the biggest ranch in the Mobettie Valley. You've got the best grass, the best water, the biggest herds. But you still haven't got what Tom Trimbull's got! You haven't got the respect of your neighbors. You're a broken-down, lonely old man, with your heart all twisted up with bitterness and hatred! That's why I'm glad I can call myself a Trimbull. That's why I get sick with shame every time I have to admit my name once was Molly McKeever!"

I got up stiffly out of my chair, feeling the cramp in my bad leg worse than usual. My voice sounded like a dried stick scraping against a hunk of sandpaper.

"You've spoke your piece. Now get out," I said tightly.

For a long minute Molly didn't move. She just stood there with her pale cheeks streaky with tears and the breath choked back in her lungs, and her wiry little body quiverin' like a snuffy bronc's. She didn't say another word. All of a sudden

she whipped around and started leggin' it for her horse in the corral like a blind bucker.

I sagged back in my chair, feeling shaky suddenly. My heart pounded and my throat felt dry. Something had seemed to bust loose inside me when Molly went off in that tantrum, and for a minute I just sat quiet, trying to get a deep breath, waiting for my heart to stop that crazy pounding.

Stubborn hell-necked proud—I'm that, all right. But Molly had turned up only one side of the tally sheet—Tom Trimbull's side. She didn't know how Tom Trimbull had horned in on Cynthia and me after Cynthia'd been wearin' my ring two months, and took advantage of a no-account little lovers' tiff to talk up his brand to her.

Cynthia was a town girl, and she'd wanted me to sell Slash Z and take up a spread nearer Mobettie Junction. We quarreled about it, and the next day, on the peck, I tried to let out my dander on a pussy-back I hadn't ought to have touched with a ten-foot pole. The bucker blew up under me, and throwed me first bounce. That did it. I was laid up two months with a busted right leg. I writ a note to Cynthia and give it to Tom to take over to her. I wanted to patch things up, but I said I couldn't sell Slash Z—I'd poured too much of my sweat and blood and guts into it. She would understand, I said. And she would like it here fine, once we were settled down and she had begun to get used to it.

I never doubted it. I knowed Cynthia—knowed both of us.

Cynthia never wrote me back, and I couldn't get up to go to her. But Tom took care of that. Tom saw plenty of Cynthia. And then one day Tom rode over to Slash Z. It was just one of those things that happened, he said. He had fallen in love with Cynthia and she was in love with him.

IF I hadn't been all hog-tied with splints, I reckon I would have killed Tom Trimbull that day. As it was, I never spoke to him again but once—the day I was fencin' in the rock spring where I had always let him water his cows. It was on my land, not his. But Tom Trimbull had the gall to ask me if he could use it—just till he could get a well dug, and scrape together enough cash to put up a windmill, he said.

"Why not send Cynthia over to do your beggin'?" I asked him. "Maybe a woman's pleadin' would break my heart, and I'd be just sheep-brained fool enough to let you have it."

He didn't holler calf rope, I'll say that for him. He just gave me a cold look out of them squinted, sun-wrinkled blue eyes of his'n and said quiet-like, "Cynthia's expectin', Zeb."

"I'm expectin' myself," I said. "Some barbed wire. I'll have it strung up by next week. Then keep to your side of it. I got good grass here—too good to have it skint down by any of your wind-bellies and fence-crawlers."

Tom got white to the bone. "I don't aim to beg you, Zeb. But you and me fought together too many times to fight each other now. We don't belong on opposite sides of no fence."

"We didn't," I snapped, "till you started feedin' off your range. You asked for this—I didn't. Now you kin have your damn' gutful of it."

The white went to the tight corners of Tom Trimbull's mouth. Then, without another word, he swung on his heel and walked to his horse. Sometimes, after that, I'd see him in town, and I passed him plenty times on the trail, hazin' some of his skinny culls to the railhead at Mobeetie Junction, but we never spoke another word to each other from that day to this.

Cynthia had Gil, and a year later she was dead. Some said it was from the

strain of childbirth. Others claimed she'd got up too soon to help Tom with the chores around the place. On his little cocklebur outfit he was lucky to carry three men, and there was plenty to do. After Cynthia died, Tom stuck pretty close to the ranch. He never married again; he seemed satisfied to hole up at T-Square, and devote himself to Gil.

Now that I look back, it seems funny how things worked out—almost like fate was laughing at Tom and me from behind the scenes. Almost like fate already had in mind the loco joke it was fixin' to play on us. Because, six months after Cynthia died, I married Lucy Marxman, a chorus lady I met one night after a high lonesome in Luke Shore's place in Mobeetie Junction.

The wonder is that it lasted as long as it did—three years. Lucy wasn't the ranch wife type, and when the chance come for her to join a road troupe leaving for Californy, I didn't try and stop her. Anyway, I had Molly then to ease my loneliness, and I'd hired a housekeeper to look after her. And then, just eighteen years later to the day, Molly eloped with Gil Trimbull. . . .

Now, hunkered there on the gallery and thinking back, it seemed just like yesterday that Tom and me was riding with John Chisum up the Guadalupe trail, with a herd of ten thousand beeves for Fort Sumner. We was hardly more than buttons, but either one of us could part an Apache's scalp at two hundred yards with a Henry rifle, and I've seen Tom do it, more'n once. At the Horsehead crossing of the Pecos, Tom saved me from drowning that year, and two years later, bound for Dodge City with another Chisum herd, I yanked Tom out of a stampede when his horse foundered under him. After that Tom and me swore we was good luck for each other and would split the blankets whichever way our trails should lead. They led us,

finally, here into the Mobeetie country, to start our own irons.

When my thoughts back-track these days, them old times seem more real to me than the here and now, and I didn't hear the scrunch of boots along the side gallery until the voice giggered me suddenly awake. Then I looked up and saw Jake Reno.

"Got a minute to spare, boss?" Reno asked.

"You see how busy I am," I grunted. "Come over and set."

Reno was built small for a ramrod: hardly better than pint size, but tough as whang leather. He had stiff coal-black hair and a kind of tight sullen twist to his mouth, but I'd never had no call to regret I'd hired him, on Al Cluff's recommendation, when Jeff Wheelock, my old foreman, had bucked out a year ago, with pneumonia.

Reno came over and said, "Boss, there's a break in the silk up on the east forty. Looks like somebody'd cut it."

I nodded. "Al Cluff was by and mentioned it. You mend the wire?"

"Didn't have the tools. I'm goin' now for Brace Evans."

"You do that. Meantime, I'll take a little *pasear* up there myself."

A half hour later I located the break, up near the rock spring. One whole section of the wire was out, and it had been pliered, all right. I cut around for sign, then, when Jake and Brace didn't show up, I decided to cruise on along the line. That's when I found the remains of the fire. Some of the mesquite still smoldered, and there was tracks of high heels around it, and farther off, the sign of two horses. On a hunch, I swung my steeldust and rode on over into the graze grounds, in Box Elder Flats.

Everything here looked in order, but I thought I'd circle around a bit anyway. I had my winter's calf crop bedded out here, but as usual, I didn't plan to brand

any till March. I rode out around the herd, but it looked normal size, and it wasn't till I was almost back to the fence that I noticed a few cows and calves slopin' down towards the fence break. I started hazin' these back with my lass rope, and then I saw it. One of the calves nursin' off a big white-face had a fresh brand on it—and the brand was a T-Square!

Maybe you've been belly-kicked; I have. But it never knocked the wind out of me the way the sight of that burnt dogie did. I held my breath till it felt like a streak of fire down in my lungs; I felt a hot pulse of anger beating inside me, and then it went away and I just felt gutted and weak and sick in the belly. . . .

OLD SIME LENROOT, Tom Trimbull's ramrod, was in the ranch yard when I rode up twenty minutes later, draggin' that roped dogie after me. I hadn't put foot to T-Square ground in more than thirty years, and Sime stared at me like he was lookin' at a spook.

"I wanta see Tom," I told him. A queer tightness constricted my throat. "Tell him Zeb McKeever."

Sime swallowed. "Tom?" he croaked. "You mean—Tom Trimbull?"

"He owns this jackass spread, don't he? Haze him out here."

The calf started to bawl. For a second longer Sime stared at me like some locoed old pecker-neck. Then he spun around on his bandied old legs and broke into a kind of jerky, hop-skippety jog-trot up towards the house.

Nothing happened for a couple of minutes. Then I heard a back door slam. A minute later hoofbeats sounded from up near the corral and I jerked around in time to see a rider fannin' the fat of a big Apaloosa. I recognized the horse, then the rider. The rider was Gil Trimbull, he was foggin' it out of there like

the devil beatin' tanbark. I wondered.

Been mixin' the medicine with Tom, I thought bleakly. *They been in on this together,* and then the front door opened and Tom Trimbull stepped out on the gallery.

I sucked in my breath. This wasn't the Tom Trimbull I used to know—with arms like hunks of knotty pine, and shoulders that could have rassled down the orneriest old Brahma in ten states. I stared, shocked. Time chips away at the toughest granite, but Tom Trimbull didn't look just old, he looked old and busted-down and sick.

He came down off the gallery draggin' it like a droop-horned old kettle-belly and halted in front of me. He just glanced at the calf. Then he said, "Howdy, Zeb," and waited.

I fought back an impulse to drop the rope from that damned dogie and brindle out of there with a nine in my tail. Instead, I jerked a nod towards the calf and gulped out, "I found this dogie milkin' off one of my white-faces up at Slash Z. He seems to be wearin' your brand."

Tom Trimbull said quietly, "And you think I mavericked it, Zeb, that it?"

There was an angry knot crawlin' up in my throat. "What the hell else can a man think?" I blurted. "I find this calf suckin' one of my cows. I find my silk cut, and the sign of a fresh brandin' fire a couple hundred yards away. If I'm figurin' this wrong, you add it up."

"If I'd been fixin' to burn some of your calves, Zeb," said Tom Trimbull slowly, "I'd'a done it on T-Square, not over on your side of the wire. And I'd've kept 'em penned up. They wouldn't have got back on Slash Z."

I stiffened. I hadn't even thought about that. "Somethin's goin' on around here don't meet the eye," I grumbled defensively.

"Somethin' is," said Tom Trimbull

grimly. "Like the two Z-branded calves I found milkin' off a pair of my cows yesterday mornin'."

One belly-kick a day is about all I can take. I reckon it must have been a full minute I sat there and stared down at Tom Trimbull, too dumbstruck to open my mouth. All I could do when I did open it, finally, was blat out weakly, "Milkin' off your cows! You sure of that, Tom?"

Tom Trimbull said in a level voice, "I done plenty things in my lifetime I'm ashamed of, Zeb. But stealin' cows ain't on the list."

I opened my mouth, then shut it again. Tom Trimbull said, "Maybe you'd feel like takin' a little *pasear* up towards the Flatrocks, Zeb. Gil's cut some sign that's given him a notion about this. He's waitin' for me now, at Arrow."

I damn' near swallowed my Adam's apple. Me—ride with Tom Trimbull? Was the old fool out of his senses? Besides, he didn't look like no more'n just a ball of hair. He didn't look able to ride.

It was like somebody had whanged me on the back, knockin' the words right out of me.

"Nobody settin' on my shirt-tail, Tom."

"I'll git my smoke-pole," Tom said. I noticed his eyes was a little watery, from the sun. The old fool always did have weak eyes. From the gallery, he swung around and stared back at me with a grouchy look.

"Come up and set, Zeb?"

I jerked out my bandanna and blew my nose. "Why, mebbe I would," I said. "Long enough to rest my seat from this damn' saddle, leastways."

N OBODY was home at Arrow when we got there, and we started right on again, after Tom had found the note Gil had left for us. It was scrawled on a piece of paper bag, and Gil had left it pinned to a window curtain, where

we would be sure not to miss it. It read:

TT:

E just rode by, heading uptrail, so decided not to wait. Try and locate Tarheel, then come on with him. Don't come alone.

GIL.

I knew Tarheel meant Tarheel Jackson, an old-timer Gil had made a kind of straw boss for his little three-up outfit here in the brasada country. But I didn't savvy who "E" could be. When I asked Tom, he twisted around in the saddle and gave me a flat stare across his shoulder.

"Brace Evans," he said. "Gil thinks it was Brace shot him that day up in the Flatrocks."

"Brace!" I scratched my bronc, and pulled up even with Tom's big skewbald. "But that's loco! Brace wouldn't have no reason to shoot at Gil."

"The sign might be a little hard to read," Tom said. "But that don't mean it ain't there."

I searched Tom's cold, puckered blue eyes and said, "You don't think it was Evans who burnt them slicks?"

Tom gave me a steady look. "Why not? What do you really know about Brace Evans?"

I couldn't answer that, and we pushed on in silence, getting deeper into the brasada, and then starting the slow climb up towards the scrubby, rock-rimmed ledges of the Mobeetie foothills. What *did* I know about Brace Evans, outside of the fact that I'd signed him on, at Jake Reno's suggestion, at the same time I'd hired Reno? I'd needed another man, and Evans had had all the earmarks of a top hand.

The trail swung past Al Cluff's big C-Shell, and I thought of Molly. Al Cluff was a go-getter; if Molly had married him, instead of Gil Trimbull, things would have been different with her, now. She wouldn't be working herself down to skin and bone as the wife of a two-bit

poverty rancher. Dave Wilsner, the sheriff, was getting on, and Al would likely be the next sheriff of Mobeetie County. Al was ambitious in a lot of ways, and once he'd even made me an offer for Slash Z.

After Gil had married Molly, Al crowded him hard. Before, he'd always let Gil cut the corner of his south range on his drives to Mobeetie Junction. Afterwards, he'd forced him to drive thirty miles farther by way of the old Dead Creek by-pass, a tough, 'round-about route that had cost Gil plenty, both in time and tallow. Later, there had been trouble over a water hole Gil claimed belonged to Arrow. In court, Al proved the water was on land owned by an old buck-nun named John Ritt. He bought out Ritt, and Gil had to take out a second mortgage on Arrow to pay for a well.

But Gil Trimbull rode 'er out, I'll say that for him. And at that time, on account of Molly, Gil couldn't expect any help from his old man. Tom had been as dead set ag'in that marriage as I'd been. Gil didn't ask no favors, and Tom didn't offer none. Both of 'em so damned grissel-heeled they wouldn't've moved camp for a prairie fire.

I stole a glance at Tom. He still sat saddle like a proud old eagle, but he couldn't disguise that droop in his shoulders, or that sick, tired look in his squinted blue eyes. Ahead, the trail narrowed steadily. *Like the trail Tom and me been a-ridin' these last few years, I thought with a pang. Only from ours there ain't no back-trackin', ever.*

My thoughts wound back to Brace Evans. I still couldn't connect that up with anything. Why would Evans want to set a new spark to that old feud between me and Tom Trimbull? I shook my head. It didn't make sense. It didn't make sense noways.

We were entering a rocky defile now that ran down by a series of steep switch-

backs towards a little box canyon, ahead of us and to our right. Suddenly Tom Trimbull's voice yanked me straight in the saddle.

"Zeb, look! Down there."

I saw the smoke then—a twist of dirty gray, hangin' lazy against the mouth of the canyon. And in the next second a sound drifted up on the steady upwind—the shrill, angry blat of a calf.

We scratched our cayuses and sloped. The trail went on down, fanning out with jutting rimrocks on our left, and a shaley cut bank widening away on our right. And then we saw it. A branding fire, with two men hunkered over it. And right behind them was a pine-pole snappin' turtle, the long chute crowded with dogies waiting to git burnt.

"Jimminity Judas!" I breathed out slowly. And then, abruptly, I grabbed at Tom's sleeve. "Tom, look down there—in that brush! Somebody's Injunin' up on 'em."

"Gil," said Tom softly. He measured the distance with a glance. Gil was maybe fifty yards away from us, and another fifty from the turtle. "We'll have to go shank's mare," he grunted. "They'd spot us sure, we ride out in front of these boulders."

We lit down and pulled the Winchesters out of our saddle boots. The cut bank to our right wasn't very steep at this point and the mesquite and backbrush gave a good cover. But when we hit the bottom and I looked around for Tom I got a shock. His breath was coming kind of hoarse and raspy, and his face had gotten a sickish lead-blue color.

I stared at him, alarmed. "You'd better hunker down and rest a minute," I said. "I'll just mosey on and—"

"Shut up!" he snapped at me. He was biting down against the pain now, his metallic blue eyes stiffened angrily. "This'll pass. Haul in your neck and git movin'."

I felt that damn' lump crawling up in

my throat again. "Suit yourself," I growled. "But keep your moccasins greased, and save part of your breath for breathin'."

We started on again. The brush thinned out now, but rocks and small boulders gave a fair cover for another fifteen, twenty yards. Then I stopped. I was down in a little draw, out of sight of Tom for the moment. But ahead twenty yards I could just see Gil Trimbull, bellied down behind a granite outcrop. He had his hat off and was peepin' out around the rock at the two men down in the democrat pasture. A calf bawled. And then the shot slammed—the high, wicked whine of a rifle bullet.

I jerked around, crouched. Ten, fifteen yards in back of me I saw Tom Trimbull take a lurching step, then pitch forward and go crashing down in the brush like a breachy steer. I felt my belly squeeze up and then a second shot blared and angry little grits of sand sleeted into my face. Six feet to my right there was a mossy deadfall, screened with brush. I dove behind it and faced back towards the sound of the shots, my rifle tipped up and ready. I could see now where the shots had come from—a low sandstone rimrock, some fifty yards to my left—but before I could make out any movement up there, the lid blew off hell right in back of me.

I heard Gil Trimbull call out, "All right, you hombres, reach for it!" and I pumped three at the rimrock, then jerked around. Gil's rifle was leveled across the rock outcrop, but the two men in the canyon didn't reach. They jumped back towards their ground-hitched horses, a few feet behind them and Gil fired.

The tall jasper had his hand down to his hip when he took it. He just crumpled like a burnt shuck, but his partner made it around back of his horse and fired across its rump.

I drew an inch of breath, then left it

caught in my throat as the rifle dropped from Gil's fingers and clattered down on the rock. In the next second, Gil tipped suddenly like a man in a hurry to lie down and fell sideways across it.

I threw a quick look back over my shoulder. It was quiet up on the rimrock. The hidden rifleman up there seemed satisfied now to leave the pasture count to his man down there in the brand-new pen. He couldn't see me. I was sure of that much.

The jigadee in the canyon was mounted up now and headed out of the canyon. He rode slow, straight towards Gil, his rifle canted up in his arms, ready.

He was a small hombre, I saw now, and there was something oddly familiar in the kind of hip-shot way he sat his saddle, the way he kept that dark Stetson tipped low over his tight narrow-jawed face.

He was less than ten yards from Gil's rock when I jerked taut suddenly.

"Lookin' fer somebody, Jake?" I called softly.

He was sudden, I'll say that. He swung that rifle like a six-gun, and fired it from right across the hip. Only he couldn't see me. He fired at a voice. And I fired at a settin' duck.

He slid off the horse backwards, slow and gentlelike, and when he hit the ground he didn't move.

But had Gil moved? For a second, I thought he had. Then I wasn't sure. I hitched around and faced back towards the rimrock. Quiet up there now. Had

the look-out taken his chance to come down off that rock, while I was busy with Jake Reno?

In the old days, when me and Tom rode with John Chisum, we learnt a thing called patience. I figured I could use some now. I stretched out and waited. Ten minutes went by, fifteen. I felt a crick in my bad leg. It began to ache and throb. Time crawled. Off to my right there was the dried curve of an old creek bed, clotted with alder. Another fifteen minutes dragged by. Then brush snapped and I jerked taut. The sound was from over there in that alder. I slid my finger around the trigger of Old Betsy, and waited.

It got quiet again. Somewhere a cicada chirred. Nothing happened for five minutes. Then the brush twitched, and I saw a hand spread it apart. The dull blue barrel of a rifle poked out. A man followed it. I held my breath.

For a minute the man stood tracked. He seemed to sniff like a hound on the spoor of a bone. Then he started towards the canyon at a slow, careful walk, his finger looped around the trigger of the rifle.

Thirty yards from it he stopped, checking again. He seemed to hesitate for a second, then started on again, walking faster. He got to within twenty-five yards of me, twenty. And then I recognized him, and my heart jerked like a snubbed buckler.

I sucked in a stiff breath and called



IT'S RED CROSS TIME

flatly, "Drop that Long Tom, sheriff. Twitch a finger and you'll pick up a harp, pronto."

I had him dead in my sights, but he whirled and fired towards the sound of my voice. Punk spurted from the old deadfall, but not near enough to where I was hunkered. My old Betsy bucked and roared. Echoes drummed on the silence, and up in the hills the sound was like the beat of a snare drum.

I kicked the kinks out of my joints and got up. And then the voice behind me said, "You got a delicate trigger, Zeb," and I yanked around and stared blankly at Gil Trimbull.

A bloody gash ran across his scalp and his face had a strained, stiff-set look, but otherwise he seemed all of a piece. He said, awkward-like, "Reno's crease-shot knocked me out. I reckon he'd've finished the job, Zeb, wasn't for you."

I snorted and said, "Hogwash!"

He gave me a queer tight look. "You didn't cut any sign of dad on your back-trail, I suppose?"

I didn't answer that right away, and he walked over to the sprawled figure in the buckbrush. He stared down at it a minute, then turned and came back.

"Al Cluff," he said. "I figured he must be in on it."

"Me," I said, "I never was any good at figurin'. Mebbe you could cut that deck a little deeper, Gil."

"Ain't much to cut, Zeb. Ever since I taken Molly away from him, Al's hated my guts. Those are my dogies down there in that democrat pasture. Evans and Reno was stampin' Cluff's C-Shell brand on 'em. Cluff wanted to kill two birds with one stone—break me, and do a little cross-maverickin' between you and dad. I guess he figured if he could git you two whittle-whangin' again, he could some way git his hooks on Slash Z and T-Square. Looks now like he kind of tossed his rope before he'd built up his loop."

"Yeah, looks like." I let out a long slow breath and took his arm. "Tom come here with me today, son. Mebbe we'd better have us a look-see."

I had a feeling then, and from the sound of my voice, I think Gil had it too. His face was tight, set against what he was afraid we might find, as we back-tracked to where I had last seen Tom Trimbull. He was still there. But me and my old partner had ridden our last trail together. He looked plumb at peace there, curled up in the brush, with his head pillowed across his arm. That damn' cocklebur crawled up in my throat and made it so tight I couldn't speak for a minute. There was too much to say, anyhow.

Gil said, "He'd have liked it best this way, Zeb. The doc didn't give him much more time. A month, two months. His heart."

I still couldn't talk. I squeezed Gil's arm. I was still holdin' it when we turned and walked back to the horses.

THEY named the boy Thomas Zebedee Trimbull, but mostly we all call him Zeb. And there ain't no T-Square or Slash Z any more. It's the TZ now, and Gil and Molly own it. I just set around and smoke my pipe, and when I ain't dandlin' Zeb on my knee, I mosey up to the old cottonwood motte back of the spring, where Tom reps for the old outfit up yonder. There's just a simple wooden marker on the grave. And all it says is:

THOMAS TURCOTT TRIMBULL

Born Aug. 6, 1823

Died Mar. 31, 1892

A Pecos Trail-Blazer

Only a few of us are left now. The rest, like Tom Trimbull, have hung up their saddles and gone on across the big divide, lookin' for new range. I hope they find good water and plenty of grass. But wherever they are is where I want to go.



His second bullet smashed into
Keeler as the sorrel fell. . . .

GUN KING OF DOOM TOWN

*"This, mister, is a road to a town
—a town called Perdition. It's a
six-gun road—and only one way!"*

By

BARRY CORD

THE small campfire just off the wagon road caught Eddie Winters' eye, and because he was tired and hungry and wanted information he turned the leg-weary roan off trail. The roan nickered softly, sensing water ahead and Eddie shifted his weight in saddle, easing cramped leg muscles. The low ridges on his left were dark and without outline against a cloudy horizon and the moon made a purple parenthesis in the west.

He let the roan pick its way through the darkness. A man was sitting on his heels before the fire, holding a frying pan over the flames. He was facing Winters, seemingly occupied with his cooking, and the unmistakable odor of beans and bacon came to the rider as he pulled up at the edge of the firelight.

"Howdy," Winters said.

The camper glanced up at Winters without surprise. He was a heavy man in his early fifties with a ruddy, thin-lined face and Winters saw through his seeming nonchalance, sensing an edged wariness in the man. He wore no hip gun, but his open coat possibly concealed a shoulder holster.

Winters frowned.

A wagon loomed vaguely in the shadows beyond the fire. Someone moved in the darkness by the tail gate and Winters caught the passing glint of light on metal.

"You can call the snooper in," Winters said tightly. "I'm harmless."

The older man studied him, taking his time. Finally he nodded. "All right, Lucy," he said, turning his head. "He ain't one of them."

A girl in Levis and gray wool shirt came away from the shadows. She came into the firelight, holding a brass-sided carbine across her slim waist, and Winters was suddenly conscious of the picture he made. He was bone-tired and hungry and a week-old beard stubbled his lean face.

All right! he thought angrily. *So I look like a saddle bum. . . .*

He put his hands together on the pommel and leaned forward on them, his face stiffening with his anger.

"Do I pass, ma'm?"

"Pass what?"

"Your judgment."

The girl's lips softened. She was small and dark-haired and a roguish twinkle came into her eyes as she said, "You do."

She let the carbine slide stock down into the sand at her feet. "Cool your saddle, stranger. Dad'll give you some coffee while I dig up some extra beans and bacon."

"I didn't come looking for a handout," Winters answered coldly. He was still riled at the way he had been received and he had a stiff-backed pride in such matters. "Only an answer to a question. Is this the road to Perdition?"

The girl's head went up in a jerk and the laughter faded from her eyes. The man by the fire said, "Yes. This is it."

"Then I'll be moving on."

The girl stepped forward and caught the tired roan's bit, holding him as she looked up at Winters. "Stay a while," she invited softly. "Perdition will still be there in the morning."

Her lips were full and darkly red in the firelight. They made him suddenly restless, and a wave of resentment washed over him, pushing through his weariness. "No," he said meagerly.

"Your horse's worn out," she insisted, still holding onto the bit strap. "Let him graze back of the wagon." The roguish twinkle came back to her eyes. She released the roan, turning confidently to the fire. "Pour him out a cup of coffee, dad. He's staying."

She moved toward the wagon, humming softly, dragging the carbine stock through the sand. Winters sat rigidly in saddle. "Black as hell an' twice as hot," the older man said, holding out a tin cup. "But it'll chase the weariness outta yore bones, stranger."

The hard, lonely core in Winters suddenly warmed. He felt his stiffness loosen up to the friendly man on the other side of the fire, and the girl's soft humming as she lifted the cover of a box in the wagon gave the moment a touch he had not experienced in more than five years.

"Much obliged," he said. He dismounted and led the roan to the fire. The

other man smiled. "Name's Theron Masters. That's my daughter, Lucy. Been taking care of me since her mother died. A mite bossy, but a good cook."

"Eddie Winters," Eddie said. He sipped his coffee. It was black and biting and it warmed his insides. "My friends used to call me Red."

Theron Masters eyed the stubble of beard that shone coppery in the flickering light. "I can guess why," he laughed. "There's grass in the draw behind the wagon," he suggested.

Winters finished his coffee and handed the cup back. "Haven't had coffee as good since I left Louisville."

He stepped past the fire, leading the roan into the shadows of the coulee. Stripping saddle and blankets from the animal he staked it out where it cropped hungrily at clumps of spiky grass.

BEANS and bacon were warming over the fire when he returned. He was a lean man of average height, tending to wiryness. He was twenty-seven, or was it twenty-eight? He had lost count of the years somewhere along his back trail.

"Water in a keg lashed to the tail-board," the girl said cheerfully as he came into the fireglow. "We can spare it if you want to wash."

He nodded and went to the back of the wagon. He ran water from a brass

spigot and rubbed the dust from his face and hands, drying himself with a clean blue handkerchief. Rearranging his dusty Stetson so that it did not tilt so low over his blue eyes he looked up at the yellow desert stars and for the first time in years found them warm and friendly.

Lucy Masters was sitting cross-legged before the fire, a tin plate in her lap. The light brought out reddish tints in her hair, tumbled loosely on her shoulders. *She's over twenty-one*, he thought. *Old enough to know what she wants.* . . . Then he pushed the reflection from him and sat down beside her.

She held out a tin plate and indicated the frying pan resting on a flat stone nearby. "Help yourself," she said. A strand of hair blew across her cheek, tickling her nose and she wrinkled it in a natural, unaffected gesture before she brushed the hair back. "Don't worry about dad. He ate."

He felt her nearness as he spooned beans and bacon into his plate. She was warm and direct and frankly capable. This was a woman a man could marry, he thought, and then he grew stiff again, remembering that he was already married.

Masters lounged in the half shadows. He had filled his pipe and the quick flare of his match lighted up his round face.

"Going to Perdition, Red?"

Winters nodded.

"Funny," Masters replied, sucking

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slowly on his pipe. "Everyone else's leaving."

"Why?"

"Silver," the older man replied. "It made the town five years back. Wasn't anything but Donkey Harris' shack out there then. And desert sand. Then Harris picked up some blue rock that assayed almost pure silver an' the stampede was on."

Winters took a swallow of coffee. Lucy was looking at him. She had finished her meal and was relaxed, resting her weight on an elbow. She caught his glance and her slow, lazy smile made his pulses beat at his temples.

"Five thousand population in five years," Masters continued. "Where there wasn't anything but blasted desert and the hottest hills this side of creation before." He took the pipe out of his mouth. "The mines have played out. The exodus started a month ago. Lennie and I hung around a while longer, hoping some new strike would turn up. I was running a store on Desert Avenue. Fin'ly we gave up. We sold what stock we could, packed what we could in the wagon, and left the rest. We're headed for Clearfield, other side of them mountains."

Winters stared into the fire. He felt suddenly tired again and lonely and deep inside him the acid of a bitter hate began to burn and make him restless.

"Riding chuckline?" the girl asked softly.

He turned his gaze, reaching inside his open vest for the makings in his shirt pocket. "No." He couldn't tell her he was riding to kill a man; it did not concern her, and for some reason he didn't understand himself he didn't want her to know.

"I used to be a pharmacist," he said, sliding the Bull Durham sack back into his pocket. He licked the cigarette paper and rolled it smoothly. "Had a little shop of my own, back in Louisville."

"Clearfield could use a pharmacy," Masters suggested. He looked at Lucy, reading in her eyes more than she wanted him to see. He was an understanding father, and though she had pampered him and he would regret losing her, he knew it was high time she married. "If it's money you need, Red, a man knowin' the business would find backing there."

"Thanks," Winters cut in dryly. "But I have other business." He lighted his cigarette with a burning twig. "Ever run across a gent named Henry Garfield in Perdition?"

"Garfield?" Masters frowned. "A light-fingered gambler named Spade Garfield ran the biggest gaming house in town. Called it The Gay Nancy, after his wife, I reckon."

"What became of him?"

"He's still there," Masters said oddly. "Yeah—I'm sure he's still in Perdition."

WINTERS washed his cup and plate and fork and scoured them clean with fine sand. Using his hat as a container he drew a measure of water and walked into the coulee behind the wagon.

The roan came to him, nickering thirstily, and he held the Stetson under the animal's nose while it drank. He was still there when he heard the two men ride up and one of them said, "Howdy, pop."

Masters' answer warned Winters with its sharply suspicious tone. "What you want, Luke?"

"Now, pop," Luke laughed. "Me an' Keeler don't want anythin', 'cept mebbe some coffee. We saw yore fire an' rode over, aimin' to be sociable."

Winters left the roan, loosening the gun in his greased holster as he started back for the fire. He walked softly, making little noise in the soft sand of the coulee.

A chunky, black-bearded man in dusty

clothes was facing Theron Masters across the fire. He had dismounted and was holding the reins of a big gray stallion. His companion, mounted on a fidgety sorrel, was a slim man in dark pants and shirt and a tightly buttoned doeskin vest. He wore his hat low over his face and the flickering brush fire made no impression against the wedge of shadow that hid his features. Both men wore bone-handled hip guns.

"We're fresh out of coffee," the girl said. She was standing about ten feet from the wagon where she had propped her carbine.

"Quit clownin' Luke!" the man on horseback snapped. He reached under his right leg and drew a Winchester .30-30, holding it across his saddle. "We're not lookin' for coffee, Masters!" He had a thin, vicious voice, pitched high. "We want the gold you got in yore poke. All of it. An' don't try tellin' us you haven't got it because we saw you clean out yore strongbox when you closed up."

Luke chuckled. "We thought it better to relieve you of it on the trail. More private like, this way."

Lucy looked at her father and Winters, coming slowly up, saw the lines of indecision form around her mouth.

Hand it over, Masters!" Keeler ordered harshly. "We ain't got all night!"

"I wouldn't be so hasty," Winters interrupted softly. He was in the shadows beyond the flickering ring of firelight, which was all to his advantage, for Luke and Keeler were nicely outlined in the light.

Keeler stiffened, as if Winters' voice were a whip lashing him across the face. Luke fell into an instinctive crouch, the shambling looseness of his body tightening to the threat beyond the fire.

"You on the sorrel!" Winters snapped. "Throw that rifle into the brush!"

He drew his Colt, holding it low and a

little away from his hip. The hammer made a distinctly audible click as he thumbed it back.

Keeler caught the tiny glint of light from that smooth muzzle and the tell-tale sign decided him. He was swinging his rifle over to his right, as if to drop it, when he changed his mind. He jerked the muzzle around in a smooth, quick move and pulled trigger. At the same time he jabbed his spurs into the sorrel's flanks.

The rearing animal caught Winters' first slug under the ear. His second smashed into Keeler as the sorrel fell backward. Man and horse went down together and only the sorrel moved, kicking spasmodically.

Luke lunged toward the girl, drawing his Colt in the same motion. He caught her arm as she whirled away, and jerked her to him. She turned on him, clawing at his face. Cursing, he spun her around and shifted his left arm around her neck. Half strangling her he began to back toward the wagon.

Theron Masters was standing beyond the fire, hands clenched helplessly. The girl fought Luke like a wildcat. She kept kicking, jabbing down with the high heels of her boots and finally one of her thrusts crunched down hard on Luke's instep.

The bearded man whirled her clear of him and slashed her across the face with his palmed gun. Masters made a lunge across the fire, an unreasoning fury driving him. Luke pivoted and snapped a shot at him.

Masters sprawled forward on his face.

Winters' bullet slammed Luke back against the wagon. The chunky killer stayed on his feet, throwing shots back at the flares from the darkness. He emptied his Colt and hurled it at Winters. Then he fell back, clutching at the wagon wheel for support, fighting to stay on his feet.

Winters' last shot killed him.

LUCY was moaning when Winters stepped into the firelight. He walked to Keeler, trapped under the carcass of his sorrel. The thin man was still alive, but unconscious and dying.

Lucy was crawling toward her father when he turned to her. Winters said, "He's dead, Lucy," and watched her collapse on her father's body.

He let her cry while he went to the water keg and soaked his neckerchief. Coming back he hunkered down on his heels beside her, and gently, but firmly, he pulled her away from her father. She resisted at first, then suddenly turned to him, burying her face in his rough shirt. She was no longer crying aloud, but he could feel the spasms shake her.

He put his index finger under her chin and turned her face so that the bloody bruise under her right eye was clear. He washed the blood from it, and when it was clean he wadded the neckerchief and pressed it against her cheek.

"This will stop the bleeding," he said. "Just rest easy."

It was a long night. The girl did not sleep. She sat, staring with a numbness he did not try to shake.

Daylight finally cracked the eastern horizon, lighting up the desert. The greasewood and manzanita bushes shed their dark indistinctness and took on shape and substance and in a nearby thicket a bird whistled.

Winters found a shovel in the wagon and dug graves for three men. With the planks he loosened from the cover of a storage box he fashioned a cross. Lucy stood over him as he whittled:

Theron Masters
1812-1876

on the cross board, and hammered the marker into the sand at the head of her father's grave.

The crying had gone out of Lucy Mas-

ters. He helped her hitch her team of bays to the wagon, then he went back into the coulee for his horse, saddled, and rode back.

He watched her climb up to the seat.

She looked at him, searching for something in his eyes she did not find. A resigned smile broke the line of her lips. "Good-by, Eddie."

"Good luck," he said gravely, lifting his hat. She clucked to the bays and they bent to the traces. He waited until the wagon took a turn in the road before turning the roan toward Perdition.

PERDITION sprawled haphazardly along the banks of a dry wash, its jerry-built, false-fronted structures boarded up and deserted, shrinking under a pitiless sun. West of town barren hills, pock-marked with the shafts of played out mines, made a ragged line against the brassy sky.

A hot dry wind blew down from the hills, swirling sand along Desert Avenue. Winters pulled the brim of his Stetson low over his eyes and cursed the grit that forced its way between his teeth.

He shied the roan away from a wagon standing half loaded in front of Jake's Saloon. A paunchy man with a black patch over his left eye was blocking the doorway, bawling to someone inside. "Hurry up in there! We ain't got all day!"

Winters rode past, searching the deserted buildings for the Gay Nancy. Sand was already sifting over the boardwalks, making little drifts against closed doors.

The Perdition National Bank, a squat stone structure with boarded windows sat on the corner of Desert Avenue and Silver Street. A big brindle dog came around the corner and sniffed at the partially opened door, then turned to chase a tumbleweed rolling down the street.

The Gay Nancy loomed up in the middle of the next block. It was a preten-

tious structure of milled timbers that must have been freighted into Perdition at heavy cost. Its two full stories dominated the street and a canvas sign strung across the road flapped its empty welcome to the wind.

A grizzled, shaggy-haired prospector in a shiny plug hat sat on a box in front of a shack next to the Gay Nancy. This was Donkey Harris, original discoverer of the Gee-Gaw silver mine, although Winters didn't know it as he turned the roan in to the Nancy's rail.

Harris had sold out his claim for a mere \$25,000 and headed for San Francisco. He had a wild time while the money lasted, and returned to Perdition six months later as ragged and penniless as the day he had picked up his first chunk of ore. The plug hat was all he had to show for the money he had tossed away in 'Frisco.

He watched Winters ride past and tie up at the rail next door. Winters was mounting the steps when Harris said, "I wouldn't go in there, stranger."

Winters paused. "Why not?"

"That's Spade Garfield's place," Harris said.

Winters shrugged. "I'm looking for Spade Garfield."

The leathery-faced prospector appraised him shrewdly for a moment, then he shook his head. "So's Jim Stanton," he said. "Jim's been waitin' acrost the street for Spade and his woman to show their faces outside for two days now. His brother, Steve, is watchin' the back door."

Winters followed the prospector's nod across the street. A blond, rangy man wearing a holstered gun edged into sight in a doorway. The man dropped a hand to his gun butt with unmistakable warning.

"What's he got against Spade?" said Winters slowly.

"Garfield killed Jim's youngest brother. In a card game. Young Stanton was

losin' his shirt when he accused Spade's wife, who was standing behind him, of cheating. She called him a liar an' Spade killed him."

Winters shrugged. "Looks bad for Spade," he said dryly.

Harris took the pipe from his mouth and spat into the dust. "Jest warnin' yuh, stranger. If you go in there yo're liable to get hurt."

"I might, at that," Winters said, and without another look at the scowling man across the street he went up the Gay Nancy's steps.

The door creaked as he pushed it open. He closed it with his heel, then stepped aside and got his back against the wall, letting his eyes adjust to the poorer light in the room.

Spade Garfield had evidently spared no expense in outfitting the gambling hall. A fancy mahogany bar ran the length of the north wall, backed by a long clear mirror and well stocked shelves. Monte tables, chuck-a-luck and roulette wheels filled the rest of the room, crowding close to a stage in the rear. A gleaming mahogany stairway, heavily carpeted, began at the right of the platform and curved gracefully to a railed landing that overlooked the gaming room.

It was all very elaborate and expensive—and quite empty.

Winters heard the sound of his steps as he moved away from the wall, heard them fade away into the stillness when he paused again.

A door opened on the landing and a woman came out to the balcony, pausing at the rail to look down at him with stony regard. She was tall and buxom and expensively dressed. Her blonde hair was coiled on top of her head, showing her ears and a neck that was beginning to pad. Her figure bulged against her low-cut wine satin dress. She was beautiful in a hard, brassy sort of way, but Winters remembered her when she

had been soft and younger and had not worn diamonds on her fingers.

She said: "What do you want?" in a tired voice, and he knew she didn't recognize him.

"A drink," he replied, and silently cursed the thickness in his voice.

She hesitated a moment, glancing back at the closed door, then came downstairs. She crossed the room without looking at him and faced him across the gleaming bar. "What'll it be?"

He walked to her, closing the gap of five years with each stride. This is my wife, he thought, and it seemed to reach up and stifle him. This was the girl he had been crazily in love with. This was the young, naive girl who had left him in Louisville, to run away with a suave, smooth-talking gambler named Harry Garfield.

"Rye," he said, forcing the word through his lips. "With a dash of sassailla. I like it that way."

She was reaching for the bottle on the shelf behind her and he saw her bared shoulders quiver. She hesitated, and when she did turn, placing the bottle down on the counter in front of him, her eyes were wide and searching.

"Eddie!" she said. Her voice had a strained, cracked note. "Eddie Winters!"

He took the bottle from her and poured himself a drink. His hand shook as he lifted his glass and almost savagely he forced it to steady.

"Where's Garfield?"

The woman suddenly laughed. He watched her, feeling his bitter frustration expend itself in the echoes of her laughter. She still had the animal magnetism that had attracted him to her, the lush sort of figure that made his blood go hot. But somewhere along the years she had lost a certain softness, a naive tenderness he had kept in his memory and which had colored his picture of her.

This is the woman I went to hell for,

he thought. *Thinking I could even things by finding her and killing the man who took her away from me. Five years, living with a memory that was no longer real.*

He felt a dry, bitter taste come into his mouth, and he washed it down with rye.

"So you've been following us," she said through her laughter. "Ever since Louisville—"

"Where's Garfield?" he broke in harshly.

Her voice was contemptuous of him. "Upstairs."

He turned and shuffled across the room, his steps echoing flatly in the empty hall. He was halfway to the stairs when his wife said in a brittle voice, "Wait a minute, Eddie!"

He turned his head. She was holding a short-muzzled Colt across the bar and there was no laughter in her. There was a tight, puzzled look in her eyes as she watched him. "Don't go upstairs!"

He turned and walked back to her. Five years. The words repeated themselves in his head. Five wasted years!

He had been a kid of twenty-two, full of pride and ambition the day she had walked out on him. He had never recovered. A frustrated, deeply humiliated youngster, he had sold his shop for a song and drifted West, looking for the man who had taken his wife from him. He saw her now as she was, and he did not hate her. But for the five bitter years he could never forgive her.

She stiffened as he walked to the bar and he saw uncertainty flicker in her eyes. The gun in her hand relaxed.

"Eddie," she said, suddenly pleading. "Eddie—take me out of here!"

"What about Garfield?"

"He's a fool," she said, almost spitting the words out in her hurry. "Eddie—I never loved him. But I wanted excitement—money—"

"You looking for me?" a voice said.

Winters turned. Harry Garfield was at the second floor landing, a rifle in his hands. Winters had trouble recognizing him, seeing in this haggard, unshaved man in dirty coat and unkempt hair the tall, suave gambler he had met briefly in Louisville.

Winters glanced at his wife. She was staring at him, waiting, and suddenly he felt tired and washed out . . . he wanted only to get out of here.

"No," he said shortly, looking up at Garfield. "Guess I made a mistake." He tossed a silver dollar on the bar. It skidded against the whiskey bottle, tinkling musically. The sound hung in the air, fading slowly, and then the harsher sound of the front door, creaking open, broke through it.

Jim Stanton stepped in like a prowling cat, gun in hand. His hard glance picked up Winters and the woman behind him and made a quick sweep up to Garfield. He wasted no words. His hand jerked up and Garfield fired in the same instant. Stanton gasped. His second shot was low, splintering wood on the landing under the gambler's feet.

Garfield sagged against the railing, trying desperately to work the lever of his rifle. Under the landing a rear door slammed open, as if the shots had been a signal, bringing a shorter, stockier replica of Jim Stanton into the gambling house.

He came in at a run, and his eyes picked up his brother Jim sagging, going to his knees. The sight brought him up short by the bannister at the foot of the stairs. His bright blue eyes jumped to Eddie Winters backed against the bar and to Nancy behind it, still holding the gun in her hand. He saw this in that quick, desperate moment while Jim was sinking to the floor and he thought Nancy Winters had killed him.

His shot splintered wood at Eddie's side, grooving deep along the polished bar top. Nancy said: "Oh!" in a startled,

hurt voice. Eddie caught a glimpse of her falling back against the shelves as he jumped away from the bar, his right hand bringing up his Colt, his left palm fanning the hammer.

Steve Stanton shuddered. He fell against the bannister, groped blindly for support, and sprawled on his face. Ten feet above him, sagging weakly over the railing, Garfield finally worked the lever of his rifle. He steadied the muzzle with desperate effort and fired once more into Jim Stanton's crawling body.

The explosion jarred the rifle from his hands. It dropped over the railing, bouncing off a roulette wheel immediately below, and a moment later Garfield followed it. . . .

BLUE GRAY smoke made a band of color in a swath of sunlight from the street window. It drifted slowly out through a broken pane, and the jarring sounds of gunfire seemed to go out with it, leaving a vacuum of silence in the room.

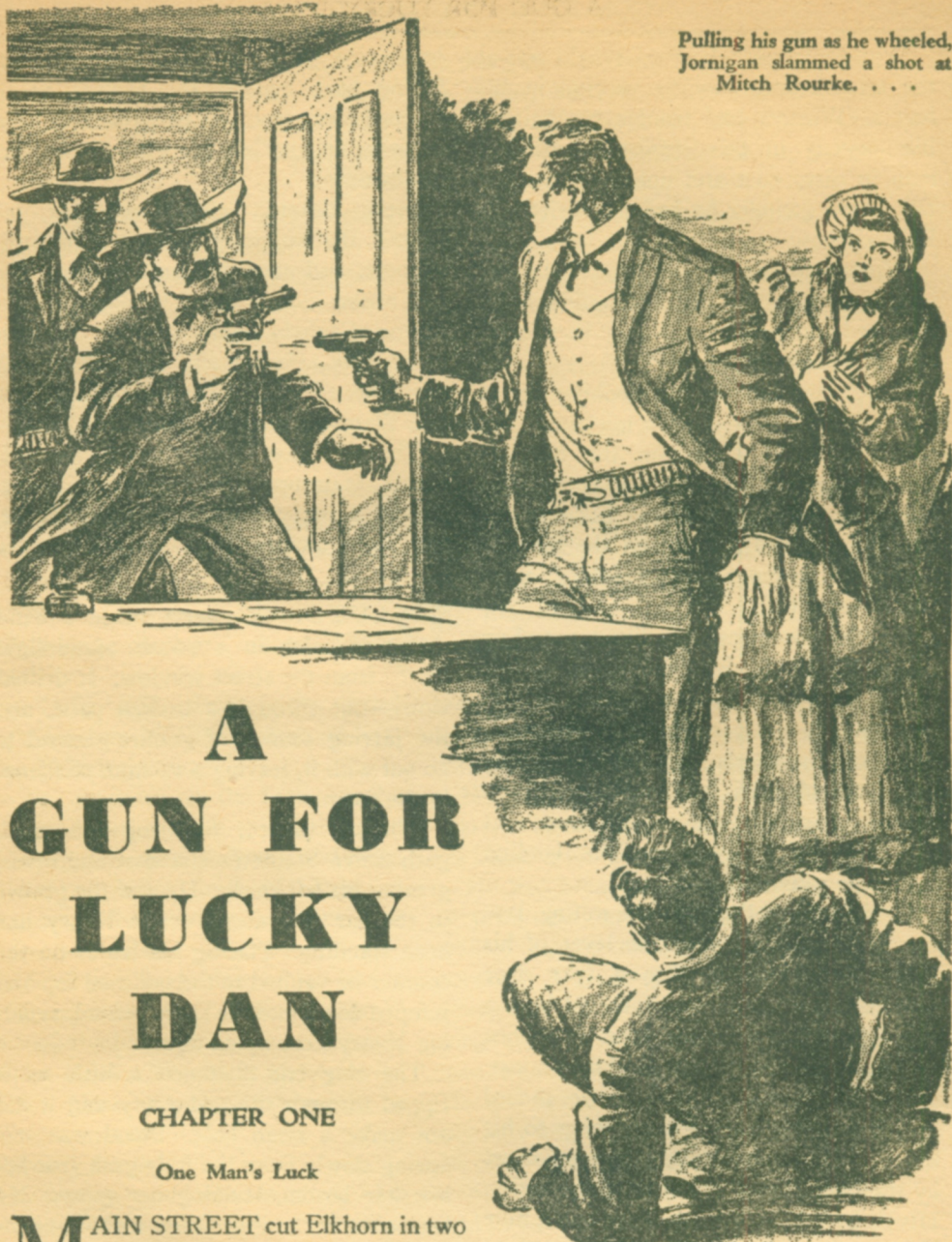
Winters turned, fingering the small gash Steve Stanton's last shot had made, grazing his left cheek. He saw the groove in the bar just about where Nancy had been standing. Placing his hands on the counter he vaulted to the polished top and jumped down into the space behind, avoiding Nancy's crumpled figure.

The slug had flattened a little as it ripped through the mahogany and it did not make a clean hole. Blood was still oozing slowly from the ugly gash just below her bosom, staining her gown. He bent over her and she died without opening her eyes.

The wind made a desolate sound down the street and sand pattered softly through the open door. Eddie straightened. He walked around the bar and crossed the room, stepping over Jim Stanton's body. He paused on the Gay Nancy's top step, blinking at the yellow glare in the street.

(Continued on page 129)

Pulling his gun as he wheeled,
Jornigan slammed a shot at
Mitch Rourke. . . .



A GUN FOR LUCKY DAN

CHAPTER ONE

One Man's Luck

MAIN STREET cut Elkhorn in two as definitely as a sharp-bladed knife would cut an apple, the rotten part from the sound. The rotten side was on the south, ruled by Mitch Rourke with as much violence and treach-

A gambler will ride his luck till it kills him, but Lucky Dan Jornigan knew he would swear off—the day it did!

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

ery and immorality as his satanic majesty could conjure. Lucky Dan Jornigan ran the north section with dignity and temperance and justice. Elkhorn, throbbing with the lustful power common to all boom mining camps, wasn't big enough for these two, as different as the kingdoms of light and darkness.

Jornigan, waking late as he always did, had breakfast in his rooms above the Casino. Then, shaved and dressed, he stepped to the window and looked down. The snow was a shifting curtain that blotted Rourke's Silver Palace from sight, but below him in the street he could see a plodding line of burros and a great ore wagon and trailer that creaked noisily on its way from the Gettysburg mine. From the mill, almost two miles away, came the pound of the great stamps. Eighty of them there were, battering the ore from the Gettysburg so that Phil Owens might become richer than he was yesterday.

Here in Elkhorn were all the things Jornigan had ever seen in his dreams. Power. Respect. Friendship. Money. And most of all, love. Danger? Of course. Without it life would be like a cake without sugar.

Everything that he possessed had come together. A year ago he had started with fifty dollars and a tent saloon on Main Street. He had grown with the town so that today folks called him Lucky. Luck, the philosophers said, was what a man made it, and only the fools believed in it, but no one called Dan Jornigan a fool. He knew, if no one else did, that he had not made his luck. It stemmed directly from Lydia Dailey and her love.

This morning, as it had for a week, the temptations of the flesh were strong in him, and he hated himself for it. He was a sensitive man, and somewhat an analytical one. It was his conviction that there is an immutable law of justice, that a man receives, in the long run, exactly what he deserves, and he knew, if he kept thinking

this way, he'd descend into a self-made hell. Still, knowing it, his thoughts did not change, for Tess Ormay was in his blood.

A knock on the door brought him away from the window and across the room. When he opened it, shame hit him like a driving fist in the belly. Lydia was standing there.

"Good morning, Lydia," Jornigan said, and stepped away.

She came in a little hesitantly, for the luxury of his quarters always made her say that she felt as if she were in the wrong place. It looked more like Phil Owens' house on the hill. Owens was a millionaire twice over and could afford it. Jornigan always laughed, and said he'd be one, given time enough and the luck that her love gave him.

Jornigan closed the door and took her coat. He tilted her head upward, hand under her chin, and gave her grave inspection. Not pretty. Nose a little too long and slender. Cheeks not quite round enough. Chin too blunt. But her hair was black silk, her eyes brown and depthless and understanding. She was tall, almost as tall as he was, and graceful. He had never understood why she was teaching here, for she was a lady, and a lady was out of place in roaring brawling Elkhorn.

"You'll do," he said at last. "You'll pass to the head of the class." He kissed her, with more restraint than he usually displayed and led her to the orange love seat in the corner. "I couldn't get away last night. Something was coming up all the time."

"I haven't seen much of you lately," she said a little wistfully. "You've promised to quit, but you're getting in deeper all the time."

RIISING, he crossed the room to the heavy-legged mahogany table, flipped back the cover of the cigar box and selected a cigar. He kept his

back to her for a time. Lydia was the most discerning woman he had ever known. She hated his business, but she had stood at his elbow during those first poker games when he had played with Mitch Rourke and Phil Owens. That was when his luck had started. He'd run his fifty dollars to twenty thousand and he'd built the Casino. From that moment everything had come his way.

Jornigan walked to the window and stood there while he lighted his cigar. The snow was still falling. Turning, he said, "I'll keep that promise, Lydia. After what you've done for me, I'd be lower'n a bootheel if I didn't."

"I've done nothing for you," she said quickly. "You'd had bad luck. It was time for it to turn."

He shook his head. "A good woman's love is all a man needs," he said, and as he said it, shame was a crawling thing in him. Even now, with Lydia here in the room, Tess Ormay was a haunting shadow in the fringe of his thoughts.

"About quitting," she said. "Land is cheap now, Dan. Yesterday Mrs. Dugan told me about a section of patented land that could be bought for a thousand dollars. Mining camps boom and bust. The land will always be there."

He came back to the love seat and sat down beside her. "You should be a farmer's wife the way you believe in the land."

She shook her head. "A rancher's wife. Not a farmer's."

"You'd be mighty handsome on a horse."

But she was in no mood for his easy compliments. She gave him a straight look. "This is cattle country, Dan. Look ahead. Your business won't last. You've made your stake. You said you'd get out when you did."

"If I quit, Mitch Rourke takes over," he said slowly. "I'm no preacher, Lydia, but I've got ideas on what's right.

"That's one of the things I like about you."

"I've likewise got some ideas about when a man should fight. I just don't take to the notion of Mitch Rourke running this camp."

"Phil Owens can afford to pay enough taxes to bring in a good lawman if we need one," she said. "You're risking your life to keep Rourke in line, and it isn't costing Owens a penny."

"I know." He got up again, a thousand devils of restlessness in him. "I can't explain it, Lydia, but I can't quit now. Maybe it's pride. Or part of my luck. I just know I've got to play it out. One of these days it'll be Mitch or me. Then, if I'm still alive, I'll quit."

She rose and he helped her into her coat. "I'm lucky," he said, "just knowing you love me."

"I'm the lucky one, Dan." She stood at the door, dark eyes probing him. "Love's a strange thing. I don't know why I love you or how it could make me do the things it has. I guess I'm a one-man woman. If we never get married, I'm lucky just for having loved you."

He kissed her, lightly. "It's Saturday, isn't it? It just occurred to me why you aren't teaching today. I'll see you tonight if nothing happens. Or tomorrow anyway."

"All right, Dan," she said, and turned to the door.

That was the moment Tess Ormay chose to come in. She didn't knock. She turned the knob and slammed the door open and came in like a hot summer wind. "There's some men below who want to see you. . ." Then she saw Lydia and stopped, open-mouthed. "Who's this?"

"My fiancée, Miss Dailey." Jornigan pulled in a long breath. "Miss Ormay, Lydia."

Lydia's nod was a bare tip of the head. "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Ormay." She smiled at Jornigan. "Good-by, Dan.

"I'll expect you tonight." She went out, leaving the door open.

Tess dropped into the love seat. "So help me, Lucky, I didn't know anybody was in here."

Jornigan couldn't say anything for a time. His cigar, clutched in his hand, had been squeezed almost in two. He had never seen Lydia look like that before. Not angry. Just hurt.

Tess got up and bounced across the room to him. There was no restraint about her. She was a small volcano in constant eruption. Wherever she was, everything around her seemed alive. He had hired her to sing a week ago, the day she'd ridden the stage in from Ouray, and that night the Casino was packed. It had been every night since.

"Look, boss." She took his hands. "I'll knock the next time I come in. Honest, I didn't know you had a fiancée." She danced across the room and back, an impish smile touching her red lips. "I just want to know one thing. Can you have fun with a lady?"

"Is there a law against spanking a girl?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "When they're over eighteen, and I'm way over that. What about those gents downstairs?"

"Send them up," he groaned, "and get out of here."

He gloomily surveyed his misshapen cigar. Lydia had never censured him for anything he'd done in the year she'd known him, but he was going to have a tough time explaining Tess.

CHAPTER TWO

Bullets Make an Offer

IT WAS Mitch Rourke who came through the door first, squat and deep of shoulder, a hard-driving man without scruples, without inhibitions, the kind

of man who counted only one thing as success, the attaining of the objective he had set out to attain. He paused a moment just inside the door, lips showing a smile, little black eyes drilling Jornigan like the thrusts of twin knives.

"Howdy, Lucky," Rourke said and stepped aside. He motioned to the other man who came in behind him. "Ever meet Collie Boone, Lucky?"

"Heard of him." Jornigan held out his hand. "Made quite a name for yourself in Leadville, Boone."

"You've made a name for yourself here." Boone gave Jornigan's hand a quick grip and dropped it. "That's why Mitch says you're on your way out. He's a jealous man, Mitch is."

Jornigan motioned to the red plush chairs along the wall. "Sit down, gents." He offered them cigars and put the box back on the table. Collie Boone was a slender, green-eyed man who was something of a gambler and more of a killer. His price was high, but he was efficient, and Mitch Rourke liked efficient men. Jornigan moved to the window and stood with his back to it, a questioning smile on his lips. "So I'm on my way out, am I, Mitch?"

"That's right," Rourke leaned back, molars clamping hard on his cigar. "You've been riding high, Dan, but luck's got a way of letting a man down. You've got too big. I'm moving in."

From the moment he had first met Mitch Rourke, Jornigan had sensed a sort of animal-like cunning about him. He could play the sly game, or the direct one, whichever suited the occasion. Now he had elected to play the direct one.

"Sorry to hear that," Jornigan murmured. "I've had a pretty good time since I blew in here."

Rourke laughed shortly. "I can believe that, Dan, the biggest mistake I ever made was letting you get started. You were just a cowboy with a tent, a pine plank,

and some second grade whiskey. Now I suppose you're worth fifty thousand." He swung a big hand across the room. "Look at them ceiling lamps. Blue shades and cut glass trim. Class. Real class. You've put a lot of money into this layout. It's better'n I've got and I've been at this business twenty years."

"See what I mean?" Collie Boone asked. "Jealous."

"That's right," Rourke agreed. "I figured for a while you'd play your luck too close and it'd go sour. Instead you've been flying higher all the time." He moved his big hands, palms out. "So I'm trimming you down like I should have done in the first place. Without your luck, you're just another cowboy."

"Then Mitch is the big noise in Elkhorn," Boone added. "That's the way you want it, isn't it?"

Rourke nodded. "That's right. I'm doing pretty well, Dan, but I could do twice as well."

Jornigan stood motionless, pulling steadily on his cigar and wishing he had his gun. He always carried it during business hours, but it was in his bedroom now. It was doubtful if Rourke and Boone meant to kill him here. Still, a man who tried to outguess Mitch Rourke was in for trouble.

"I didn't expect you boys," Jornigan said evenly. "I don't have my gun, but if you . . ."

Rourke held up his hand. "Don't get that idea, Dan. You don't give me credit enough still for the brains I do have. I ain't above killing if that's the play the hand calls for. This one don't. Not yet. Now I'm giving you credit for being mighty damn sharp. I think you'll listen to my offers."

This was more like it. Rourke had fetched Collie Boone along to show Jornigan he held high trump if he chose to use it, but actually he was playing a deeper game than he let Jornigan see.

"Offers?" Jornigan asked.

"That's right. First, I'll buy you out, lock, stock and barrel. Fifty thousand."

"No dice, Mitch. I put more into this than you figured."

Rourke's grin was faintly mocking. "All right. Second offer. A poker game. We'll go till we finish. Me and you and Collie. Call Phil Owens in if you say so."

Jornigan fingered the ash from his cigar. This might be it. Collie Boone could always find an excuse to go for his gun. It would be legal enough with Owens at the table, and Jornigan knew well enough he'd never beat Boone to the draw.

"He don't want none of that." Boone's laugh was a rasp drawn across Jornigan's taut nerves. "Wait'll we get the news around camp. The boys'll laugh him plumb out of the country."

That was right. Lucky Dan Jornigan who had made his pile at poker turning down a finish game with Mitch Rourke? No, he couldn't do it. He said, "All right, Mitch. Where and when?"

"Just one thing, Dan. You don't play this game with Lydia Dailey at your elbow."

Rourke and Boone were leaning forward, eyes pinned on him, waiting. Jornigan, before he answered, sensed that Rourke knew he'd turn it down. It was what Rourke wanted. That was why he had made the stipulation.

"No good, Mitch. I've never played a big game without Lydia. You know damned well I wouldn't. She's my luck."

"There's ways of making luck with a woman at your elbow," Boone murmured.

JORNIGAN recognized the bait and refused it. "Even Mitch never figured that, Boone, and he's lost plenty across the table to me with Lydia behind my chair."

Rourke nodded. "He's square, Collie. That's what makes him tough."

"That your final offer?" Jornigan asked.

Rourke shook his head. "I made two fair ones, Dan. You turned them down. So-o-o—" he made his characteristic gesture, hands sweeping out, palms up—"if words won't do the job, guns will. Easy enough. Some dark night maybe when you're coming home from Miss Dailey's place. Folks will do a lot of thinking, but thinking won't hang me."

That was true enough, but a man didn't admit it. Not in a game like this with the stakes high as they were now. It was all or nothing. Jornigan played his top card then, and knew it would fail as Rourke had known his offer would be refused.

"Suppose we make that game with guns instead of cards, Mitch. Noon today in the street."

"Not with your luck, Dan." Rourke's grin was quick and mocking again. "You'd have Lydia Dailey beside you and you couldn't miss." He rose, a finger scrubbing his wide chin. "There is one more way of taking you, Dan. It's like I said. Without Lydia you're just another cowboy. I'm not afraid of you. It's your luck that scares me."

The inference was clear. For the first time anger began simmering in Jornigan. He said, "You're talking wild, Mitch. Most things go in this camp, but if you tackle a woman—"

Rourke turned to the door. "Come on, Collie. Dan, don't get this wrong. I won't tackle a woman. Not the way you're thinking, but you'll lose her just the same, and when you do, you're finished."

They went out, Boone saying something that Jornigan didn't hear. They both laughed, and then their steps were lost on the carpeted stairs. Jornigan's eyes swept the rooms. The Battenburg lace curtains, the rich plush chairs and love seats, the mahogany table, the red drapes tied back with the tasseled white cords. Luxury. More than he'd ever dreamed he'd have in the old days when he'd ridden for the Broken Heart outfit in New Mexico.

The ash dropped unnoticed from his cigar. He had turned to stare unseeingly into the whirling snow. He knew now, and the knowledge hit him like the stunning downsweep of a club, that this wasn't his world. He'd built his stake. It was what he'd set out to do. He had no regrets. He'd sold good liquor and his games had been honest. The Casino had that reputation all over the San Jaun. Lydia was right. It was time to get out. But he couldn't. Not until Rourke was out of it.

Lydia! Fear gripped him, knotting his middle. Mitch Rourke had been playing the sly game when he had been pretending to play the direct one. He'd tipped his hand when he said Jornigan would lose Lydia, but what could he do to her? Jornigan thought about it for a long time, and could find but one answer. Rourke had been playing a wild deuce to bring Jornigan into the Silver Palace with his guns smoking. A man of Rourke's caliber could never get a hold on a woman like Lydia by peaceful means.

Jornigan wheeled and striding into his bedroom, slid into his coat. He was reaching for his hat when he saw Tess Ormay in the doorway, a wadded handkerchief in one hand. She had been crying.

"Lucky, I've got to have your help. I've got to." She came on into the room, face upturned. "I know you're busy, but this won't take long. Just this afternoon. We'll be back in time for this evening. You'll do it, won't you?"

She was close to him now, hands on his arms. He caught the fragrance of her hair and her nearness brought that high beat again to his pulse.

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you know why I came here, Lucky?"

"You asked for a job."

"It was just a cover-up. I had to keep people from knowing the real reason. Now he's here, and I've got to have your help."

"Will you tell me what you're talking about?"

"My father. I came here to see him. You're the only one I can turn to, the only friend I've got. I've known you just a week, but that's long enough to trust you."

Tears were close to the surface again in her eyes. It was bad enough to see any woman cry, but Tess was worse. She was the rare enough kind who never should know tears.

"If you came here to see your father, why don't you see him?"

"It's the storm. I can't drive in it, Lucky. I thought you'd take me. He's in the Baxter cabin."

"Look. If your father wants to see you as bad as you want to see him, can't he come here?"

"Oh no. He wouldn't dare. The sheriff might recognize him. You see, he's Red Mohler. You'll take me, won't you, Lucky? We'll be back in time for me to sing tonight."

It shocked him into silence. Red Mohler was the most notorious road agent who had ever operated in the San Juan, but there hadn't been a stage holdup for more than a month, and it was generally thought around Elkhorn that he'd found the climate a little too hot.

"All right," Jornigan said and knew it was wrong. If Red Mohler was at the Baxter cabin, he should notify the sheriff but he wouldn't. Not if Mohler was Tess's father. "I've got an errand to do first. I'll send word to the stable. You get plenty of clothes on. It'll be a cold trip."

"Oh, Lucky, I knew you would." She kissed him impulsively, her lips warm and sweet and clinging, more clinging than the occasion warranted. "I'll be ready in just a minute." Turning, she ran out of the room. Jornigan, staring after her, felt conscience prick him. He could only hope that Lydia didn't hear about it.

CHAPTER THREE

The Sly Game

JORNIGAN stopped at the foot of the stairs, eyes sweeping the room until he saw one of his housemen. "Larry, get over to the stable and tell them to harness up my team." He stepped into the snow then, and turned up his collar. It wasn't far to the Baxter cabin. As Tess had said, they'd be back in time for her to sing. Still, vague worries plucked at him. There was a strange pulling and hauling inside him between these two, Lydia to whom he owed so much and Tess who had touched his heart with a different flame.

Wading through the snow that was more than a foot deep now, Jornigan crossed a side street and turned into Phil Owens' office. A girl nodded and pointed. He thanked her and, threading his way through the desks, knocked on the door.

He went in at Owens' call, said, "Howdy, Phil," and knocked the snow from his hat.

The mine owner tipped back in his chair. "Morning, Lucky," he said in his soft voice. He was a slender, handsome man, a little too young for the job that had fallen to him, a little too weak when it came to women, cards, or whiskey. Still, Jornigan liked him, mostly because he'd won a lot of money from Owens and the mining man had taken it without a word.

"Looks like winter's here," Jornigan said.

"Hell of a lot of snow coming down." Owens motioned to a chair. "Take your weight off your bow legs, Lucky. Wouldn't think you'd have to be told around here. You take anything you want."

Jornigan grinned. "Not quite anything."

"Looking for another big game? I'm your huckleberry if you are."

"No game. I'm having trouble."

Owens's brows lifted. "I don't believe it. Lucky Dan Jornigan doesn't know what trouble is."

Jornigan unbuttoned his coat and flung it open. Owens was the nerve center of the camp because he owned the Gettysburg. He was the mayor, chairman of the school board, and a county commissioner, but actually it was Jornigan who had the ideas and Owens bowed to him. Sometimes, Jornigan thought, Owens wasn't altogether happy about it, but he never argued, and the alliance had worked.

"I've had my share of trouble," Jornigan said, "and I reckon I will again." He told Owens about Rourke's visit.

Owens fidgeted nervously while he listened, filling his pipe, lighting it, and knocking it out almost immediately. It wasn't like him, Jornigan thought, and it puzzled him.

"I don't want trouble between you two," Owens said when Jornigan was done. "No reason for working up a ruckus. The men will take sides and it'll kick back into my teeth. You keep the peace, Lucky. You hear?"

Jornigan stared at Owens, not sure he had heard right. "What the hell, Phil? We've kept the north side clean. Every house has followed my lead. You've never had a kick about any of us, have you?"

"No, but—"

"You've had plenty about the south side, though. A hell of a lot about the Silver Palace. You'd have riots here, camp burned maybe, if I'd let anybody on the north side cut their whiskey and run the kind of games Rourke has. This way a man who wanted a good drink or a square game knew where he could find it. Now you sit there and tell me to keep the peace."

"Some of the boys like the Palace," Owens said defensively. "Rourke keeps girls. You don't. Still, it's part of the business."

"Not my business," Jornigan flung at

the mining man. "You've always said we were ahead without them."

"I've changed my mind. When my men come to town Saturday night, they've got a right to buy what they want. From now on, I'm not bucking Mitch Rourke as long as he keeps his nose reasonably clean." Owens leaned forward, cupping his long chin on his laced fingers. "Maybe your luck's run out."

This wasn't Phil Owens. If it had been another man, Jornigan would have said he'd sold out to Rourke, but Owens had more than all the money he could spend. If he was dancing to Rourke's tune, it was for reasons other than selling out.

"Maybe it is, Phil. Lydia wants me to get out. You want to buy the Casino?"

"Maybe," he said carefully.

Jornigan rose and buttoned his coat. "Let's put this on the barrelhead, Phil. You want me out of things?"

Owens straightened, hands dropping to the desk top. "Not necessarily. I've been playing second fiddle. That's all. I'm done. From now on I'm the head man. No favors to you. None to Rourke. You stay on your side of the street. Same for Mitch. The boys can take their pick."

"All right, Phil. No favors."

Jornigan nodded and turned into the outside office. He'd had a funny feeling that morning. Tess had barged into the room when Lydia was there. He hadn't had that feeling for a year. He'd played poker boldly and confidently and he'd won. He'd played everything else the same way, and he'd won. Lydia hadn't believed in everything he'd done, but she'd loved him enough to go along. He hadn't told her he'd hired Tess Ormay, but he knew she had no objections. He'd had singers before, but the difference was that none had barged into his quarters in the intimate way Tess had done that morning. Nor had they insisted on having a room in the Casino.

He got his team from the livery, took

a seat in the sleigh and swung into the street. Tess came out of the Casino the moment he stopped, sat down beside him and pulled the buffalo robe over her knees.

"Let them go, Lucky," she said. "I've been here a week, and this is the first time you've taken me sleigh-riding."

THE sleigh slid smoothly away from the walk, swung around an ore wagon, and left the camp behind. Jornigan let himself look at the girl then. There was no sign of worry about her, no sign of the tears he'd seen before he'd gone to Owens' office. She looked at him suddenly, surprising him, and laughed. He liked her laugh. It came out of her freely, silver-clear, as if the world were a place to have fun, and the things that made people worry were of no more importance than a youth's childish troubles.

"Why the glum-glum, Lucky?"

"I was thinking about Red Mohler."

"Oh, don't worry about him," she said carelessly. "There never was a sheriff big enough to bring him in." She raised a mittened hand and caught a snowflake. "Look, Lucky. Isn't it pretty?"

"Very pretty," he said. The color in her cheeks had not been painted there. A transient thought drifted into his mind. Why couldn't Lydia sparkle like Tess Ormay instead of looking ahead and cautiously feeling for solid ground?

They didn't talk for a time. Tess snuggled close to him as they rounded Eagle Point. The wind knifed at them. The ground was bare here, the granite needles grimly sharp in the wheeling snowflakes. They were around the point then, the team slowing as it took the steep sharp curves. For the moment Jornigan forgot that Tess was beside him, forgot Lydia. His conversation with Owens pressed back into his mind. It was fantastic that Owens had gone over to Rourke, yet it seemed the only explanation.

"How much farther?" Tess asked. "I'm getting cold."

Jornigan had to wait a moment before he answered, the snow blotting out the landmarks. Then they were rounding a point again, and he knew where they were. "Almost there," he said. "Back here at this creek."

He stopped a moment later, the cabin a smudge to their right. Throwing back the robe he helped her out. "I'll put the team away," he said, "as soon as we see if he's there. How long will you be?"

"Not long," she answered. "Or maybe longer."

"What kind of talk's that?"

She took his arm. "Woman talk," she answered.

They ploughed through the snow, deeper here than it was in Elkhorn. Jornigan pulled the door open. It came easily, for the snow had been shoved away behind it. Heat rushed at them as they went in. Jornigan's gaze swept the cabin. It was clean. There were cans of food on the shelves, a high fire in the fireplace, a pile of wood beside it, but no one was there.

"Looks like he's been here and gone," Jornigan said.

Tess shook the snow from her cap and slid out of her coat. "He built a fire, anyhow. Put the team away, Lucky, and come back in. I don't like to be left alone."

"You don't want me around when you talk to him. I'd better stay outside—"

"No, Lucky. I'll feel safer with you here."

He stared down at her, puzzled. There was no sense about it. If Red Mohler was her father, there was no reason for her to want Dan Jornigan to be there when she talked to him. Not if she thought enough of him to come to Elkhorn just to see him. But he didn't argue. Some of Mohler's bunch might be with him. He turned out of the cabin, put the team away in the log shed set hard against the cliff.

Jornigan had been gone only a moment, but it had been long enough for Tess to set a whiskey bottle and two glasses on the table. She was rummaging among the cans on the shelves when Jornigan closed the door behind him. She said, "I'm hungry. I thought I'd see what we had to eat."

"Never mind about me."

She turned and came across the cabin to him. "We may be here a long time," she said.

She was wearing a red dress, and the instant she turned he saw that it was low cut and revealing, the kind of dress a woman would wear for a man only if the occasion meant a great deal to both of them.

"No reason for us to stay here a long time," he said. "As soon as you have a visit with Mohler, we'll head back."

"I mean the snow. It may get too deep. Or there may be a slide." She was very close to him now, face upturned, full-lipped mouth parted expectantly. "I can think of worse places to be stuck, and I can think of a lot worse men to be stuck with."

Her presence was like a strong drink. She was here within reach, waiting for him to claim her, asking for it in a none-too-subtle way. There was this moment when the fever that she roused in him blotted everything else out of his consciousness. . . .

He brought her to him, more roughly than he realized, and kissed her, feeling the fullness of her lips, the beckoning sweetness that was there. When he let her go, she stayed in his arms, face still upturned, looking at him through long lashes. She murmured, "I was right. There are worse men to be stuck with. I didn't believe Phil when he said—"

"Phil?"

"Phil Owens. He said before I came—"

"How long have you known him?"

She began to tremble, embarrassment

bringing a rush of red across her face. He saw that she realized she'd made a mistake, and sudden suspicion took root in him.

"I've just met him. In Denver. He said you might give me a job."

"Did you expect to meet Red Mohler here? Is he your father?"

"No, silly. It was the only thing I could think of that would get you out here. I wanted you by myself. Don't you see, darling? Just you and me where we'd be alone. No men to see you on business. No fiancées to bother us." She turned to the table and poured drinks. "With all respect to her, Lucky, you're not the kind of man for her. You belong to me. You're good, but no gentleman. And I'm no lady."

Shame was in him again, then, crawling along every nerve and making a sickness in him. It began to add up. Her admitting she knew Owens before she came here. The way Owens had talked today. Mitch Rourke bringing Collie Boone and his threat that he'd strike through Lydia. This was like Rourke. Tess Ormay was bait, the kind of bait that would knock any man off his feet, bait to get him out of camp while something happened.

"What's Rourke up to?" Jornigan demanded. "How does Owens tie into this job?"

"I don't know anything about Rourke." She held out a glass of whiskey. "I don't know anything about a game or a job or how Owens fits into it. I just want you, Lucky."

It was an old game and a good one, and he'd fallen for it like a greenhorn. He backed away, a wild rage in him. "Who built this fire? Who brought the whiskey? Who left the grub?"

"I sent a man out this morning," she murmured. "What's the matter, Lucky? Don't you like me?"

"Sure, I like you. I'd like you better right across my knee." He started for her,

his face thunder black. "That's where you're going if you don't talk."

She dropped the whiskey-glass and backed away, suddenly frightened. "I don't know, Lucky. I don't. I just know Owens wanted you out of town."

"Then we're going back. Or you can stay here to meet your papa." Jornigan wheeled to the door. "If you're going with me, be outside when I come by, or you'll be here a long time. Alone."

THERE was no talk on the way back. Tess hung on, white-faced, while Jornigan put his team around the sharp curves at a wild dangerous pace. The mountain broke away below the narrow road, a precipitous cliff so steep that it was almost bare of snow. Above them a peak reaching for the sky was lost in the fog of snow. No slides had run here this year, but there might be any minute, for it was a treacherous death trap. Tess might not have known it, but Mitch Rourke and Phil Owens would, and with the thought, rage blazed in a higher flame.

They were in camp then, falling snow whipping into their faces. Jornigan pulled up a block from the Casino. "Get out and wade," he said curtly. She did, without a word or a backward glance. He didn't wait to see where she went. He turned uphill to Mrs. Dugan's house, laying the whip on his horses. He floundered through the snow to her porch, kicked some of the snow from his boots and pounded on the door.

Usually Lydia answered his knocks, but not today. It was Mrs. Dugan, the floor squeaking under her weight. She gave him one look, bawled, "The likes of you ain't wanted here," and tried to slam the door.

"Maybe I'm not wanted but I want something here." Jornigan's boot was blocking the door. Where's Lydia?"

"She's packing up, the dear. And why? Because of you, you lying good-for-noth-

ing. I told her there wouldn't be no good come from listening to your promises. I knew what you was all the time. You don't know a good woman. You'd rather chase a hussy."

"I want to see her."

"Oh, no you don't. I'll lay a rolling pin over your worthless head afore I let you see her again. Getting her fired. Making her cry like I never saw her cry. Why, if you don't—"

He wheeled away from the door, slogged back through the snow to the sleigh and swung the team down the hill. There was time, but not much. The stage didn't leave for an hour, but an hour was short for what had to be done.

He left the team at the stable and floundered along the street to the Casino. The warm air washed around him, strong with whiskey and tobacco and the stale sweat of working men. The big room was never fully clear of it. The expensive chandeliers, the ornate mahogany bar, the great mirror; show stuff, but luxury and wealth didn't change anything. He was sick of it. Everything. The whisper of cards. The roar of guns. The treachery and greed and lust for power that were all around him.

Jornigan was in his room then, buckling on his gunbelt. Mitch Rourke hadn't been playing a wild deuce when he'd made his threat about striking at Jornigan through Lydia. They had expected Lydia to be out of town before he came back. Then, embittered by anger, he'd barge into the Silver Palace and be cut down by Collie Boone's gun. That was where Rourke and Owens had made their mistake. He'd settle with Owens first.

He had left his overcoat and hat in the room. He didn't remember he'd taken off his hat until he was outside again and the feathery touch of snow was in his hair and on his face. He wondered briefly where Tess was, if she had gone directly to Rourke. He was thinking clearly, more

clearly than he had ever thought before. The blinding haze of fury had gone from him. The jobs that had to be done were arranged in proper order in his mind. First, Owens because Owens was the key figure. Then Lydia. And finally Mitch Rourke and maybe Collie Boone.

Jornigan plunged into the mine office and went on back to Owens' room without a glance at the girl who had the first desk. She called, "I don't think you'd better—" He didn't wait. He turned the knob, slammed the door open, and went in.

Phil Owens was at his desk. His head snapped up, eyes questioning; then he saw who it was and fear sucked color from his face. Jornigan kicked the door shut. He said, "On your feet, Owens. I'm gonna lick hell out of you."

"No, Lucky. That isn't the way."

It was Tess huddled in the back corner. She still wore her cap, but her coat was open. Jornigan, turning his gaze on her, felt a strange feeling crawl through him again. It was something Lydia would never know. Now, sensing that his luck had run out, that he had probably lost Lydia, he wondered what he had seen in Tess Ormay, how Mitch Rourke's scheming could have come so close to working. He saw her clearly, saw her shallowness and tawdriness, and when he balanced her in his mind against Lydia as he had done so many times this week, it was like trying to balance a feather against an ounce of gold.

Owens came to his feet slowly, eyes warily on Jornigan as he reached for a gun in the top drawer. Jornigan said, "Don't make me kill you, Phil." Owens straightened then, hand dropping back.

"What do you want?" the mine owner asked thickly.

"I want to know what you've been doing?"

"Nothing. I told you before I was tired of playing second fiddle."

"So you use a woman to get me out of

town while you fire Lydia. You got somebody else to teach?"

"I will have. Monday."

"Nobody ever claimed Lydia was a bad teacher. She's too good for this camp. What kind of a damned lie did you cook up to get her out?"

Owens licked his lips. "It's no lie, Lucky. We told her we wanted a teacher who didn't stand by her man's elbow when he played poker."

"Took you a long time to think of that."

Owens shivered as fear slapped at him. He shot a glance at Tess and licked his lips again. "There's more than that. We want a teacher who doesn't call on her man in his room above the Casino on Saturday morning. Think what kind of moral influence a woman like that has—"

Jornigan hit him. Owens spun away from his desk, hit the wall and bounced back into another driving fist that knocked him off his feet. Tess cried out. Jornigan said, "Keep your hollering—"

"Behind you," Tess screamed.

JORNIGAN knew before he turned. He knew by the look on Tess's face. It told him something else, too. She wanted him to live.

Pulling his gun as he wheeled, Jornigan laced a shot at Mitch Rourke before the squat man could pull trigger. Collie Boone was behind Rourke, and it was that fact which saved Jornigan's life, for Rourke had not expected to find Jornigan here and, coming in first this way, he blocked the gunman's view.

Jornigan heard the snap of Rourke's bullet. His first shot, fired too fast, splintered the door casing at the side of Rourke's face, a miss, but close enough to ruin his shot. Rourke had his one chance, and failed. Jornigan's second bullet drove through his head and brought him out of the doorway in a slow ponderous fall.

Collie Boone was there then, a mocking smile on his thin face. He fired, ahead of

Jornigan, for time favored him by a slender fragment of a second. His bullet missed, and that was a miracle that Dan Jornigan could not explain. His shot came hard upon the thunder of Boone's gun. Then he knew, the instant he'd fired, that Boone had been hit before either of them had pulled trigger.

Jornigan watched Collie Boone prop his slender body against the door casing, try to hold himself there while he lifted his gun, but he could not, for life was leaking out of him in a pulsating scarlet stream. He died there on his feet, surprised that the host of men who had died at his hand had been avenged at last, and he fell.

Still not understanding, Jornigan turned. Phil Owens was sitting up, a hand rubbing his jaw, eyes glazed. Tess, standing beside her chair, face gray and old-looking, still held a smoking gun in her hand.

"I'm beholden to you," Jornigan said, "but I don't know why you did it."

"No, you wouldn't understand," she breathed. "Just say that it's good for even a woman like me to do one decent thing before she dies. That was mine, and I'm sorry for the part I had in this."

She pulled her coat around her and, stepping gingerly over the bodies in the doorway, pressed through the crowd of curious office workers who came out from under cover to look into the room.

Owens was on his feet, still rubbing his jaw. "Wait, Tess. You know the deal—"

But Tess Ormay walked out of the building without looking back. Jornigan holstered his gun. "All right, Phil. My luck wasn't all run out, but I'm willing to let you have the rest of it. You can buy the Casino and run both sides of the street."

Owens waved the crowd away from the doorway, calling, "Stryker, go get the coroner. Get the marshal." He brought his gaze to Jornigan then. "Better stay,

Dan. If Lydia should want her old job back—"

"She's given this camp too much already," Jornigan snapped. "I'll never ask her to stay here. You don't want to play second fiddle. I guess that's the whole answer. All right. I'm selling for fifty thousand. Walk in and take over whenever you like."

Owens took a long dragging breath and reached for his checkbook. "All right, Dan, but I don't guess I'll be buying your luck. She'll be going out on the stage today."

Dan said nothing.

Lydia was at the stage depot when Jornigan ploughed through the snow and went in. She looked at him, half-smiling as if she had somehow expected him. He said, "I'm going out with you. I've sold to Owens. We'll find that land you believe in."

But she didn't stir. She stood very straight, holding him away from her with her eyes, for pride was a great force in her. "I think not, Dan. I've gone through too much for you to keep on."

"There'll be no more of that," he cried out. "Didn't you hear? I've sold out. I've got my stake. I'm quitting like I promised."

"A man like you never quits," she said evenly. "I told you I was lucky for having loved you. You always said a person should never run his luck too far. I'll let mine stand where it is."

There was a finality in her voice.

He stood there looking at her helplessly, knowing he couldn't let her go, and knowing, too, that he couldn't beg her and she wouldn't believe him if he told her what had happened.

The door opened and was quickly closed, a gust of cold air rushing into the hot little room. Still jumpy, Jornigan turned, hand gripping gun butt.

"Easy, Lucky," Tess said. "I've got

(Continued on page 128)



"Get outa my way, gran'pa—these tie-rails is for real men an' hosses. . . ."

BOOTHILL | BONANZA

No bank could grubstake Old Ben to his lost youth—so he made his last strike on the talking end of a six-gun!

By
RULAND WALTNER

OLD BEN did not interrupt the banker's angry oratory. His gaunt frame slouched in the customer's chair in the Fourche Bank and Savings Company; and his faded blue eyes, nestled in wrinkles, avoided Rip Hardin's hawk stare and hunched shoulders. He had known Rip would not want to grubstake him twice in one year; but he and Sampson were entitled to one accident. They had made Rip plenty of money in the past.

Rip paused for breath, but Ben kept his eyes on the fly-specked window and

the dusty street where Sampson dozed at the hitch-rack, one long, motheaten ear dropped against his scraggy neck, the other pricked toward the door Ben had entered half an hour before. Beyond the burro, the road disappeared into a sea of pines that rolled up Granite Mountain past the bare gray bones of the unpainted Halfway House that marked the curve in the trail. For more years than Ben liked to remember this had been the center of his world.

"Are you saying you ain't going to grubstake me no more," he asked mildly, "just because Sampson fell in Wolf Creek and I lost my gear getting him out?"

"Your burro's too old," Rip said with finality. "That's why he fell. And it ain't only him. It's you. Grubstaking prospectors has got to show a profit. The last two trips you ain't turned up nothing. So I'm looking for younger men, like Squint Phillips and Brush Adams."

"I been hunting Lost Valley," Ben explained stubbornly. "It's richer'n the Two Spot; bigger'n the Cougar. I found it once. I can again."

"It's a pipe dream," the banker said shortly. "Something you thought up when the stars were bright and the grub low."

Ben drew himself up with shabby dignity.

"I never fancied none," he said soberly. "It's real. And I ain't used to reminding folks of things they ought to know. You've made lots of money off Sampson and me. Now we're in a tight with our gear gone and us not so young—"

Rip bent over his littered desk, and his broad back was like a closed door between them.

"You said it, Ben. You're too old to work the mountains. I've passed the word about you. No one in Fourche will stake you. You'd better hit for some big town where there's odd jobs. Turn your burro loose. He ain't worth a bullet."

Anger too great for his gaunt body

shook old Ben. He lurched to his feet.

"Turn Sampson out to shift for himself?" he demanded. "To be coyote bait or worse? Him and I journeyed together since his mammy foaled him; and we ain't quitting now. We'll find Lost Valley and we'll find it together!"

Rip Hardin did not look up.

"Luck to you," he said coldly. "You'll need it."

Ben stumbled blindly from the room. Ankle deep in the dust of the road, he patted Sampson's neck and swore.

"Never you mind," he said. "You're the best doggone burro there is!"

From beyond the window, he felt Rip Hardin's eyes. Perhaps he was remembering all the strikes they had made for him.

Ben had not profited by them. He did not know the ways of gold after it warmed men's palms. Until now, he had not cared that his arrangements with Rip Hardin left him little more than another grubstake. All he wanted was the fresh, clean smell of pines, mountains piling above him peak on misty peak to the infinity of the sky, water leaping over the sheer face of cliffs on a journey whose end or beginning he could not guess, the feeling that he was a part of the breathing vastness.

Surely, for the sake of a few dollars grubstake, Rip would not take all this from them. He would not condemn Ben to a life of odd jobs among strangers and Sampson to starveling wandering in a wilderness peopled by his enemies. He would call them back.

Rip was standing at the window of the bank; but he did not call them back. He was staring beyond them, his hawk face hard and expressionless; and for the first time, Ben heard the dust-muffled beat of horses' hoofs.

Two men were galloping down the road, their strong, short-coupled ponies dripping foam from spade bits. They wore

guns and, even in the saddle, they seemed to swagger.

Ben recognized Squint Phillips and the thick shoulders and bristling black beard of Brush Adams. Even if Rip had grubstaked them, they did not look like prospectors to him. They had the lean recklessness of gunfighters.

"Get out of my way, gran'pa," Brush shouted, pushing his bay almost onto Ben. "These tie rails is for real men an' hosses."

Ben looked around him in elaborate misunderstanding.

"I'd be pleased to see some," he drawled. "Sampson and me—we been right lonesome."

Anger flared in Brush. His hand dropped on his gun, but Ben stood his ground. He was not going to back water for Brush or any one like him. All he had left was the right to stand on his two feet and face folks down.

Squint swung his horse in beside them. His yellow hair fell straight and thick before his eyes, and he tossed it back impatiently.

"Leave the old man be," he said shortly. "Rip ain't staking him no more. So leave him lick his sores in peace."

"I ain't got no sores," Ben interrupted. "It's you and Rip going to be tendering yourselves when me and Sampson find Lost Valley."

The words tickled Brush. He threw back his bristling head and roared with laughter.

"We'll tender ourselves all right," he said, "when you find it!"

Still chuckling, he swung down from his horse and stamped up the steps and into the bank. Squint followed and, through the window, Ben saw Rip meet them at the door, cordially, as he had once greeted him.

Ben caught the frayed halter rope. There was no use seeing any one else in Fourche. Rip owned the store, the two

saloons, and the livery barn and held mortgages on everything else. But even if he and Sampson were too old, like they said, without supplies or any way to get them, the men in the bank should not see that they were washed up.

His shoulders squared as he backed Sampson away from the hitch-rack but he coughed as they plodded up the road and disappeared among the pines. The dust, he guessed it was, clogging up his lungs.

IT WAS almost noon when they reached Happy's Halfway House, sprawled beside the road with the pines, sharply resinous under the hot sun, crowding in on it.

Happy was his partner's widow; and the memory of her blue eyes, dauntless in her little wrinkled face, of her biscuits and wild plum jelly, of her way with a steak and a dried apple pie, never altogether left him. When her husband died, she had started the Halfway House with Rip Hardin's help. Though the fame of its cooking spread far and wide, it made her no more than a bare livelihood above her payments to Rip.

If Ben could have been freshly outfitted and heading back into the hills, he would have stopped there. With empty pockets and a bare-backed burro, he trudged stolidly on.

Sampson had other ideas. He sidled off the road and, when Ben pulled on his lead rope, he planted his four feet solidly and refused to budge.

Silently, Ben struggled. If Happy found them here, she would insist on feeding them and he could not let her see him like this.

Sampson lifted his long head and brayed.

Ben swore and clouted his soft muzzle. Sampson bit him, a sound, self-respecting nip.

The commotion drew Happy to the front porch.

Ben refused to turn toward her. He knew how she looked, bending over the stripped pine rail, her gray hair in a soft knot on her neck, the color in her cheeks, faint pink like late wild roses, the deep folds of her calico dress that floated around her with a grace city women in their silks and laces could not equal.

"Ben Goodson!" Her voice was like gold—just wearing a little thin with the years. "Shame on you—brawling with Sampson!"

She turned to the cool recesses of the house and the boy behind her in its doorway.

"Charlie," she called. "Come get Sampson and take him out back. Give him some oats. The poor beast hasn't likely had any since he was here last."

"Now, Happy—" Ben said.

"Don't Happy me," she interrupted tartly. "Just march yourself into this house and set. Dinner'll be ready in a jiffy."

Redheaded Charlie came grinning down the steps and took the lead rope from Ben's nerveless hand. Sampson crowded the boy's bare heels as they headed for the shed with its waiting measure of oats. Charlie was a stray Happy had taken in when his people died. Rip Hardin said she could not afford to, but Happy said he was a good boy, and it was her own business.

The house was cool and smelled sweet. Ben did not know how tired he was till he stepped inside. He did not know how easily rested he could be, either, till she set him down on the back porch with a mug of cold buttermilk while she moved deftly in the kitchen behind him, her voice floating to him through the window.

"Where do you think you were heading, Ben Goodson, without passing the time of day with me? From the looks of Sampson, a body'd know you'd lost your

gear someway and Rip Hardin, drat him, wouldn't grubstake you no more. But that don't mean you can go back on your friends."

She rattled a stovelid and Ben cleared his throat, overwhelmed with guilt.

"I ain't going back on no one," he protested. "But Sampson and me, we're getting old, like Rip said. We can't pay you for your victuals, most likely."

Happy sniffed. She came to the doorway and stood looking at him, her work-worn hands light on her slim hips, her eyes darkened with concern that she wiped away quickly.

"Maybe you heard Rip ain't staking real prospectors no more—just a couple of gunmen? Claim-jumpers, likely."

"I been wondering since I seen Squint and Brush," Ben admitted. "There ain't no honest work in them."

"Then you're going to show them?" she demanded.

"How can I?" he asked.

"I ain't never thought to see the day Ben Goodson'd turn quitter," she said witheringly but she added in swift apology, "I know you ain't scared, Ben. You're just hungry. Scanting their victuals takes some men that way and here I stand talking when dinner's ready to spoon up."

She went back to the kitchen. "Call Charlie and set."

He accepted her words in the spirit they were meant.

"Ain't no one could feel glum with your cooking under his belt," he said gallantly and, after dinner, things did look brighter to him.

Perhaps, he thought, sitting on the porch watching Sampson drowsing in the shade, listening to Happy bustling in the kitchen, hearing the ring of Charlie's axe in the woodlot behind the shed, he could mosey over to Spotted Dog and get a grubstake. He did not know anyone there and it would not be easy, coming in with a barebacked burro.

The rustle of Happy's skirts interrupted him. She brought out her knitting and sat in the little rocking chair beside him while she listened to his plans.

"Of course you can do it," she said confidently. "Maybe they don't know you in Spotted Dog; but they know of you. Rip Hardin would be a sight poorer if it wasn't for you, and folks know it. He'd even be a mite poorer without the money I've made him on the Halfway House. And now he's closing us both out."

"Not you," Ben cried.

She nodded.

"I've most paid him off—with interest. But this year I'm behind, so, come Christmas, if I don't catch up, he's setting me out."

Ben's gnarled hands tightened on his chair arms.

"He ain't going to do it!" he said.

Her knitting needles clicked briefly.

"I've been waiting for that," she said.

Charlie came around the corner of the shed at a run. His face was flushed with excitement, his red hair shot fire in the sunlight.

"Seeing you got no gear, give me an idea," he panted. "Uncle Tom's is still stored in the shed, and Happy's got lots of dry beans left over. Why don't you grubstake us, Happy—Ben and me and Sampson?"

Doubt flickered in Happy's face and hardened into decision.

"When Tom died," she said slowly, "I always said nobody should use his gear. But this is different, Ben. This is you—and Charlie. You'll learn him all you know, won't you? Stuck off in the hills like he is, he don't get much chance at schooling, and you're a good prospector. Now that Tom's gone, the best there is. We got plenty of jerked meat and some flour and coffee. It ain't much of a grubstake, but you might make it do."

Ben snorted.

"Not much of a grubstake," he repeated. "Why, Happy, it'll be the best one Sampson and me ever had!"

ALWAYS before, Ben had tried for a real strike. Always before, he had ignored the streams where a man could make day wages. This time he was playing safe. Charlie was a bright boy and quick and, with the two of them working their best, in any of a dozen streams he expected to pan enough gold before snow fell to meet Happy's needs. But luck deserted him.

"Like they say," he told Charlie sadly, "Gold is where you find it."

Charlie grinned. He and Sampson were happy. For the boy, it was one long picnic; for the burro, the best possible way of life. But for Ben, wakened so late to responsibility for them, for Happy, and for himself, it was misery.

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MUTUAL BROADCASTING SYSTEM, INC.

At night, while Charlie slept and Sampson grazed, never out of sight of their camp fire, he looked at the stars and thought of Lost Valley. If he could find that again, Happy could have a new Halfway House, Charlie could go outside to school, Sampson could have a barn bursting with hay and oats, and he. . .

Ben sighed. He would have a grubstake as long as he lived!

But the valley was still lost to him and he had no time to gamble on finding it. He had to have day wages, not adventure.

They struck Lonesome Widow Creek and worked slowly higher toward its source. One afternoon when the sun was still hot on their heads and the smell of the pines sharp in their nostrils, they started to cross the stream. Ben was leading and Charlie was bringing up the rear when Sampson slipped. In his prime, the burro had been more sure-footed than a cat; but he fell, just as he had in Wolf Creek.

Charlie grabbed his rat tail and swung up with all his strength, and Ben hauled on the lead rope. Sampson fought to his feet and scrambled across and up the opposite bank, where he stopped, his sides heaving.

Some of the more loosely lashed gear had been swept from his back, and Charlie scooped it up. The long-handled skillet turned in his clutch and scraped creek bottom, coming up half-filled with sand and gravel. As he started to empty it, the sun glinted on some of the pebbles and Ben cried out hoarsely, "You've found it, boy. Gold!"

They made a hasty camp, and Ben rigged a rough cradle. They worked in a frenzy of excitement as the sun lowered and the evening chill crept in. When they could no longer see to work, they built their fire and fried johnny cakes in the longhandled skillet.

As Charlie sat cross-legged before the

fire, he asked, trying to sound off-hand and casual, "What we got? Something or nothing?"

Ben rolled his last cake and bit it reflectively.

"If it holds up a few days, we'll have all Happy needs," he said. "And it's coming none too soon. It's still summer down at the Halfway House; but it's petering out up here."

Ben woke with the cold, raw smell of dawn. In the grayness, he built up the fire and had breakfast ready when he called Charlie. They were hard at work before the sun was up.

Slowly Ben's poke fattened. Each night, about the campfire, he and Charlie hefted it critically before they stretched their tired bones to the warmth of the leaping flames.

One night they heard movement in the undergrowth, the faint crackle of twigs as if some stealthy creature moved there. A hasty search revealed nothing. Before morning it rained, water washing out any sign a prowler might have left.

"I reckon it was a bear," Ben said. "But we got to be careful. There's always a chance for snoopers. And we can't risk this. It's Happy's."

After that they buried the poke near the fire, and Ben spread his blankets over the spot when he slept.

The days grew shorter and cooler. The nights had a sharper bite. Some mornings, there were traces of ice along the stream.

The poke was almost full when the gold played out. Regretfully Charlie studied the sterile sand in the last cradle.

"I wish we'd filled the poke to its drawstring," he said; but Ben shook his head.

"We got enough. Tomorrow we're starting back."

"Aw, Ben," the boy protested, but Ben was firm.

"Winter's coming early this year. Ain't you noticed how spooky Sampson's acting? And I ain't resting easy till Happy

drops her gold on Rip Hardin's desk and gets shut of them mortgage papers."

He built up the fire several times during the night. Sheltered though the camp was, there was a chill in the air that bit to the bone and by morning they knew that they must be traveling.

Charlie went after Sampson while Ben packed. The sugar was gone, he noticed. There was not much coffee. The bean sack was more than half empty. It was indeed time to strike for the lower country.

Everything was ready to lash on Sampson's back. Ben reached for the spade to dig up the poke and paused with a sharp and unexplainable reluctance. He looked about him swiftly. The glade was as it had always been; but his uneasiness persisted.

He bent to shovel dirt onto the dying fire. He was straightening when the blow struck him. He knew only a terrific shock and a sensation of blinding pain as he plunged forward.

DIRT ground into his face. Blood gushed from the cut a clubbed gun barrel opened across his scalp. But through it all he felt a sharpened functioning of his faculties. This might be the end of everything for him. For Sampson and Charlie, too. Without him, they could not win safety through the wilderness.

Face down, arms outspread, he relaxed, knowing that his slightest motion would bring a shot in the back.

"Hold it!" He recognized Squint's voice, harsh with warning. "The kid'll hear a shot, and one killing's enough. Leave him be."

Leave him be," mimicked Brush. "That's all you ever say. But this time, we've give him a sore he can't lick."

He laughed at his own joke and kicked Ben in the ribs as he passed. Ben rolled with the blow, but no sound came through

his clenched teeth. Satisfied, Brush tore into the careful packing, slitting the bags, emptying their contents in wanton destruction.

"Don't do that," Squint protested. "You won't find anything and the kid can't get out without grub."

Brush turned on him, threateningly.

"Maybe there's a map in them beans," he said. "Maybe he found that Lost Valley and is stalling to get it all for himself like Rip was worrying. We charge the boss plenty when we do jobs like this. He ain't going to like your going soft no more'n I do."

He shook out the flour and scattered the coffee in the ashes.

Grumbling, Squint reached for the spade. "Gold's all the boss wants. I'm going to dig up the poke we saw them hide and vamose."

Ben's slender hold on consciousness slipped and he drifted into darkness.

Charlie and Sampson found him alone, stretched beside the dead fire. His breath was shallow and his face the color of putty. Frightened, Charlie bathed his wound with water from the creek. He bandaged it and eased his position. Sampson snuffled his body. He planted his forefeet, lifted his gray muzzle, and brayed.

That unearthly sound was the first to penetrate to Ben. He moved and Charlie sprang to help him.

Propped against a boulder, he surveyed the wrecked camp.

"Two men did it," said Charlie. "I found where they'd tied their horses back in the bushes. If Sampson and I'd got here in time—"

"It's good you didn't," Ben said bleakly, "or they'd have killed you. It was Squint and Brush come on orders from Rip. Our gold's gone and most of the food. You'd better scrape together what you can, and we'll get moving."

Charlie washed the ants and dirt from

the jerked meat and hung it over the fire he built to dry it. He raked up the beans. The coffee and flour were beyond saving.

Sampson stayed close to the camp, traveling restlessly from Charlie to Ben, nuzzling them with his soft, black lips, standing with his ears pricked toward the far stretches of the lowlands.

Ben watched with fevered eyes and the pain in his head sickened him.

"Weather's coming when he acts that way," he said hoarsely. "Gold gone. Grubstake gone. Summer gone. Poor Happy—I reckon the Halfway House is gone, too."

By afternoon, Charlie had loaded the burro and they were ready for the long tramp downward.

With Ben clinging to the lashings, Sampson started off briskly; but almost at once he slowed his pace, as if Ben's hand on the pack had telegraphed his weakness. From time to time the burro jerked on his halter rope, looking back over his shoulder, as if urged by his instinct to desert the peaks, but held back by concern for his master.

The sky was heavy with a cold gray that chilled the spirits as if winter was coming without benefit of the short mountain autumn. As the day wore on, instead of lifting, the clouds bore more heavily upon the peaks. A few snowflakes sifted down.

Sampson stopped abruptly. He hunched his forequarters, dropped his head, and closed his eyes against Charlie's urging.

"Nothing but dynamite'll move him," Ben panted, steadying himself on the lashings. "He's thinking."

As abruptly as he had stopped, the burro lifted his head and scented the wind. Then he swung away from the open ground they had been traveling and angled for a close stand of timber below them. Charlie pulled desperately on the lead rope; but it had no more effect on

him that did the thickening snow flakes.

"Give him his head," Ben advised the boy. "This ain't no common storm, and he knows it."

Charlie obeyed. Before they reached the trees, they could not see five feet before them; but Sampson kept on briskly. Once in the gloom of the timber, cut off from the swirling snow that was loading the tree tops above them, he still seemed to be driving for a particular goal.

"I'm lost," Charlie protested. "I'm all turned around."

"So'm I," Ben admitted. "But Sampson ain't."

They could tell that they were working into a lower valley, and Ben began to have a haunting sense of familiarity. He had been here before—a long time ago.

Sampson broke into a shambling run that made Ben cling harder to the pack; but, even before they stopped at the tumbled-down shack, he began to laugh.

"It's Lost Valley!" he gasped. "It's my old shack. And Rip Hardin said Sampson wasn't worth a bullet."

Charlie beat his numbed hands together.

"Lost Valley!" he repeated in an awed voice. "Now everything's all right!"

THE words wiped Ben clean of elation. They had found the valley, but what good could it do them or Happy? They were buried in the wilderness in a raging blizzard, wounded, exhausted, without food and supplies.

"Finding it's enough for you and me, old-timer," he mumbled to Sampson. "We've been trying so long! But it ain't enough for Charlie and Happy. Somehow, we got to do more."

Aloud, he said, "We'll hole up here, son. Build our monuments and sort of get our bearings."

Charlie nodded prompt agreement, and Ben felt the responsibilities of leadership crushing him.

"We'll get us a deer," he said with a confidence he did not feel. "Or maybe a bear. Bear steak's pretty fancy—even an old one, once you're hungry enough; and this storm come so suddenlike we'll maybe catch one before he dens up."

The roof of the cabin had fallen in, but the walls were stout, and Charlie thatched a corner with pine boughs. He went to sleep, chewing the last of their jerked meat. Ben lay beside him, but he did not sleep. His head throbbed under its bandages; his legs ached; but his thoughts tormented him worst. He had to stake a claim for Charlie, one for Happy, too, beside his own. He had to mark the valley so that he would never miss it again. He had to get the boy to safety. He had to record their locations at the county seat. He had to deal with Brush and Squint and Rip.

"Suppose Rip was right," he mumbled. "Suppose I am too old!"

Two days later the last of their beans was gone; and the storm showed no sign of abating. If there was any game in the valley, it was not stirring. Ben decided they had to go on while they still had strength to travel.

They kept to the timber, for where it was thickest there was not much snow on the ground although the white canopy over the spreading tops of the trees made the little calvacade move through the gloom of narrow, tented aisles. They blazed their way with careful strokes of Charlie's hand axe, for this time they had to make sure the valley would not be lost again.

They crossed Lonesome Widow Creek and, as they stood panting in the comparative shelter of the trees on the other side, Ben considered.

"Follering the creek'd be shorter. It ain't froze. But it's colder'n Greenland, and the banks are one drift after another. We can make it through the timber, if we pull in our belts another notch."

Grimly they plunged on.

It stopped snowing, but they were too tired to notice it. Night threatened, and they fumbled wood to start their fire. Ben labored down a slope, dragging a dead branch. He passed Sampson. The burro had been nibbling the straggly bushes. Now he stood motionless, staring through the trees. His lower lip drooped, and his upper lip twitched back over his long, yellow teeth. He was about to bray!



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Ben dropped the wood and caught the burro's lifting muzzle. Another outfit was before them in the timber and, if it had not been for Sampson, Ben would have stumbled on them before he knew whether they were friends or enemies.

He led the burro back to Charlie who squatted beside their blankets, shaving twigs to start their fire.

"Some one's up ahead," he explained. "Might be Squint and Brush. They ain't woodsmen, and a mite of snow'd send them into camp. You wait. If I holler, come a-running. If I don't, stay put till I get back."

He lifted his ancient carbine and checked its load. He crept cautiously forward. If Squint and Brush had been forced to camp, they still had Happy's gold and he meant to have it back.

BEN had never seen so poor a camp as the one he found on the ledge.

The thread of fire seemed to gasp. One man lay rolled like a log in his blanket. The other sat propped against a tree, his gun across his knees trained on the blanketed cocoon of his companion. The man with the gun was Squint.

Ben forgot the dull throbbing of his wound. He shifted his course so that he could crawl down behind the camp. Squint did not hear him, but, noiseless as his approach was, it must have carried to a horse picketed beyond Ben's sight. It whinnied.

Ben dropped flat and lay still, but Squint broke into eager shouting.

"Hallo!" he called. "Help! Help!"

Something desperate and unrelated to the storm had happened here. Ben put the trunk of a tree between them.

"Throw out your gun," he ordered. "Way out!"

Squint obeyed.

Cautiously, Ben stepped closer. He picked up Squint's gun and searched him for weapons. Squint's leg had been broken

and was crudely set. Wrapped in his blankets, Brush had not moved.

"He ain't dead," Squint said contemptuously. "After we left you, my horse fell on me. We set my leg; but, when the snow started, he tried to sneak out on me. He took the gold and all the grub. I had to put a hole in him to stop him; but he ain't dead—yet."

Ben rolled Brush over and took his gun and knife while Brush looked at him with blank eyes and muttered in his beard. When he found the poke with Happy's gold plump and hard on the man's side, jubilation welled in Ben.

"Fine prospectors you are—you and Rip Hardin!" he chuckled.

He called Charlie and when he heard boy and Burro coming through the underbrush he bent again over Brush and examined his wound. It was bad, but Ben knew what to do. Snow had other uses than shutting men in to die.

"I ain't too old to tend a broken leg or pack a bullet hole," he said. "We'll build up the fire and all eat a bite before we start doctoring. We'll need our strength for what's ahead."

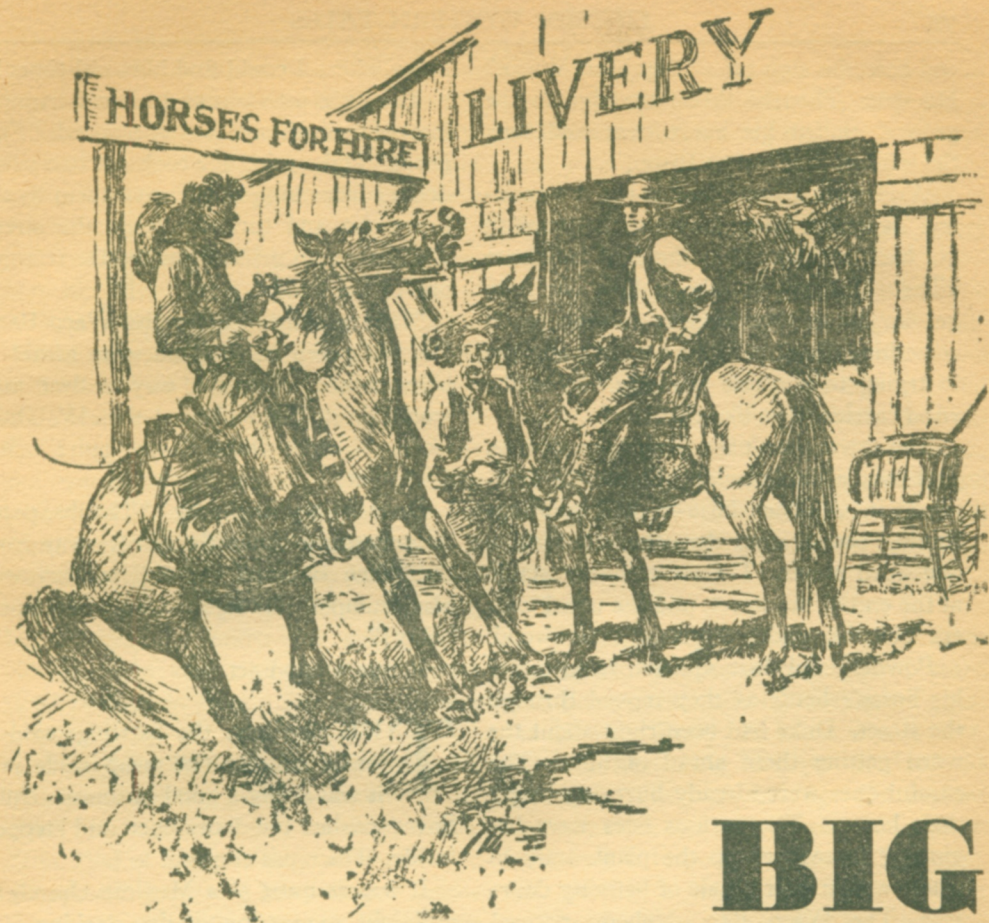
Charlie looked at him in amazement.

"We got no call to take care of them! After all they did, we ought to leave them, like they left us."

A smile crossed Ben's tired face.

"They're witnesses, son," he said. "We're going to take care of them and take them in. But before we go, they're going to sign a paper about the things they done and who hired them. Rip Hardin has wrote his own comeuppance, and we're the ones to deliver it. Sure and certain, like we're delivering Happy's Halfway House to her!"

He raised his voice and shouted triumphantly into the darkness "Sampson, come here, you long-eared flea trap! Rip Hardin said you wasn't worth a bullet—bet when he sees what you done, he'll wish he'd throwed a whole six gun at you!"



"Now — now is your chance to do something," she said breathlessly. . . .

BIG MEN

T DIE HARD

It was John Waco's town — and John Waco's boothill. And it was John Waco's sudden sixes that wrote his own epitaph!

**By
CLIFTON ADAMS**

THE big oak tree stood in the middle of the Y where the two dusty roads came together. A scrawled sign was nailed to its trunk.

STRANGER, TAKE THE RIGHT FORK.
THE LEFT ONE GOES TO BISON
BIG JOHN WACO'S TOWN.

Duke Savoy read the sign carefully. He looked at it for a long time, then he kneeed his horse up to the tree, reached out,

and tore the sign off. "Big John Waco." He spat. Then he threw the sign to the ground, pulled his horse over and took the left fork, the one to Bison.

Word gets around fast in the out-country. It hadn't taken long for the word to get back to Duke that the Kid had been killed. It wouldn't take it long for it to get up ahead that he was coming to do something about it. There wasn't any use in trying to surprise anybody. Even the wind carries news like that.

The town wasn't far from the oak tree. Just over a little rise and Duke was looking at it. A dozen false-fronted buildings leaning one against the other to form a one-sided street. The usual livery stable at the end of the street, and the usual loafers whittling under the usual cottonwood.

Powdery red dust squirted from under his horse's hoofs as they moved through the street. Duke had been right about the word getting there ahead of him. The careful ones were already hurrying to get their horses. The curious ones were beginning to saunter up the plank walk to where a sign over a pair of batwing doors said, The Waco Bar. Nobody noticed Duke as he rode in front of the buildings. They were careful not to.

Duke pulled his horse up under the big cottonwood beside the livery stable. The loafers had melted away in the hot sun. There was nothing left of them but a few little yellow curls of whittled wood. A little gimp-legged liveryman came out of the stables and looked at Duke. His age could have been anything over a hundred, and his eyes lit up like the sun catching a clear stream. He held a long, curved ear-trumpet to the side of his head and shouted, "Hay?"

"My horse wants water and oats," Duke said.

"Hay?" the old man screamed.

"Water and oats." Louder this time. The little man nodded vaguely.

"Big John Waco," Duke said. "You

know where I could find him, old-timer?"

The little man screwed his ear-trumpet in another inch and looked puzzled. "Forget it," Duke said. He took out two silver dollars from his pocket, gave them to the liveryman and turned toward the street. The little man grinned, pulled the trumpet out of his head.

"If it was me, I'd try the Waco Bar." He whispered it, as if he were afraid of being heard. Not the way a deaf man would do it. He looked at the .45's Duke wore. "You're Duke Savoy, huh?" Still a whisper.

Duke let a grin slip by. "Thanks, pop." A horse came down the street away from the Waco Bar and the old man screwed his trumpet in again and screamed, "Hay?"

It was a good act.

THE sign over the batwings said it was a saloon. The noise inside said it was doing a good business. Duke Savoy pushed the doors open and stepped inside. The noise stopped.

It was as quiet as a Mexican church at midnight, except for the dry clacking of a roulette ball in the back of the place. The clacking stopped abruptly, but nobody looked to see what number the ball was in. Duke's boots clicked hollowly on the wooden floor as he walked slowly over to the end of the bar. He said, "Whiskey," to a slab-faced bartender, and the room began to breathe again.

The noise began again, but this time it was careful noise of the salon emptying by twos and threes. The bartender set a glass on the bar, got a bottle and poured. "You're Duke Savoy," he said without moving his mouth. His voice was dry, like the rattle of tall grasses. "The boss kind of wants to talk to you. You'll find him back there." He moved his head toward the back where there was a door marked OFFICE.

Duke said, "Tell your boss to come out

here. We may need some room to talk."

The bartender shook his head wearily. "I can't hear a word you say." He was going to say something else, but another voice cut in.

"That's all right, Mac. We'll talk out here like Mr. Savoy says."

Duke whirled around and a big, clean-shaven face smiled peacefully at him. The face owned two blue eyes; they were sharp and clear and sure of what they saw. It had a big mouth, the kind of mouth that can turn up at the corners without having to work at it. The face belonged to a big man, very big. Duke wondered how a man that big could come up behind him and make no noise at all. He wore a long black coat, and under the coat was a chamois skin vest with two big holster-sized pockets in front. The pockets were empty.

"I'm John Waco," the big man said. "They call me Big John on account of my size." He smiled. Then he didn't smile. "I've kind of been waiting on you. Word got around that you'd be coming in before long. I've heard about you, your name gets around—I was kind of hoping we could settle whatever it is that's bothering you."

Duke's gaze slid down from the big face to the gaping pockets in the chamois vest. He said, "Yeah—I've heard of you, too. I never saw you, but I figured you'd be wearing guns."

The big mouth turned up again. He smothered a quart bottle in one hand and poured a tumbler half full and downed it. He didn't even blink. "Sometimes I take them off," he smiled. "Sometimes if I don't, somebody gets hurt." His smile widened. "This time I wasn't sure just who it would be."

The blue eyes laughed. Duke couldn't tell if he was joking or not. Of one thing he was sure—Big John wasn't afraid of him. The big head pulled back in the direction of the office.

"It would be quieter," he said easily.

Duke studied the big man for a minute, and then he nodded. "All right." They turned away from the bar and walked to the back. The saloon was almost empty now.

The office was big, like the man who owned it. The flat desk was big, the tilt-back chair was big. It had to be. Duke sat down where he could see the big man's hands. Big John sat back comfortably. He took a slim cigar from a box, bit off the end, rolled it in his mouth and finally he said, "The word that got back to me had something to do with the Kid. The Stevens Kid."

Duke waited.

"The way I got it, the Kid had been riding with you for a long time. I heard you put a great store by him, and I guess he did you. But I just know what I hear. Then I heard the Kid got tired of the business. Tired of running. He decided to come back and take the old man's ranch and lead a respectable life. I liked that. It's good in a young man."

Big John was through. He took the cigar out of his mouth and inspected it carefully like he was thinking about lighting it. He didn't light it. He put it back in his mouth and waited.

"The word gets back to you pretty straight," Duke said. "I liked the Kid like a brother. But I was glad when he decided to give it up and go back to the ranch."

Duke looked at the blue eyes. "I wasn't glad to hear he'd been killed two days after he got back. I don't like for my friends to be killed—especially with a shotgun—in the back."

Big John decided he would light the cigar after all. He did it and watched the blue smoke curl up from its end. "I hardly ever use a shotgun," Big John said. "I can't remember the last time I shot somebody in the back. But it could be that you didn't get that word."

"The word I got," Duke said, "was that Big John Waco was the boss of Bison. That he owned everything around it except the Stevens ranch. Sometimes the word said he didn't take that because of Martha Stevens, the Kid's sister."

The blue eyes didn't laugh now. The big mouth didn't either.

"What else?" Very softly.

"I heard maybe Big John didn't like it when the Kid came back to take over the ranch after the old man died. I even thought maybe Big John had something to do with doing away with the Kid."

Big John's chair squeaked, just a little. His eyes were cold and they said nothing. He studied his cigar for a long time; then: "You hear a lot of things. I don't know how much you believe. I can't do anything about it." He pulled out the desk drawer and his hands went in very carefully so Duke could see every move. When they came out they held two .45's, beautiful silver-plated Colts with gold and silver mountings. He swallowed the guns in his big hands and bounced them a minute on his palms. Then he slid them in the big pockets of his chamois vest, both butts forward for a cross-arm draw. "Like I say," Big John said softly, "I can't do a thing about it. You can look around, and if you don't change your mind you can find me."

Big John ran his fingers up and down the ivory butts of the pistols. "I'll be wearing these," he said, "the next time."

THE little liveryman was disappointed. He hobbled out with Duke's horse; then he looked around furtively and pulled the trumpet out of his ear. "No fight, huh?" he whispered. Then he grinned. "I didn't hear nothin'."

Duke shook his head. "No fight," he said. "Not yet."

"Dang!" the old man whispered. "That would of been a good one, too."

"What do you know about the Stevens kid?" Duke said. "Do you know how he was killed?"

The old man peered up at him. "Bush-whacked," he said. "That's how the story goes. Building a fence down on the south slope behind the Stevens' house. Somebody snuck up behind him in a draw there and got him."

"Does Big John ever use a shotgun?"

"Son, he didn't get the name he's got by using a shotgun. He don't need one. Besides, I never heard of Big John shootin' nobody in the back."

"How about his men?"

The old man thought about that. Finally he nodded his head, "Could be. Big John's got some hardcases working for him. Some of them would do it, all right, but—"

"Thanks, pop," Duke broke in. "I think I'll mosey out to the Stevens' outfit and look around. Could you tell me where it is?"

"Sure. About four mile south. House settin' in kind of a valley. Real good spread, too. Few years back it wasn't hardly nothin'—until Roy Kramer got on there as foreman."

"Kramer?"

The old man bobbed his head. "Good man," he said. "Hard worker, awful hard." He stopped and scratched his chin and thought about it. Then his whisper got even lower, a confidential kind of whisper. "I got a idea that Roy and Big John ain't got much love for each other. The story goes they're both sweet on the Stevens gal. You know what that means."

Duke didn't know exactly, but he nodded his head anyway. Then some boots clacked outside and the liveryman snatched his ear-trumpet. He grinned. "If I hear anything I'll let you know."

Duke said, "Thanks, pop." Then he got on his horse, headed him into the street and to the south.

The Stevens' place wasn't hard to find. Duke pulled his horse up and looked for

a minute at the squat ranch house in the valley; then he headed on toward the south slope the liveryman had told him about. There was the draw and the fence just as the old man had said. There was a man working on the fence.

Duke left his horse in a thicket and made for the draw to get a better look at the man. He didn't know why he did that. It was just a man fixing a fence.

He was a young man. He had a serious face, and it was dripping with sweat as he worked with a post-hole digger. Duke wondered if this man was the one named Kramer. He was wondering about that and looking between some drooping willow branches and a voice behind him said, "Stay where you are. If you move, I'll shoot you in the back with this Winchester." It was a woman's voice. It meant what it said.

That was the second time in one day that he'd let somebody get behind him. That was not a good average. Not nearly good enough if you're trailing a shotgun backshooter. The woman shouted, "Roy, come here. Bring your gun."

Duke stood where he was. He didn't move his hands. The woman wouldn't like that. He watched the man drop his post-hole digger, snatch a rifle from the ground and hurry toward the draw. One thing was settled, anyway. Duke didn't have to wonder any longer if it was really Roy Kramer.

Kramer didn't get excited. He was the plodding kind; he wouldn't ever get very excited. He stopped at just the right distance and held the rifle on Duke at belt-buckle level. He said, "Take his guns, Martha." Duke felt his guns come out of their holsters. Then he turned his head slowly to take a look at the woman.

She wasn't a woman; she was more of a girl. Brown eyes—steady eyes, but very nice. Everything about her was nice. It wasn't hard to see how two men could get sweet on her, as the old liveryman had

said. She was holding his two six-shooters at his back. They were the only guns she had.

Duke said, "That was a good act. It wasn't the smartest thing in the world to do, but it was a good act."

Roy Kramer didn't waste words. He said, "Who are you? What were you doing in the draw?"

"I can talk better," Duke said, "if you'll ease your finger a little on that trigger." Roy Kramer's arms relaxed a little. His face did not.

"Thanks," Duke said. "They call me Duke Savoy."

Martha Stevens made a little sound behind him. It was a sound that could mean anything.

Duke said, "I can't say what I was doing in the draw; I just do things like that. I liked the kid—I didn't like it when he was killed. I thought maybe if I saw the place, it would give me an idea."

Martha Stevens made that sound again. Duke forgot about the rifle and turned to face her. She didn't have the guns on him now, they were hanging limp in her hands. Then she looked up at him, and her eyes said hate. They said it as clearly as if she had shouted it.

Duke wished it could have been some other way, but he knew it couldn't. It wouldn't be easy to have your brother known as a gunman. It wouldn't be easy to like the man who helped give him that name. Duke didn't blame her for the way she felt; it was the way things had to be.

He said, "Ma'am, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about a lot of things, but most of them I can't do anything about. The only thing I may be able to do is get the man that killed the Kid."

Her eyes still said hate—but they said something else, too. They said if he did that she would almost forgive him. Almost. She handed his guns back and he slipped them into his holsters. Roy Kramer didn't like that. He lowered his

rifle, and after a minute he said, "There's been enough killing. If anything has to be done—"

Martha Stevens stopped him. She said, "Maybe he could do something." She looked at Duke levelly. "I've heard about you. I don't like you. I have every reason to hate you, but if you really want to do something we'll go up to the house."

Duke said, "Thank you."

Roy Kramer didn't like that either. He didn't seem to like anything or anybody—except Martha Stevens. Kramer couldn't hide that. He said, "I'll stay here. I've got this fence to fix." He started to say something else, but didn't. He turned around and walked up the bank to where the post-hole digger was. When Duke and Martha Stevens got on their horses and rode back toward the house, he was working hard. He didn't look up.

THE HOUSE was a little larger than most ranch houses. It squatted close to the ground in the middle of the valley. Behind it were the bunkhouse and stables. It was a nice spread. They left their horses in front of the house and went in.

"I don't know why I brought you here," Martha Stevens said. "But if you meant it about wanting to do something, maybe seeing the place will help." She was sitting now, looking at her hands. Then she looked up at Duke with that level way she had. "I meant what I said down at the draw. I don't think I'll ever be able to like you, but if you meant what you said, I'll answer what questions I can."

The house was quiet. It should have been a comfortable house, but Duke wasn't comfortable. "When I first came to town," he said, "I didn't intend to ask questions. But things didn't work out like I'd figured on, and now I'm not so sure about anything." He waited another minute and listened to the curtains rustle in the windows. "Did Big John kill him?"

Her eyes flew wide. She had known that he was going to ask that, but she didn't like it anyway. It could have been because of the abrupt way he had asked. But Duke didn't think that was it. She looked at him and said, "No."

"Not personally, I mean. One of his men."

She wasn't looking at him now. She studied her hands carefully. "I don't know. Some people think that. Roy thinks that." She paused and looked up again. "Yes," she said. "It could have been one of his men."

She hadn't wanted to say it, but she did. Duke wished that he could tell what he saw in her eyes when he mentioned Big John. He couldn't be sure.

"I heard that Big John would like to have this ranch along with everything else around Bison," Duke said. "It would be easier with the Kid out of the way."

She didn't like that.

"For that matter, Kramer would probably like to have it, too."

She didn't like that either.

That was all. They didn't have anything to talk about, and Duke wondered why he had come here at all. He nodded once, got his hat and walked outside to his horse. As he rode back toward town he didn't look back at the house. He hoped he wouldn't see it any more.

As he rode back north, he added the things he knew and got nothing. He added them over and over and got the same thing. His horse slid down the banks of a shallow dry creek, then he saw the willows move, over to his right.

Twice in one day was enough.

Letting somebody get behind him for the third time would be too much. Duke kicked his horse hard and he skittered away. He jumped from the saddle and hit the hard dried mud of the creek bottom. A gun roared—a shotgun. Buckshot ripped through the dry willows over his head.

Duke scrambled on his belly to hug the creek bank. He didn't think the shotgun could see him there. He was wrong. The shotgun bellowed again not more than thirty yards away around a small bend in the creek. More buckshot went ripping over his head. He scrambled again, this time behind a rotted tree stump. He didn't remember pulling his guns, but they were in his hands. They crashed three times in each hand in the direction of the bend. Then he dropped down and waited.

The shotgun waited.

Duke thought about reloading. He decided against it. Just hug the tree stump and wait. He listened hard, trying to locate the shotgun with his ears. He heard a frog croak, and that was all. It was a long way off, on down the creek where there was some water.

There was some more waiting. It seemed like a long time. After a while Duke felt around and got a stick. He put his hat on the stick and poked it above the stump. Ordinarily, that would be a good way to ruin a hat. This time nothing happened. Not a sound. Not even the frog.

Duke decided he couldn't lie behind the stump all day. He began to move. Carefully. Crawling close to the creek bank. It wasn't long before he reached the bend. Then he saw the man who had been using the shotgun.

Duke saw his boots first, the soles of them. They weren't good boots; one had a hole in it. He inched forward until he could see the man's head. His head wasn't any good either. It also had a hole in it. A big .45 hole just above his right eye. The right side of his head wasn't any good at all.

It was all right to stand up now. Duke did it and looked at the man sprawled on the ground, still clutching his shotgun. He was thin and tall, and his nose was big and lumpy and heavily veined like the nose of a drinking man. Duke decided

there wasn't anything he could do now. He turned around and headed back down the creek bed toward his horse.

But there was something he could do when he got to town. He could find out who the big-nosed man worked for. When he found that out, he'd have the answer to a lot of questions. Some questions he wanted answers to, badly.

TOWN seemed like a long way. But it wasn't more than a mile, it just seemed that way. Duke pulled his horse up at the livery stable at the end of the street. The little liveryman came out holding the trumpet to his ear.

"Rub him down?" the little man screamed. "Water? Oats?" He swept the street with a glance and whispered, "Trouble?"

"Trouble," Duke said. He got off the horse and let the liveryman have the reins. The little man pulled the trumpet out of his ear.

"What kind?"

"Do you know a tall, hungry-looking man with a big whiskey-nose and a bad eye for shooting shotguns?"

The liveryman thought about it. "Sounds like Rupe Malloy. Yep, that's who it would be. What about him?"

"He tried to bushwhack me, for one thing. He's dead, for another. Do you know who he works for?"

"Used to work for Big John. I don't know now." He grinned. I heard they had a falling out on account of Rupe's drinkin' too much, but I can't say for sure about that." The liveryman bobbed his head. "No big loss," he said. "What do you figure he had again' you?"

"Nothing," Duke said. "Somebody hired him out to do it. They might have hired him to get the Kid. You got any ideas?"

The little man scratched his chin, squeezed his eyes and pulled on his nose. He was thinking hard. "I got a idea

there's somethin' funny," he said at last. "But I get ideas like that, and sometimes there's nothin' to them."

"Pop," Duke said, "If you've got any ideas at all, it's better than what I've got. What is it?"

"Well, first thing, Roy Kramer came ino town about an hour ago on horseback. He made a fast trip because his horse was all lathered up, but I got a customer then and I didn't get to see where he went. The next thing I seen was Rupe Malloy headin' south, and from the way he rode, he was pretty lickered up. Then about ten minutes behind Rupe come Big John Waco. It seemed like the whole shebang was headed for the Stevens' place. And Big John was mad. You can tell when Big John is mad. When he gets that look somebody's goin' to get hurt—more likely, somebody's goin' to get killed." The liveryman scratched his chin some more. "Maybe it don't mean a thing. It's just a idea."

It could mean that Big John had found out that Kramer knew something and had gone after him—after putting Malloy in the creek to do some bushwhacking. It could even mean that Kramer had come to town to get Malloy to do the job. But Duke thought of the beautiful gold and silver mounted pistols—and he thought of a sign warning him away from Big John Waco's town.

He said, "Thanks, pop. Thanks a lot. I've got an idea too."

Duke swung up in the saddle and moved the horse out the wide doors.

"Wait a minute!" the little liveryman hissed and jerked his head toward the south end of the street. A horse fogged up in the red dust, wheeled in front of the stable and pulled up beside Duke.

Martha Stevens bent over in the saddle. Her eyes were wide, scared.

"Now—now is your chance to do something," she said breathlessly.

"Wait a minute, ma'am," Duke said.

"Take your time. Now tell me what's the matter."

"There isn't any time," she gasped. For an instant she clamped her jaw, trying to get hold of herself. Then, "Big John Waco," she said. "He's going after Roy. You've got to keep him from killing him."

It was almost as if she had said, "You've got to *save* him from killing him." Duke waited until she got her breath.

"After you left," she said, "I went back down to where Roy was working on the fence. He wasn't there. I was afraid something was wrong. I didn't know anything then; it was just a feeling. I started towards town to see if I could make sure, and that's where I met him."

"Kramer?" Duke said.

"No, Big John. And he was mad—it's horrible when he is mad like that. I tried to stop him, but I couldn't."

"Wait a minute," Duke said again. "I just came from that way, and I didn't see Big John or anybody else."

"There's a road over to the west that goes around the hills. It's faster than going straight south."

"Oh," Duke said. "All right, ma'am." He pulled his horse around, kicking up dust. "You wait here."

"I'm going with you."

"Wait here," he said again. He didn't look back to see if she had heard him. There wasn't time for talking, not if he was going to do anything. He nudged his horse hard with his blunted spurs and rode back in the direction he had come from.

HE RODE hard, but not as hard as he wanted to. His horse was tired and he had to ease him up. It seemed that he rode a long time before they finally came up behind the house, near the slope where Kramer had been working. No one was there now. Then Duke saw the horse hitched in front of the

house. It was a big horse, big and black. The kind of horse Big John would ride.

Duke headed down toward the house. There was no use trying to slip up on anybody now. There would only be one way to play it with Big John.

Duke rode up in front of the house, got off his horse and listened. There was no sound from the house. He went up on the front porch and listened some more. Still no sound. He eased the door open with his shoulder and went in. A clock ticked, starched curtains rustled faintly in the windows, and that was all.

"All right, Waco, you can come out. Wearing your guns."

His voice sounded hollow, like shouting in a well. There was no answer. Duke walked slowly through the front room, through a short hall to the kitchen.

He didn't have to look any farther for Big John. He was looking at him.

The big man was crashed on the floor. He had his elbows pulled under him as though he was trying to get up. He wasn't trying to do anything. He didn't look like he would ever try to do anything else. His hands were on the butts of his pistols and had them about half out of his vest holsters. A little stream of blood snaked down his arm and smeared the gleaming ivory.

Duke knelt on the floor and pushed his fingers hard against the big man's neck. There was still a pulse, very faint, but he wasn't dead. Not yet. With a .45 slug in his back, he should have been. Duke looked at him and tried to think, but nothing added up. While he looked, Big John's eyelid quivered, came up, and a glassy eye stared at him.

A voice said, "All right, Savoy, stand up. Keep your hands high, away from your guns. Turn around." The third time in one day somebody had got behind him.

Duke did what the voice said. It didn't make any difference about Big John now. He stood up and looked into the big twin

barrels of a shotgun. He lifted his gaze and saw the face above the gun.

It was a serious face; it was even a sad face. It shook sadly from side to side. But the work hardened hands that held the gun didn't shake at all. Roy Kramer said, "You shouldn't have come back, Savoy. I didn't want to kill anybody else."

The voice was flat, like the side of a keen blade is flat.

"Then you shouldn't have planted that bushwhacker for me," Duke said. The words were dry in his mouth. It isn't easy watching a finger tighten on a trigger and knowing there is nothing you can do.

Roy Kramer shrugged a little, but his face was still serious. Deadly serious. "It wasn't any of your business," he said softly. "You shouldn't fool with things that are not any of your business."

"When a friend of mine gets killed I make that my business."

He wasn't fooling Kramer. The serious face knew that he was playing his cards as slowly as he could, playing for time. It didn't seem to bother him any. "I've worked hard for this place," he said. "I've built it up from nothing to what it is now, and I don't aim for a kid to come and take it away from me." Kramer glanced down at Big John. "I don't aim for anybody to take it away from me—you, or him, or anybody else."

Duke tried dropping his arms a little, trying to get his hands a little closer to his guns. The ugly twin mouths of the shotgun quivered. It wasn't a good idea. He raised them again.

"How many more do you figure on killing to get the place?" Duke said.

Kramer waited a minute, as though he were trying to decide. Finally he said, "Nobody. Unless they make me—the way you're doing." He nodded his head slightly toward Big John. "I guess I must have got scared for a minute after I did that. I was all set to run away. I was out to the barn when you came up and I got

an idea. You see, if you'd minded your own business you'd be alive tomorrow—maybe the next day too."

"You can't get away with it, Kramer. You can't get away with it." And all the time Duke knew he could. Kramer knew it too.

"I can get away with it," he said. "I'll show you how. Reach down very slowly with your left hand and lift your gun out with two fingers and drop it on the floor. If you don't do it that way, I'll have to do it with the shotgun. I could do it that way and say it was self-defense. I've got a good name. People would believe me." He almost smiled then. "But I'd rather do it the other way. Reach down—slowly."

Duke reached down, slowly. He couldn't beat the shotgun. Before he could touch the butts of his guns, that finger could twitch and blast him in two. There wasn't anything else to do. He grasped the butt of his .45 gently with two fingers, pulled it from the holster and let it drop to the floor.

"That's right," Kramer said. "Now back up, all the way against the wall. Now I'll show you how I'll do it."

Duke backed up. If he was going to do anything, he would have to do it while Kramer was reaching for the pistol. There wasn't a chance. Kramer was smiling now. It wasn't a pretty smile, but that was what he was doing. Then he cradled the shotgun carefully in his arms and knelt very slowly to get the pistol. He curled his fingers around the butt and stood up again. The shotgun didn't waver.

Then Kramer leaned the shotgun against the kitchen chair and leveled the pistol somewhere between Duke's neck and belt buckle. His smile had widened now. He liked his idea. He was proud of it.

"You're supposed to be good with guns," Kramer said softly. "I'm not so good—but I think I have an advantage,

anyway. You see, I can shoot any time I want to, but you have to draw first. I'm giving you a chance, Savoy. You can draw any time you want to and we'll see how good you are."

Kramer waited and smiled.

For a minute Duke didn't say anything. Maybe he was good, but he wasn't that good. He couldn't pull his arm down from shoulder height, draw and fire before Kramer could twitch his finger. He tried again for time, but it wasn't any good now. Kramer shook his head to show him it wasn't. There was a sound outside.

KRAMER listened. His face said nothing, and his gun didn't move.

"That will be Martha," he said. "She will be here in a minute. I want it to be over by the time she comes in. Are you going to draw, Savoy? This is your last chance."

The horse was close now. The serious face wasn't smiling any more. It was a blank face, almost a dead face. The finger on the trigger was tightening. Duke could see it. Time had run out now, there wasn't anything but trying to draw.

Duke felt his arm and shoulder stiffen. That wasn't good, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He looked at Kramer's expressionless face and started to drive his hand down toward his holster. Before he even started, a gun roared.

Kramer jumped as the blast shattered the still of the room and his gun swung away. He jerked the gun back quick. He was too late. There was another crash of a gun, and another crowded behind it. Duke had felt his gun buck twice in his hand. He didn't fire any more. At that distance he didn't have to.

Kramer took two short, quick steps back and crashed to his knees. He tried to hold himself up with his hands. For a minute he lifted his face and his eyes were wide and amazed. Then he slid forward

(Continued on page 130)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 95)

PARDNERS, here's where we separate the rannies from the skim-milk cowboys. Below are listed twenty questions—dealing with the West and cowpuncher topics in general. If you can answer eighteen or more of them correctly, then you're a ranny for sure. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're still good. But if you can't call the turn right on more than sixteen—then you join the ranks of the skim-milk cowpunchers. Good luck to you!

1. What is a "tumbling" brand?

2. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he was planning to "trap a squaw," you would know he intended to: Go Indian fighting? Go call on the local school ma'm? Get married?

3. True or false? A "swing rider" is one who rides with the trail herd, about a third of the way back from the point riders.

4. True or false? A "swinging brand" is a brand which rests on a quarter-circle.

5. In the language of the cowman, a "spoiled herd" is: A herd in which most of the cattle are too thin to be marketed profitably? A herd which has lost many cattle as a result of disease? A herd which has developed the habit of stampeding frequently?

6. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he had "just finished a Spanish supper," you would: Offer him some more food? Offer him the bicarbonate of soda? Run for the nearest doctor?

7. True or false? A sorrel horse is a light chestnut, having a sort of golden color.

8. The cowboy slang expression, "sop and 'taters," is used in reference to: A pacing horse? A porcupine? A bedroll which has gotten wet during the day and which the puncher has to roll into at night.

9. True or false? In the language of the Westerner, a "sign camp" is a place where Indians have recently camped.

10. If the ranch boss told you to "go get the silk," you would, if you knew your business, return with: A rope? A fancy bandanna? A Mexican Shawl? A roll of barbed wire? Some smoking tobacco.

11. True or false? "Saddle warmer" is a slang expression used in reference to the cowpuncher.

12. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a "saddle band" is: A strap which attaches the saddle to the horse? A cavvy of saddle horses? A cowpuncher addicted to playing the mouth harp?

13. If the ranch boss told you to "roll your cotton," what should you do?

14. "Rooter" is the cowboy's slang name for: Hog? Any cowboy who works too hard? A farmer? The ranch boss?

15. True or false? According to the cowpuncher's way of thinking, a "prairie strawberry" is an ordinary bean.

16. True or false? A "possum belly" is a rawhide which hangs beneath a wagon and is used for carrying fuel.

17. What is a "parlor gun"?

18. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "paper-backed"?

19. The cowpuncher expression "pan of snakes" is used in reference to which of the following? A Mexican brand? An unidentifiable concoction of the camp cook? A twisting, turning calf at branding time?

20. What is a "skimmy"?

Tinstar

Give a dog a bad name and he'll never live it down. But give a lawdog a bad enough one, Corning's sad sheriff figured—and he might live forever!

NOBODY much in Corning County gave Sad Sam Sackett credit for anything. They just allowed he was slow and plodding—colorless, was the word they used.

He had lived in the valley for ten years before it was learned that his first name was Sampson and not Samuel. That gives you an idea how little folks really knew about him. And they found that out when Sad Sam ran for sheriff.

Big Mace Newell summed it up pretty well. "Sad Sam will fill the sheriff's pants 'bout as good as that there dumbheaded Hereford bull o' mine!"

Even though everyone conceded that the little ranch out on Corning Creek was the showplace of the county, nobody would admit that Sam's hard work had anything much to do with it. It was all just out-and-out plain damn-fool luck.

It started as a joke cooked up by Anse Bullard in front of the pot-bellied stove in the Widow Bentley's General Store. Bullard, who owned the blacksmith shop, was a big, heavy, untidy man who just couldn't abide Sam's industry, his neatness, his general air of reserve. The joke kept going, gathering momentum—with an occasional push by Anse or Mace.

"Elections comin' up," Bullard said. "Now we all know that Zeb Chance is gettin' too old for the job. What we need is a regular rootin'-tootin' sheriff." He spat a brown stream of tobacco juice into the box of shavings the Widow Bentley kept down by the stove. "I suggest we elect Sad Sam."

Fat Homer Troy slapped his thigh and his dewlaps shook with mirth.

"You keep your big blabber-mouth shet about it bein' a joke, Homer," Bullard warned him. And he poked fat Homer Troy in the ribs with a blunt finger. Everyone knew that Homer Troy, publisher of the *Corning County Tribune*, spilled everything he knew.

Big Mace Newell didn't smile, but you could tell he was kind of tickled deep inside. A big, silent, driving man with a short temper, he owned the Slash N spread—one of the two really big cattle outfits in the valley.

"I dunno," he said. "Mebbe it's carryin' a joke too far."

Anse Bullard shook his head. "This county's been quiet and peaceable for a long time. If I figured there was a chance for any real trouble—well, I'd be agin it too."

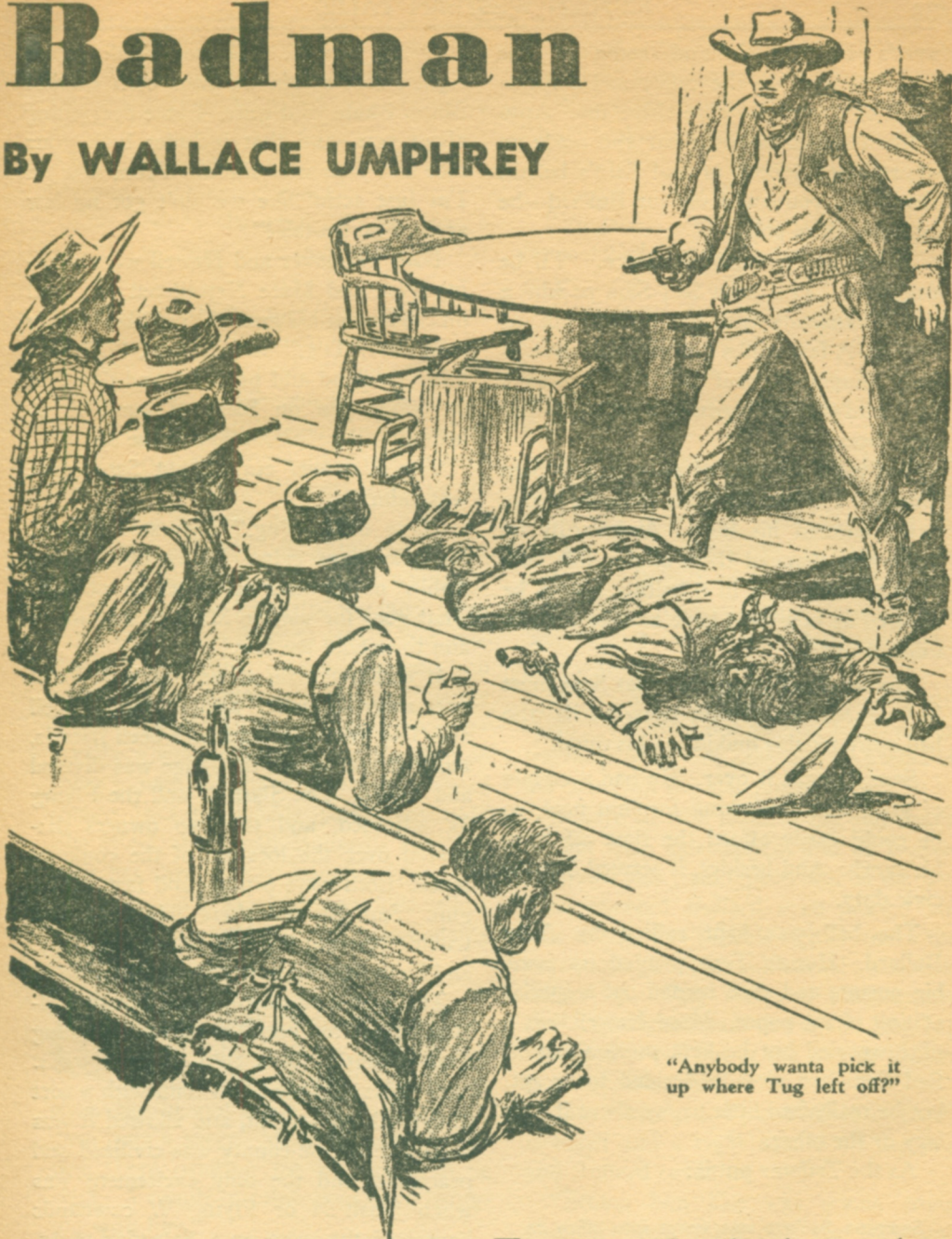
That seemed to satisfy Mace Newell. The three of them talked it up around the pot-bellied stove. It was a real funny joke, but it still might have been no more than idle chatter if it hadn't been for the Widow Bentley. She was about as big as a minute, and she was the only one in the valley who recognized the merit of Sad Sam's character.

"You bunch of no-good loafers!" she yelled at them, when she could stand it no longer. "You leave Sam be—do you hear?" Then she muttered half to herself, "I just wish Jubal was still around!"

Her blue eyes snapping, she fetched a big broom and began flailing Anse Bul-

Badman

By WALLACE UMPHREY



"Anybody wanta pick it up where Tug left off?"

lard across his broad backside. "Scoot!"

They all tumbled out to the street, fat Homer Troy fit to be tied. Even that might have ended it—except for Anse Bullard. He plotted his strategy and bided his time.

LATE one Saturday afternoon when Sad Sam was in town, he went into the Palace for a single drink before riding home. The saloon was pretty crowded with cowboys from Mace Newell's Slash 'N and from Tug West-

over's Flying W, and some of the ranchers from up the valley and a sprinkling of townsfolk were there too. Anse Bullard leaped onto the bar and made an impassioned speech in Sad Sam's behalf. One thing you could say for Bullard—he had the gift of gab.

There was a stunned silence. "I'll be dogged if I ever seen Sad Sam packin' a gun," somebody said, but Bullard hushed him up. A few winks did the trick. Everybody caught on real fast that it was a joke, and they all began to hoot and holler and cheer.

The most stunned of all was Sad Sam himself. The fact that this could be a joke never entered his head. Awkwardly he arose and thanked them all for this vote of confidence, and in a halting speech he allowed as how he'd have to take time to think it over.

Homer Troy whispered that Sam must be from Maine. "Never knew a fella who had more trouble makin' up his mind."

Sam thought it over. He had a couple of good hands working for him now, so he could easily afford the time off from his ranch. And besides, it seemed like his civic duty.

The ball was kept rolling by Anse Bullard. Homer Troy printed up some big posters and even turned out a special edition of the paper. Mace Newell was a mite worried but he kept mum about it. Sad Sam had already decided to accept, but he really had little to say about it, one way or the other.

As the *Tribune* put it:

Sampson Sackett was swept into office on a wave of public opinion.

Tug Westover of the Flying W figured out what was happening only when it was too late. When he found out that Mace Newell was supporting Sam, he tried to put up his own candidate without success.

"By the gods!" Tug Westover bellowed

at Mace Newell. "So you think you're right smart ringin' in your own sheriff! Mace, I hate your guts. I hate everything about you—and that includes both your face and your new sheriff. From now on I'm just actin' like we ain't got no law around here a-tall!"

Both Westover and Newell were packing iron, and Mace Newell put his hand on the butt of his gun. "You'd better ride outa here, Tug," said Newell, "before I beef you good and proper. And don't let me ketch you on Slash N land, or so help me I'll gut-shoot you on the spot!"

Tug Westover cursed, but Sam's face was calm.

"One thing, Tug," Sam said quietly, his gray eyes calm. "I reckon I ain't dishin' out special privileges to nobody. That goes for you or Mace or anyone. I aim to uphold the law."

It bothered Sam as he watched Westover sneer and wheel away. Mace Newell and Tug Westover had once been friends, but that was before the range was divided and fenced. The Slash N and the Flying W adjoined, and the two owners disagreed over the location of the common fence. Both were proddy and fast with a gun. Sam figured there might be real trouble between the two outfits some day, and he wondered how he would handle it.

The joke died down, even though Bullard tried to keep it alive. Corning County settled back into its own ways. Still, folks regarded Sad Sam with a sort of cynical amusement, and allowed it was a good thing the county was civilized and peaceable, and the only excitement was when Slash N or Flying W cowhands hoorawed the town on a Saturday night, shooting out windows and lights.

Sam didn't know much about sheriffing, but he reckoned it was something that could be learned. Old Zebulon Chance, the retiring peace officer, helped him some.

"It's like this, Sam. A rep is a mighty

handy gadget to have in keeping law and order. You get a big enough rep—and you won't never be called upon to prove it."

Sam scratched his grizzled head. "How'm I gonna get that?"

Zeb Chance shrugged. "That there's something, Sam, you got to figger for yourself."

Fat Homer Troy met Sam coming out of the post office one day with a bundle of books under one arm. "These here are books on law enforcement," Sam explained. It was all Homer Troy could do to keep from splitting a gut while he waddled down to the blacksmith shop to tell Anse Bullard about it.

Bullard still kept laughing about the joke, but he didn't have much company. Most of the folks were just too busy. One day the Widow Bentley really laid into Bullard. "If Jubal was still around you wouldn't be laughing like a mangy hyena!" she told him. "And if you ever breathe a word to Sam about his election being a joke I'll shove your punkin head square into the pickle barrel myself!" She stood about half Bullard's size, but with her face flushed and her blue eyes snapping and a lock of brown hair falling down over her forehead, she looked plenty capable.

ONE day Sam strode into the blacksmith shop. Anse Bullard was hammering out a glowing horse-shoe, but he put aside the hammer and gave Sam a sneer. Mace Newell was sitting there, waiting for his horse to be shod. A couple of other men were lounging with him.

"I've been checkin' the town statutes, Anse," Sam said in a matter-of-fact tone. "They's one about keepin' the town tidy and such. That empty lot next door is an eyesore. I reckon you'd better clean up the mess you've dumped there."

Bullard lifted right up on his toes with

the shock, and his face got about two shades brighter than the coals in his forge.

"You must be crazy, Sam," he growled. "I ain't takin' no such orders from you."

"I'm tellin' you," Sam said.

"And if I don't?"

"Figgered you'd take that attitude." Sam sighed. "I got me a warrant from Judge Lantry."

Anse Bullard began laughing. "You no-good tinstar sheriff! You was elected for a joke—hell's bells, you ain't even wearin' a gun! Let's see you start servin' that writ."

One of the loafers just had to giggle, but Mace Newell began to frown. You could see easy that Sam was hurt. It showed at the back of his eyes, in the sudden twitching of his lips. And right there Mace Newell began figuring that Sam wasn't sad, exactly, but was just a gent who had a quiet pride.

When Sam spoke, his voice was still calm. "I don't need no gun to serve this warrant, Anse," he said, and he peeled off his coat with the star pinned to it.

Bullard lifted a hamlike fist and waded in, but Sam sidestepped, and as Bullard stumbled past Sam tapped him on the jaw. That enraged Bullard even more. Sam was twenty-five pounds lighter and a few years older, but his coolness sort of evened things up. They swapped punches and Bullard knocked Sam down, and Sam just managed to roll out of the way as Bullard tried to stomp him.

Sam came up and put a left in Bullard's stomach and a right square on the jaw, and Bullard caved in.

"Stomp him like was gonna stomp you," Newell called out, but Sam only shook his head and waited for Bullard to stand.

The fight moved out to the dusty street, and both men were battered now. Bullard kept going down, and each time he came back more slowly. He was game—you had to give him credit for that. Finally he

lay there, gasping, unmoving in the dust.

Mace Newell fetched a pail of water and threw it over him.

Staggering a little, Sam put on his coat. Anse Bullard was sitting up, snorting and shaking his big head. "You're under arrest," Sam told him, handing him the warrant.

Anse Bullard gulped. "You just leave me be, Sam, and I'll clean up that mess."

That night when Sam went home the empty lot next to the blacksmith shop was slicked up nice as you please.

But Sam knew that a rep built on fists alone wasn't going to be enough. Men like Mace Newell and Tug Westover had always put their faith in guns. Sam stopped by the Widow Bentley's store one day.

She was reaching up to put away some stock. Sam just stood there watching her for a moment, admiring the trim lines of her figure. When she saw him, she blushed a little and dropped her eyes. Sam colored up a little too, thinking she was as pretty as paint.

"I could horsewhip Anse," she said, looking at his face.

Sam shook his head. "I shoulda knowed all the time. It made me feel real good inside though—thinkin' folks put some faith in me."

"They do, Sam." Then she added, "Anyhow, I do."

Sam changed the subject. "I figger on gettin' me a gun."

Just looking at Sam made the Widow Bentley feel all warm inside. It was like the feeling she got when she thought about Jubal. She was a little worried about this gun business, but she allowed that a sheriff pretty near needed one to look dressed. She showed him some but Sam shook his head.

"What I got in mind is one that—well, looks sorta used."

She tapped her finger against her white teeth. Finally she went through a fringed

curtain to the living quarters behind, and returned with an old gunbelt and six-shooter. "This belonged to Jubal before he met his end," she whispered, handing over the belt and gun.

Sam admired the worn and polished grip. He told her this was just what he had in mind, and he'd consider it an honor to wear it. The Widow Bentley guessed that Jubal wouldn't mind, seeing as how such a fine man was wearing it. Sam buckled the belt around his waist and returned to the sheriff's office.

A while later fat Homer Troy waddled in. Right away he saw that Sam was wearing a gun—a gun that looked as if it had seen plenty of use. Homer Troy's eyes bugged out behind the rolls of fat.

"It usta belong to my pappy," Sam explained.

"Huh?"

"Now don't tell me you never heard of Buck Sackett!"

Homer Troy hadn't, but he didn't want to act like a dumbhead, so he just kept his eyes bugged out.

"You ever hear of Wyatt Earp or Bat Masterson down around Dodge?" Sam asked, off-hand.

Homer Troy nodded. He tried to pump Sam, but Sam just smiled wisely and remained silent.

THE next issue of the *Tribune* had quite a story about it. All about how close-mouthed Sam had been about his father being a famous sheriff in Dodge City, along with Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson. And here, the article said, Sam had been living in their midst and never mentioned it.

Folks nodded thoughtfully and eyed Sam with a new respect. Sam was a deep one. Come to think of it, nothing much was known about Sam's younger days. Chances were he'd run with the wild bunch.

Early one morning the Widow Bentley

went out riding. She just accidentally happened to go past Sam's ranch. A gun was banging away around in back some place. Leading her horse, she walked around the house to see what was going on.

Sam was blazing away at a tin can sitting on a stump. She watched him fire six shots without a hit before coughing politely.

"It ain't no use," Sam said dispiritedly. "I just wasn't cut out to be a fast gent with a gun. Couldn't hit the door of Anse's blacksmith shop."

"What about the story in the paper?" she asked.

Sam had to grin a little. "Don't understand it—never told Homer no such pack of lies."

Rumors began filtering into the sheriff's office about the Slash N and the Flying W. Both outfits were armed camps, each patrolling the fence. Mace Newell claimed that it belonged one place and Tug Westover claimed it belonged fifty feet over. Right now it ran where Mace Newell claimed it should.

Both men were boiling, yet neither really wanted to touch off a war. Both were willing to talk it up to that point—and then stop. But the trouble was, Sam figured, some little unsuspected thing might boil over the pot. And the last thing Sam wanted was a range war.

It had even reached a point where Slash N hands came to town one Saturday night and Flying W the next. That's how tight things had become.

One Saturday night Sam waited until Tug Westover and the Flying W hands were all inside the Palace. Then he marched inside. He stood there, his gun swinging low on his hip. The noise dribbled away.

Sam stared squarely at the Flying W owner. "Tug, I been checkin' up on things. There's a statute against wearin' a gun in the town limits. I aim to uphold

the law. So everybody shuck his hardware, pronto."

The rumble of objections lifted to the rafters.

"By the gods!" Tug Westover shouted, his gaunt body rigid. "I knowed all along you was sidin' Mace Newell! You figger on disarmin' us all so's Mace can bring his boys here and cut us down like clay pigeons!"

Sam shook his head. "He'll get a taste of the same. Tug, shuck that gun."

"No!"

"You like sleepin' in jail?" Sam asked.

"About that time," Tug Westover yelled, "you'll be a dead pigeon!"

Dropping a hand to the butt of his gun, Sam moved steadily forward. His lips were a little pinched, but his eyes were calm. The Flying W hands all stared slack-jawed, and Tug Westover looked a little uncertain. There was something implacable about Sam's tread—and besides, he carried with him the miracle of the law.

When Sam was only a couple of feet away, Tug Westover belatedly started his draw. Sam had plenty of time to drop the barrel of his gun behind Tug Westover's ear. The Flying W owner collapsed. Sam turned his gun on the Flying W hands lining the bar.

"Anybody wanta pick it up where Tug left off?" he asked, but nobody did. Feeling a little weak, he holstered his weapon. "A couple of you boys grab a-hold of Tug," he said. "An hour or two in a cell oughta cool him off."

When Mace Newell heard about it the next day, he made a special trip to town. It was just about the first time Sam had ever seen the Slant N owner crack a smile. Newell peered into all the cells, and was a little put out not seeing Tug Westover.

"He seen the light after a couple of hours," Sam said. "I figgered there was no use holdin' him longer."

The Slant N owner pounded Sam on

the back. "Wish I'd seen it!" he belowed gleefully. "That ornery coyote in a cell! Dog me, I shoulda knowed we elected a real sheriff!"

Sam didn't smile. Sam was staring down at the gun swinging at Mace Newell's thigh. Newell stopped laughing.

"The law ain't playing no favorites, mace," Sam said. "So either you check your gun here or don't wear it no more when you come to town."

"Why, you two-bit excuse for a knot-head!" Newell raged. "I oughta blow your head in!"

"You heard me, Mace. If I ketch you wearin' iron again in town, you'll get the same as Tug got."

"You think you can make that stick?"

"I hung it on Tug," Sam said reasonably.

Without another word Mace Newell tramped outside, stepped up into the saddle and rode hell-bent for home.

Sam knew that both Mace Newell and Tug Westover were against him now. And nothing he had done yet was going to stop the range war that was brewing. His hand reached out for a sheet of paper and a stub of a pencil.

A few days later Homer Troy flopped his bulk into a chair across the desk from Sam. Sam tossed him a "Wanted" dodger which had been lying on top of the desk. Homer Troy scanned it briefly.

"This Ace Rafferty—Homer Troy stared at the dodger—"seems like a right nice fella not to meet up with. Hell's bells, it says here he's the fastest gent in the Southwest with a gun!"

"He may be headin' this way," Sam said.

"Sure enough?" Homer Troy looked appalled. "Sam, what you aim to do?"

Sam leaned back. "Reckon just set and wait for come-what-may."

"Figger you can beat him to the draw?"

"That ain't for me to say," Sam told him.

Homer Troy was a blabber-mouth, and it wouldn't be long before the whole country knew about Ace Rafferty.

A COUPLE of days later a Slant N cowhand dashed into town and ran into the sheriff's office.

"Tug Westover and his boys are pullin' down the fence, aimin' to move it again," he gasped. "Mace Newell claims, if they don't put it back up in the same spot, he's gonna start fillin' some graves that ain't dug yet!"

Sam made no comment. It had come and he felt no great shock. He swung into his saddle and trailed the Slant N cowhand out of town.

The two factions were doing a lot of scowling at each other over the weary fence. Some of the fence was already lying on the ground. A Flying W hand had his loop dabbled over and upright post, and as Sam rode up Mace Newell was bellowing.

"You pull down that there post and I'll blow you to Kingdom Come!" He looked as if he meant it, too.

"Hold it, Mace," Sam said. "Let's talk it over."

Mace turned on Sam with all his fury. "I'm plumb through talkin'. Just kind of get off my Slant N land!"

"I'm backin' Mace on that," Tug Westover yelled suddenly. "We don't want no tinstar sheriff messing in. You keep off my Flying W too. I don't like your face no more'n Mace does!"

Sam sat there, turning things over in his mind, suspecting he wasn't helping matters any.

"How'd a forty-five slug look for size?" Newell bellowed at him.

"Look, gents," Sam said quietly. "You both get a heap of fun outa hatin' each other. Think of all the fun you'll be missin' when you're dead."

Sam was quick to take advantage of the silence. "Me, I got an idea. Both of you

gents take your boys with you and ride away. Leave the fence lay and think it over for twenty-four hours. Hate each other all to pieces. And twenty-four hours from now, if you still feel the same way, pick up where you left off."

"By the gods!" Tug Westover yelled. "I ain't gonna listen to none of your talk!"

Mace Newell swung in his saddle to glare at his neighbor. He hated Sam—but he hated Tug Westover even worse. He'd rather be dead in his grave than ever agree with the Flying W owner.

"Sam's right. Let's leave her lay," he announced. "And I'll beef the first gent who says different!"

Tug Westover shrugged coldly and gave his men the word, and in a tight bunch they withdrew a few yards. Mace Newell and his hands did likewise. Sam rode back to town.

He worried the rest of the day. Both sides were doing some heavy thinking—and they'd both end up with the same suspicion: that Sheriff Sackett had talked them out of something. And that just wouldn't sit well on proddy stomachs. Chances were they'd side each other for a change and come gunning for Sam himself.

Late in the afternoon he heard the sound of a single horse galloping up the street. Sam went to the door, shading his eyes against the glare of the setting sun. A tall rangy man was dismounting in front of the Palace. His heart bouncing in his throat, Sam stepped out to the middle of the street.

"Ace Rafferty!" The man who had just dismounted jerked up his head. Sam called out, "You're under arrest."

"I am," taunted Rafferty, "in a pig's Stetson!"

A few townsfolk had come out to see what was going on, but now they scattered and the street was empty except for Sam and Rafferty. Beyond the town in the

distance a big cloud of dust lay flat against the horizon.

That worried Sam a little. Chances were it was either the Flying W or the Slant N—or both—riding for a shoot-out, since all of them had probably figured Sam had tricked them.

"At fifty paces I aim to start shootin'," Sam called out to Ace Rafferty.

"That's sweet music," Rafferty told him.

Both men were walking slowly forward, eyes intent, hands flat along their thighs. The dust cloud boiled closer, and Mace Newell and Tug Westover, riding together, pulled out in front.

Rafferty was squarely in front of the Widow Bentley's store now. Sam reckoned this was it. Both men crouched low, hands streaking toward their guns. Sam's hand crossed and his gun smacked solidly into his palm. It seemed as if he fired without aiming. And then Rafferty's gun flew up in the air and Rafferty knelt in the dust holding his wrist, and there was a beaten, horrified look in his gray eyes.

Sam held his smoking gun straight down at his side. His had been the only shot. Rafferty pulled his legs under him, then slunk toward his horse like a whipped hound dog. Nobody tried to stop him as he rode away.

"BY THE gods!" Tug Westover whispered. "That was the purtiest bit of shootin' I ever seen."

Sam holstered his gun. "Gents, I figger this calls for a drink all around."

In silence they streamed into the Palace. Sam was being looked at with puzzlement and awe.

"Never heard tell of this Ace Rafferty," Mace Newell said suddenly, glancing at Sam with faint suspicion.

Homer Troy tapped him on the chest. "Fastest man with a gun in the whole

Southwest. Yes, sir! Seen it on a reward dodger."

Sam figured it was about time to end the feud between the Slant N and the Flying W. "Here's the way I look at it, gents. You been arguin' about fifty feet of land for quite a spell. Why not put the fence right smack-dab in the middle of that there fifty feet?"

"You ain't Solomon!" Mace Newell bellowed.

"By the gods! yelled Tug Westover. "Not a chance! That there is my land!"

Sam let his hand drop suggestively. "I'm gettin' mighty tired of hearin' you both bellow like a calf what can't find its mammy! Let's all step outside."

"You aim to take us both on?" Tug Westover asked, staring at Sam. Sam nodded, and Westover lowered his eyes. Mace Newell looked thoughtful. Seemed as though Sam wasn't a gent to be taken lightly.

"Shake hands," Sam told them.

"I don't shake with no sidewinder," Mace Newell muttered.

"How do you want it?" Sam asked. "Fists or guns?"

Sheepishly, Mace Newell poked out a tentative hand. Even more sheepishly Tug Westover took it. Everybody decided another drink was in order.

The Widow Bentley was sitting in the doorway of her store when Sam walked past. She waved him closer. Sam reckoned he just couldn't disregard her summons.

"Sam, you got a brother?" she asked.

"Well—yeah."

"Tall man, gray-eyed, a mite younger than you?"

Sam flushed and nodded.

"What's he do?"

"Rancher, like me."

She nodded. "Was your dad ever a sheriff?"

"Just a rancher," Sam admitted slowly.

"Anybody could get a dodger printed up, Sam."

Sam gulped. "Reckon so."

The Widow Bentley looked thoughtful. "It seems downright amazing, Sam—the way you shot the gun right out of that badman's hand."

Sam kicked up a heap of dust with the toe of a boot. "Just kinda lucky." His embarrassment was real.

"Jubal might've been a mite surprised," she said suddenly. "Particularly since a bullet came in through the door and drilled a hole in a can of peaches sittin' on a shelf eight feet off the ground!"

Sam grinned weakly.

"You reckon you got the town tamed, Sam?"

"Reckon so," Sam said.

Her blue eyes got a distant look. "I do believe, Sam, that Jubal would approve of you." The remoteness left her eyes, and she began to smile. Now she spoke more matter-of-factly. "I'd consider it an honor, Sam, if you'd set and join me in a fresh-opened can of peaches."

BATTLE AFTER PEACE

THE battle of New Orleans was not the only American battle fought after peace had been declared, because of either poor communications or slow cooling temperaments. Americans fought each other at Palmetto ranch, Texas, on May 13th, 1865, more than a month after General Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

While it is true that news got this far West somewhat late there are those who contend that both sides pretended not to know of the surrender to settle a grudge growing out of earlier battles.—*Simpson M. Ritter.*

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 85)



1. A tumbling brand is one which is partially tilting or "falling" to one side.

2. If your cowpuncher friend told you he was trying to "trap a squaw," you would know he was planning to get married. Incidentally, Western cowpunchers preferred their women as feminine as possible.

3. True. A swing rider is one who rides with the trail herd about one-third of the way back from the point riders.

4. False. A "swinging brand" is a brand which is attached to and hangs from a quarter circle. It does not rest on the quarter circle.

5. In the language of the cowpuncher, a "spoiled herd" is one in which the cattle have formed the habit of frequent stampeding.

6. If your friend told you he had just finished a Spanish supper, you would offer him some more food. A Spanish supper is nothing more than taking a notch or two in your belt.

7. True. A sorrel horse is a light chestnut, having a sort of golden color.

8. The cowboy slang expression "sop and 'taters" is used in reference to a pacing horse.

9. False. A "sign camp" is a place where the cowpuncher sleeps and eats while line riding.

10. If the ranch boss told you to go get the silk, you would, if you knew your business, return with a roll of barbed wire.

11. True. "Saddle warmer" is a slang expression used in reference to cowpunchers in general.

12. According to the Westener's way of thinking, a "saddle band" is a cavvy of saddle horses. The expression saw greatest popularity in the Northwest, incidentally.

13. If the ranch boss told you to "roll your cotton," you should go roll up your bed and prepare to hit the trail.

14. "Rooter" is the cowboy's slang term for hog. The term arose, of course, because of the animal's seeming passion for rooting in the dirt.

15. True. A "prairie strawberry" is a bean.

16. True. A "possum belly" is a raw-hide hung from beneath a wagon and used to carry fuel.

17. A "parlor gun" is a Derringer—a very small weapon which would fit the palm of the hand. Most cowboys frowned on this type of gun, preferring a larger one, by the way.

18. "Paper-backed" is a slang term indicating physical weakness. Thus, a "paper backed cowboy" was any weak cowpuncher.

19. The term, "pan of snakes," is used in reference to any intricate Mexican livestock brand. Many Mexican cattle brands are quite ununderstandable to the cowboy. So he calls such brands any ridiculous names which pop into his head.

20. A "skimmy" is a calf which has been raised on skim-milk.

TALES of the

by LEE

Death on the Little Big Horn

(GEN. CUSTER)

GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER, AS GALLANT A FIGHTING GENTLEMAN AS THE OLD WEST EVER SAW, IS REMEMBERED PRIMARILY FOR HIS ONLY DEFEAT.

AN OHIO BOY, HIS REPUTATION FOR COURAGE AND DARING BEGAN WHEN, GRADUATED FROM WEST POINT AT 22 IN 1861. HE SAW ACTION AS A CAVALRY LIEUTENANT ON HIS FIRST DAY AT THE FRONT IN THE BATTLE OF BULL RUN.

FOR A TIME CUSTER WAS IN CHARGE OF BALLOON RECONNAISSANCE.

MADE CAPTAIN IN '62 FOR WADING THE CHICKAHOMINY ALONE AND RECONNOITERING ENEMY POSITIONS, THE NEXT DAY HE LED A SURPRISE DAWN ATTACK ON A PICKET POST AND CAPTURED THE FIRST COLORS TAKEN BY THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC.

APPOINTED BRIGADIER-GENERAL OF CAVALRY FOR GALLANTRY IN '64, WHEN HIS BRIGADE WAS IN DANGER WHILE RAIDING WITH GEN. SHERIDAN, CUSTER SEIZED THE FLAG FROM A DYING COLOR-SERGEANT AND SAVED IT BY CONCEALING IT IN HIS BOSOM.

HE WAS A MAJOR-GENERAL AT 25, WITH 11 HORSES SHOT UNDER HIM IN COMBAT. GEN. GRANT SAID, IN CITING CUSTER AT THE END OF THE WAR, "YOU HAVE NEVER LOST A GUN, NEVER LOST A COLOR, NEVER BEEN DEFEATED."



— OLD WEST



CUSTER HAD HIS FIRST GO AT INDIAN FIGHTING IN THE SMASHING VICTORY OVER THE CHEYENNES IN THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA IN '68. HE FOUGHT THE SIOUX ON THE YELLOWSTONE IN '73, AND THE FOLLOWING YEAR GUARDED A SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION INTO THE HOSTILE BLACK HILLS.

DURING GEN. SHERIDAN'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST SITTING BULL IN '76, CUSTER WAS SENT WITH 600 CAVALRY TO HEAD OFF THE MAIN BODY OF THE SIOUX.

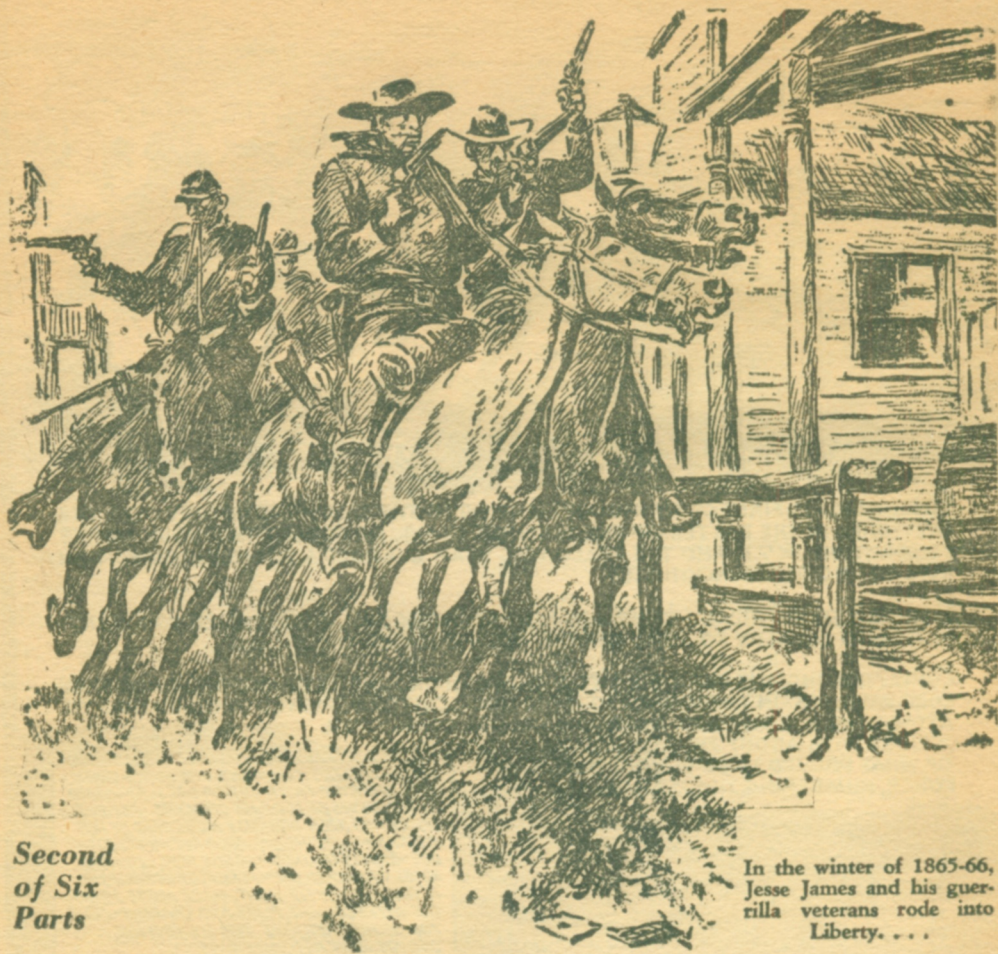
CONTACTING INDIANS NEAR THE LITTLE BIG HORN ON JUNE 25TH AND BELIEVING THEM 1,000 PAWNEES ON THE WAY TO JOIN THE SIOUX, CUSTER DEPLOYED 6 COMPANIES TO ATTACK THEIR FLANK AND REAR AND, DISAPPEARING OVER A RIDGE WITH ABOUT 250 MEN, CHARGED THE CENTER OF WHAT PROVED TO BE SITTING BULL'S MAIN FORCE, NUMBERING THOUSANDS.

NOTE — CUSTER'S COMMAND WAS FOUND THREE DAYS AFTER THE FIGHT. CUSTER LAY SURROUNDED BY THE BODIES OF 11 OF HIS OFFICERS. ALL BUT CUSTER HAD BEEN BRUTALLY MUTILATED BY THE INDIANS — CLOTHING STRIPPED OFF — EYES TORN OUT — SKULLS CRUSHED — HANDS, FEET, LEGS AND NOSES WRENCHED OFF — FLESH CUT IN STRIPS — IT WAS A HORRIBLE SIGHT, MADE MORE SO BY THE INTENSE HEAT, FLIES AND CARRION-CROWS. FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, THIS SCENE IS NOT SHOWN AS IT ACTUALLY WAS.



THE BODIES OF HIS CAVALRYMEN WERE LATER FOUND STREWN ALONG THE SLOPE BEYOND, WITH CUSTER IN THE MIDST OF A RING OF DEAD AT THE TOP.

The Man Who



*Second
of Six
Parts*

In the winter of 1865-66,
Jesse James and his guer-
rilla veterans rode into
Liberty. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Unreconstructed

QUANTRELL was carried to the nearby farmhouse (Wakefield's) and, his wounds dressed, made comfortable. Some of his band, led by Frank James, came back to rescue their leader. Quantrell couldn't go. The rescuers remained for hours, and then the Federals returned and took the wounded man to Louisville where, in a hospital, he was converted to Catholicism and died a few days later.

Quantrell's death left the guerrillas scat-

tered from Texas to the Upper Missouri valley. A pretense of surrendering had been followed by pitched combats and casual killings of soldiers and citizens. In one of the conflicts Jesse James was shot through the lung and there is a plaintive note in the story of his sufferings as he staggered away, wounded, suffering thirst, fever, anguish. In the surrender of a guerrilla band under a partisan, Poole, Jesse was so badly off he wasn't even included in the parole because "Major

Killed Jesse James

*Young Bob Ford cut his teeth on six-gun butts
and jackknife handles—and didn't do either of
them any good!*

Rogers was so well satisfied that James would die." But Jesse reached Rula, Nebraska, and came under the care of his mother. And because Jesse wanted to die and be buried in Missouri, his mother took him back to the old farm in Clay county.

The war had ended. Quite a few killings were reported, but the guerrillas bitterly resented things that had happened to them and theirs. Their Union neighbors didn't forget civilians killed, raids perpetrated, prisoners and wounded hanged, shot, buildings burned, helpless men and boys murdered variously "for fun." Guerrillas, too, had suffered.

Missouri, in Federal control, passed a law exempting Union men from punishment for crimes committed after January 1, 1861, but the Confederates were left subject for any crimes they had committed. Every guerrilla who had fought under the black flag, not duly enlisted in the Confederate armies, became an outlaw.

During the exile of Zerelda James-Samuels, mother of the James boys, the Ford clearing in Clay county, was the chief hideout for guerrillas between raids. The James boys, Hites, Millers and other river ridge scouts stopped in there in their restless furtive flight. As the war dissipated, Charley Ford knew his cousins, and learned to talk on their laps. Bob Ford, a babe in arms in 1865, "cut his teeth on revolver butts and jackknife handles" as the saying is.

Pursuit of the guerrilla veterans was more relentless and vicious than hunting

wolves. First and last the childhood of the Ford brothers was passed in the relentless dread of law, the atmosphere of escape and violation, and the continuing hatred of the Federal government.

Jesse James recovered from the bullet hole through his body when the fun of killing defenseless Federals changed to desperate losing conflict down on White river, Arkansas, and the Union forces closed in on them, driving Quantrell and the remnants of his outlawed band in desperate race with forces even more relentless than Quantrell himself, soldiers as daring and high-spirited as any guerrilla.

The James and Younger brothers intended to drop their careers of bloodshed. Exuberant and lively Jesse was good-humored, a laughing hillbilly woods boy to whom law-jeopardy was a nuisance. Even memory of wounds, hardships and privations merely added zest to life.

In the winter of 1865-66, Jesse James, Frank James, Clell Miller, Jim Poole and George White, guerrilla veterans, rode into Liberty, court seat of Clay county, bridle reins in their teeth, a Colt revolver in each hand, rebel-yelling and shooting up the town according to the tradition established by Simon Girty in Malden, Canada, before the war of 1812.

They jumped over Meffert's saloon tie-rail and swarmed into the barroom and lined up for drinks. The excitement reached Sheriff Rickards in his office and he sallied forth, running, to preserve the peace. He knew all those boys for what

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

they were; the James boys had established themselves as the most reckless and desperate of the Quantrell guerrillas. They had proved themselves to be among the most dangerous riders in the land—men who had been trained to shoot Colt revolvers as accurately as Kentucky rifles by the school-teacher turned guerrilla leader. Those youngsters were less than a year from the unstinted killing of soldiers, citizens, enemies, facing odds fifty to one.

Now, drinking, shooting, and wanted by the Federal courts and Army, they were confronted, five of them by one intrepid man. Not one of those youths knew how many men he had killed. They had called their most desperate adventures “fun.” They had learned to shoot with either hand. They never had yielded up their guns, though they had thrown away carbines when hotly pursued, and they had dropped their revolvers so that they could pass for innocent, gawping backwoods boys and escape being hanged or shot. On Jesse’s back were the marks of a lash he had endured early in the war.

No peace officer ever took a more desperate chance than Sheriff Rickards when he entered Meffert’s barroom and faced the gang of Jesse and Frank James—not yet “gone bad.” This was their first encounter with the law. Every one of them knew nerve when they saw it. They didn’t want to add to their records—and all five meekly submitted to arrest. Apparently this proves the contention that Merry Jesse and glum, morose Frank James, and their fellows, didn’t want any more trouble. They yielded up their revolvers, weapons they never had yielded before, and Sheriff Rickards took all five of them before Judge Philander Lewis. It isn’t clear what Judge Philander did to them, but it is indicated he properly lectured them, got them respectably sobered, and sent them back to their woods hide-outs. Local officials just naturally weren’t picking up guerrillas, for Federal courts.

Obviously, if the guerrillas were engaged in banditry, they would not have surrendered to a lone county sheriff.

HOWEVER, banks were robbed during the three years of doubt in the lives of the James boys and their boon companions. On February 4, 1866, the bank at Liberty was raided by masked robbers; on October 30, 1866 the bank at Lexington was attacked; on March 2, 1867, Savannah was held up and robbed; on May 23, 1867, Richmond, Missouri, was the scene of a notable bank robbery. These robberies have been ascribed to the James gang—to Jesse, Frank James—and the Hites, Millers, others of their associates may have been in the raids.

The robbers adopted the same technique that Quantrell taught his guerrillas; they met in rendezvous; they planned a raid; they made the attack; they rode away together, pursued by posses; out in the timber they scattered and sneaked away to escape and hide out.

The James boys helped Dr. Samuels and their mother farm their woods clearing. In turn, both of the boys were taught to shoot rifles and revolvers. They were hunting squirrels, turkeys, rabbits and other pot-meat before they were seven years old. In the ridge wood clearings small boys became expert hunters, keen marksmen as soon as they could hold a weapon. Small pistols, light shotguns, deadly accurate rifles were the toys of children. The boys also learned to ride calves and young stock, as well as horses which they caught and “borrowed” in the pastures; not stealing, but using when the owners were not around. This fact of borrowed horses is a matter of court record as regards James boys activities.

Charles Ford, jr., and Bob Ford, before they were ten years old, were running errands for the James boys. They were

lookouts along the trails, scouting out to make sure government posses, hated representatives of Federal court, were not sneaking up on the guerrilla fugitives.

Unable to make a living on their farm, the day came in the winter of 1868, when the James gang decided to undertake an operation. Apparently for their first robbery, they decided to go over into Kentucky, out of their own home country. On March 20, 1868, strange men appeared in Russellville, Logan county, Kentucky, near the Tennessee line. One of them entered the bank, and asked President Long to change a \$50 bill. Long refused, saying the paper was counterfeit. The visitors drew their guns and took over. They seized \$14,000 in paper and \$5,000 in gold and silver, the money a bulky and the metal a heavy load for horsemen to carry. The \$19,000 loot, where \$10 a month was the farm wage, seemed enormous.

The robbers escaped the posse pursuit, but Detective Bligh of Louisville trailed the band more than sixty miles. He tracked George Shepherd, a guerrilla, and got him convicted in Logan county. A posse killed Old Shepherd, who resisted arrest. During the trial, the names of the James and Younger brothers were listed as among the robbers, and from that day the professional investigators were constantly in search of the ill-famed Jesse James and his outlaw band.

The outlaws scattered after their raids; they returned to their river ridge hideouts in the region where Quantrell had organized and trained his guerrillas; next to the rendezvous kept by Zerelda James-Samuels the Charles Ford farm became the most important hangout of the gang.

Claim has been made that the James and Younger brothers had a long record of robberies before the Russellville raid. Suspicion of them is said to have prevailed, but perhaps they should be given the benefit of doubt. Their selection of the Russellville bank would seem to be accord-

ing to their probable first strategy—far from home.

Once exposed in court records, they spent their loot and sought other sources of funds. Stages, banks, horse herds, any source of money drew them. There is no telling how many robberies they committed, and victims, sheriffs, organizations offered rewards for the arrest and conviction of the known participants in the attacks.

The usefulness of the Ford boys, especially Charlie, constantly increased. Soon they were actually minor gang members.

On June 3, 1871, the James gang rode into Corydon, Wayne county, Iowa. Word had reached them that the county treasurer had collected the county taxes. When the desperadoes arrived they found a town meeting at the outskirts of the community, where a new school was discussed. When the desperadoes tried to cash a \$100 bill, the treasury clerk was sorry, but the safe was locked, the treasurer at the meeting adding, "They can cash the bill at the bank, across the street!"

The visitors found the bank safe open. They took \$15,000 in gold and silver, scooping it into saddlebags. A negro with a handful of church money was taken for his wad. Then the gang rode past the vacant lot town meeting, whooping rebel yells.

MORE and more post-war robberies forced the banks, railroads and industries to seek protection. The Corydon bank engaged the Pinkerton detective agency to seek the arrest and punishment of the outlaws, and from that day the Jesse James gang became an interstate problem, a constantly recurring nation-wide sensation.

Heretofore, the bandits had ridden roughshod and at will throughout the states of Missouri and Kentucky, a local post-war veteran phenomenon. They

were heroes of the underworld along the Border, and they had the sympathy and help of their guerrilla comrades at arms. Moreover, they were supported by friends at court, peace officers, politicians, innumerable partisans who were glad to become participants in outlawry, before and after robberies, because the James gang "robbed the rich to give the poor."

The central figures of the gang were Jesse and Frank James, Cole, Jim, John and Bob Younger, Clell and Ed Miller, Charles Pitts, the Tompkins brothers, Jim Cummings, Dick Liddil, the Hites boys—and numerous others. Charley Ford, junior, rode with the outlaws through Missouri and over Kentucky, where he carried messages, bought supplies, spied on posses, but was regarded as too young, at fourteen, to participate in raids. The James boys deliberately "brought him up" to be one of their band, taught him its methods, tricks and ideals.

Now Martha Ford was woman-grown. Inevitably, she became an outlaw's sweetheart, one of the girl-friends of the desperadoes. She was not a conspicuous, talkative, insistent figure; her life remained obscured. Zerelda Samuels dominated the outlaws; her bitter partisanship never wavered in her approval of her sons and their guerrillas. She fed, them hid them, advised them and, in fierce debates, defended them. Thus during the Civil War and during the careers of the first Jesse James band she was constantly in the turmoil of raids, detective work, defiance of law, order and authority.

Unnoticed, Martha Ford married a man named Bolton, took up with a man named Collins, and finally through Dick Liddil came to dominate Charles and Robert and the misfortunes of the Jesse James gang. Somewhere down through the years from her sisterly care of the two Ford babies, Martha Ford, during the desperate jeopardies brought upon the river ridges among the "reconstructed" of the Civil

War, began to understand and muster her strength for subtly thwarting Jesse and Frank James when they deliberately began to train the two small boys into outlaws.

After the distaster that destroyed the James boys gang at and after Northfield in 1876, Martha Ford, at the risk of life, cautiously resisted the James influence. The gang had grown notorious—riding high, wide and handsome, the outlaws were bold, swaggering, arrogant. Their influence on impressionable boys was enormous. William A. Pinkerton, in a speech to the International Police Chiefs at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1907, said:

"The published reports of the exploits of this (James) band had more to do with the making of badmen in the West than anything which occurred before they began operation or since. . . . As a rule the James and Younger brothers and their associates, after each crime, would return to their home, Clay county, Missouri, where they were virtually immune from arrest, either, through fear of them . . . or friendly aid."

Housekeeping in the Ford clearing for those impregnable outlaws, Martha Ford began to figure and to plan to rescue her brothers and to break her sweetheart, husband, whomever she wished to save from the outlaw band. Discovery or betrayal meant another killing—and only the years and developments unmistakably revealed that young woman's dauntless courage and subtly valiant efforts.

One of the James gang's most noted exploits was the robbery of a Missouri Pacific train in 1874 near Mosscrest—now a ghost city. According to Kit Dalton, a guerrilla and outlaw associate of the James gang, the gang was led by Jesse James and included Dick Liddil (sometimes spelled Little), Jim Cummins, Jim Collins (Martha Ford's sweetheart), and four others. They boarded the train at the water tank and captured the locomotive and boarded the express car. The messenger at pistol point opened the safe and

yielded \$70,000 mostly in \$20 gold pieces, but with a heavy lot of silver and some greenbacks.

This meant nearly 300 pounds Troy weight. News of the train robbery brought United States deputy marshals, railroad detectives, and local peace officers on the gallop. The gold was too heavy a burden for the racing animals ridden by the desperadoes and the outlaws unloaded \$37,000 near Claremore, Indian Territory.

Then they rode on to the bank of the Little Blue river in Jackson county, Missouri. The chase was hot and the uproar of the raid spread nation wide. The outlaws made another cache of the dangerous gold, and scattered to await the rum-pus to die down.

After a while, needing money, the outlaws returned to the Little Blue river and couldn't find the money they had buried there. They went back to the cache near Claremore in Kansas but they couldn't find the \$37,000 there, either. They had used a big tree for a marker, and in the dark they couldn't find it. They didn't dare search by daylight, and so one of the tales of Jesse James buried treasure originated.

In the holidays of Christmas-New Years, 1913, George Hardsook, digging a pipe line trench near Claremore, Oklahoma, uncovered \$37,000 where it had been buried forty-nine years before. Gold in the days of the Jesse James gang was the "real stuff." Paper money was dubious in value—subject to discounts and counterfeiting and wildcat bank promotions. But, gold, too, had its problems. A pound of gold, 12 oz., troy meant only about \$240. Ten pounds meant only \$2,400. In a quick raid on bank or train or express shipment, a hundred weight was an embarrassment of riches. The James boys were helping themselves frequently, during their boisterous days of profitable "fun," when they learned that General Benjamin F. Butler had located

at Northfield, Minnesota, and deposited a fortune in that Yankeeland.

General Butler had governed New Orleans in war times and stopped insults to Union troops with the same vigorous resentment that the high-spirited Quantrell guerrillas had shown toward their Union neighbors along the border. Accordingly, on September 7, 1876, the James-Younger band lurked on the outskirts of Northfield, plans made to take Gen. Butler's money and the savings of his son-in-law, A. A. Ames who had been governor of Mississippi under Union control.

Years later, in the fastnesses of Minnesota State Prison, at Stillwater, Cole Younger wrote that "Whiskey spoiled the whole plan." Jesse James, Bob Younger and Charley Pitts rode into town, fortified by a quart of whiskey. When Frank James, Bill Chadwell, Clell Miller, Jim and Cole Younger arrived, the three drinkers were shooting up the town.

Dr. Wheeler, in his office up stairs across the street from the bank, opened fire. As Miller drove back a customer, Wheeler killed his horse, and somebody filled Miller's face with birdshot. Wheeler killed him. Bill Chadwell and Charey Pitts were killed. Jesse James, Bob and Jim Younger were wounded. The outlaws fled, pursued by posses night and day.

Bob Younger's wound disabled him. The James boys suggested that he be put out of his misery, so he wouldn't be caught and perhaps betray the gang's secrets. This reported suggestion finished the break up of the first James gang. The Youngers indignantly parted from the outlaw band and all were captured, convicted of crime and imprisoned. Bob died in the pen; Cole and Jim were pardoned on June 10, 1902—and hopelessly in love, Cole committed suicide a few months later.

Frank James assisted the wounded Jesse James more than 200 miles across

Minnesota and South Dakota to the Missouri river, where Frank "commandeered a skiff" and shook off pursuit by tripping down the river at night and hiding out by day. Arriving below St. Joseph (St. Joe), they headed for Clay county and the river ridges.

Fear broke the spirit of the James boys. They were no longer "the greatest bandits of the era." Detectives were closing in on them. They turned on the detectives, killing and wounding them; they killed men they feared would betray them; from Charles Ford's hide-out they took fifteen-year-old Charley Ford with them to the vicinity of Nashville, Tennessee, where they took different names and hired out to work, tried various ways of making a living and used the boy as a messenger and go-between.

Time and again they discovered schemes to betray them for the accumulating rewards for their capture. No one knows how many of their associates were killed on suspicion; five detectives were killed, torture used in at least one instance. During the three years the two James brothers lived in panic expectancy and unceasing fear they grew poor and desperate. The newspapers played them up and detectives, blood-money hopefuls, peace officers over hundreds of thousands of square miles kept them constantly aware of their jeopardy hunting them.

The two Ford boys became the constant lookouts and companions of the two James brothers. Jesse deliberately trained them up to be members of the new band of robbers he felt obliged to organize. The change in the desperadoes is clearly indicated by an incident in their Tennessee hole-up. Carefully they reconnoitered, cased a cross-roads commissary; they sneaked into the store building at night, opened the safe and got \$4.23, a gold watch and chain—petty larceny stuff.

Lurking in the background was Martha Ford. She saw her two brothers being

lured into banditry. A particularly harrowing aftermath of the Northfield raid was the report that the skeleton of one of the robbers had been cleaned and hung in the office of Dr. Wheeler. The story found its way into print years later when Dr. Wheeler, in Wichita, Kansas, gave the facts.

They are unusual and, at the same time, embody one of mankind's oldest tragedies—dating to Adam.

A finer specimen of physical manhood I have never seen. The natives in the village made no objection when I claimed the youth's skeleton as my prize . . . One rainy night, about 11 o'clock, a genuine, old-fashioned frontiersman came to my office. He asked my name and then inquired if I had a skeleton in my closet. . . . Something about him made me think of the young man I had killed many years before . . . I was alone . . . I didn't like the color of his eyes. . . . I answered in the affirmative.

"Let me see the skeleton!" said my queer visitor.

. . . I drew a revolver. . . . I threw open the (closet) door.

"Put up your revolver," remarked the stranger, "I won't hurt you. If I had wanted to shoot you, I would have killed you when I came into the office. . . . I heard the story of your killing one of the gang, and as near as I can make out, it was my boy that was killed. He ran away from home when only 12 years old, and I never saw him after that. I don't hold any grudge against you. You did what was right, I suppose. But I thought I would take this chance to see what is left of the poor boy."

I then showed the stranger the skeleton, which was handsomely mounted, and described the raid as briefly and gently as possible. The old pioneer's only remark was as he gazed upon all that was left of his boy, was:

"Well, he was a big fellow, wasn't he?"

Probably the skeleton was that of Charley Pitt, alias Wells, though it could have been Bill Chadwell's. The gang all knew that Dr. Wheeler's deadly accurate shooting destroyed their organization. News that Pitt's skeleton had been stripped made them realize that any one of them might be similarly made into a specimen, for even far less than the \$6,000 they were reported to have obtained in the Northfield raid.

(To Be Continued)

Farrel said, "Looks like you win,
Lassiter. . . ."



A TIME TO KILL

BEARPAW was a wildcat mining town jammed in the breast of the equally wild Arizona mountain. North and west of it were the pits; there the mountain was becoming a ruin of slag. South of Bearpaw Chinese coolie labor was breaking its back to bring in a railroad spur through the impossible, forbidding peaks. It was just the sort of town that Harry would come to, Jim Lassiter thought.

He rode down Main Street on a tired roan horse, a tall, raw-boned man with a hawkish face. He passed the general stores, the Wells Fargo office, the saloons and gaudy dancehalls. It was mid-afternoon, and hot, the time of day for Bear-

*Jim Lassiter rode his long trail
patiently, for he knew that, to an
honest man, the time to kill may
also be—a time to die!*

By
TALMAGE POWELL

paw to have its claws sheathed, but even so a pair of burly miners tumbled out of a saloon as Lassiter passed. A crowd gathered. The miners cursed each other a second or two and began swinging.

Lassiter sat his roan easily and thought, *Nice town. The right place for a man to find the murderer of his brother. . . .*

He wheeled the roan away from the milling, shouting bunch of men and rode on down Main to the livery. He stirred stiffly in the saddle. Both he and the roan were coated with dust, stained and drawn with the weariness of travel.

The hostler was a skinny youth. In the cavernous, rank-smelling interior of the livery, Lassiter dismounted. He removed the heavy saddle bags and said, "Take good care of this animal, son. I expect to be back for it tomorrow, next day at the latest. The name is Lassiter."

Lassiter wheeled and strode from the barn. The hostler watched his retreating back. "Lassiter—Lassiter? Say," the hostler murmured, "I wonder if he's one of *them* Lassiters!"

The youth ran to the vast mouth of the double-doored barn to watch Lassiter walk away. The roan nickered, and the excited youth turned his attention to the animal.

Lassiter's steps were hollow on the high boardwalk. He blinked against the sun and listened to the sound of the town, the thud of a passing horse's hoofs, the rumble of a wagon, a burst of conversation, the distant hum of machinery up in the mines. The saddle bags over his shoulder, Lassiter took a final look at Main and turned in the El Tovar hotel.

The lobby was big, damp, and smelled musty. But it was ornate for a town such as Bearpaw, like a woman putting on her gaudy best with new found riches. The furniture was big, dark, with brocaded chairs and leather couches. The cuspidors and chandeliers were of solid brass.

Lassiter walked over to the desk and

let the saddle bags thump to the floor. The clerk materialized out of the gloom behind the desk, for all the world looking like a gray rat coming out of its hole. The clerk rubbed his palms; his hands were dry, like a corpse's, and the rubbing made a faint, whisking sound. "What can I do for you, mister?"

"You got a room?"

"Five dollars in advance for the night. We're kind of crowded since that Eastern combine started working the mines."

"I know." Lassiter dropped a ten dollar gold piece on the counter. He picked up the quill pen, dipped it and scratched on the register: "Jim Lassiter, Las Cruces."

The clerk's brows scuttled up. "You've had a long ride, Mr. Lassiter."

"Too many days of it. I'd like some hot water."

"Yes, sir. Uh—had another gent with your last name a few weeks ago. Related?"

"Brothers," Lassiter said.

"Do tell! Well—well."

Lassiter looked away from the little man and started up the wide, wooden stairs. He reckoned that word would be all over town in less than an hour that a murdered man's brother had arrived in Bearpaw. The game was started; he had cast the die. There was no turning back now, despite the qualms and uncertainty that had at times assailed him on the long ride up from Las Cruces. From here on out, his brother's killer would know that he was being hunted.

LASSITER did not come out of the hotel until almost sundown. He was wearing clean levis and a rumpled but clean shirt from his saddle bags, and he had shaved. With the stubble and dust gone, his face looked gaunt, too bony, too hard.

Bearpaw was beginning to rouse out of the lethargy of the day. A shift of miners

had come streaming down the mountain, tired, hungry, thirsty for drink; once they had washed, fed their faces, and put a slug under their belts, a lot of them would be just as thirsty for excitement. The boardwalk was crowded; stores were doing a late afternoon run of business; a piano began to tinkle noisily in a saloon that Lassiter passed.

He was immune to all of it, to all the life and warm blood of the town. He was alone in loneliness, not feeling pleasant. He walked all the way down Main, turned up a narrow, twisting street of rutted dirt that crawled up the mountainside. Ten minutes walking brought him to the church. He didn't know the denomination of it. He didn't try to find out. He looked at the church and saw a neat, compact building of rough-hewn timbers set in the hillside. Of all the buildings he had seen in Bearpaw, only this one looked as if there had been any feeling in the erection of it. It was up here alone, quiet, still, bees humming in a small stretch of flowers in its yard. It might have been a million miles from Bearpaw.

The cemetery was on the hill above the church; some of the graves were old, sunken. Some were grown with weeds. Finally, Lassiter's search brought him to a fairly recent grave. He read the inscription crudely painted on the rough cross at the head of the grave: *HERE LIES HARRY LASSITER. DIED MAY THE FOURTH WITH HIS BOOTS ON.*"

Lassiter removed his hat, held it in his hands and stood with his head bowed over the grave. The dying sun put a lingering warmth on his cheekbones. He didn't move or speak. He looked at the mounded earth and thought, *So here he is, dust mingling with dust, my brother. He rode away from home a long time ago because he was wild and got in some trouble. But he was young, too. He was too young to die. Somewhere, some time, somebody failed Harry. Maybe it was me. Pa never*

tried to understand him, and Ma never could cope with him. It's been too many years since you went away, Harry. But I'm here now!

He turned from the grave, and saw the girl standing down at the edge of the cemetery. She was a tall, slim girl, the sunlight soft on her oval face, catching in the honey clouds of her hair.

Lassiter nodded to her, started to walk past her, but she moved over in his path. "Mr. Lassiter?" Her voice was like the soft breeze out of the mountains, and Lassiter saw that her eyes were blue.

He nodded. "Do you have folks resting here, ma'm—or did you come up to see me?"

"To see you, Mr. Lassiter. I'm Ethel Farrel. I—"

"I reckoned word would get around town that I was here. But I didn't think the ladies of Bearpaw would be interested."

She colored. "I overheard a man telling my father that Harry Lassiter's brother had come. I knew Harry."

"I see. Did you know him well?"

"Not very. I—may I walk with you, Mr. Lassiter?"

He didn't object and she fell in step beside him. He cut a covert glance at her. The kind of girl Harry would take to? It didn't jibe. Harry had always liked them darker than this girl. Harry had liked the warm blood and red lips of Latin women.

Lassiter sensed that Ethel Farrel was studying him as slyly as he was sizing her up. It made him uncomfortable. He sensed a certain indecision in her. She said, "You don't look a great deal like Harry."

"He favored his ma's people."

"It isn't that—I mean, you look like a working man. And you're not wearing that gun as if it was a part of you."

"There has to be a worker in every family, Miss Farrel."

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to insult you."

He looked at her directly. "No cause to be sorry."

She fetched a smile for him then, but he wouldn't let his stoniness relent. He said, "Miss Farrel, there must be a reason why you followed me up to the cemetery."

"I—I guess I wanted to see the kind of man who'd come all the way from Las Cruces to Bearpaw because his brother had died. Do you think Harry would do the same for you?"

"I can't see that it makes any difference."

She looked away from him, toward the distant mountains. She said, "Harry was carried to Mayor Bemis's house when he was shot. He was delirious. All he did was talk of you. He made you out to be a fine man, Jim Lassiter. Too fine a man to get himself killed in Bearpaw."

They had reached Main. He paused. "You're trying to tell me to get out of town?"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything," she said quietly. "I just wouldn't want the man in Harry's delirium to be killed, that's all. Hasn't there been enough killing already?"

She looked in his face, laid her hand on his arm. He felt the warmth of her surge out through him. "Won't you think it over, Jim Lassiter?"

"The ride was long," he said. "The ride gave me plenty of time to think. At the bottom there's just one fact—he was my brother."

Biting her lip, she turned from him and hurried down the street. He watched her move away and was annoyed with the vague insinuation in his mind that something had changed inside him.

HE STOPPED in a store on Main. The gimlet-eyed keeper was turning the crank of a creaking coffee grinder in the dim back corner. Lassiter

walked back, watched the man at his task a moment, and said, "Is there a Mr. Farrel around town?"

"Farrel, eh? Two or three Farrels, I guess. One a old desert rat prospector, 'nother keeps books at the Wells Fargo office. Then there's Phillip Farrel. He owns the Mother Lode saloon and gambling house."

"This Farrel has a wife or daughter named Ethel."

"That's Phil Farrel."

"Thanks," Lassiter said.

He left the store, walked down Main to the Mother Lode. Crowds were thicker now. Bearpaw was flexing its muscles. The shadows of night were creeping westward across the mountains; kerosene lanterns, lamps, and candles were being lighted; wood smoke began adding its tang to the air as the chill of the high air crept in.

The hitching rack in front of the Mother Lode was banked solid with horses. Lassiter skirted the animals and entered the saloon.

His gaze swept the crowded bar, the gaming tables, paused at the large, round poker table in back. The poker game hadn't started, and one man sat alone behind the green-topped table. He looked tall and rangy. He wore a well-cut black frock coat, a white silk shirt and foulard tie. He had the fine-boned face of a sensitive man, Lassiter thought—or of a gambler. The eyes were unwavering and blue; the hair was fine and yellow, slightly curled. Lassiter had a hunch this was Phillip Farrel.

He walked toward the poker table and as he neared it, Farrel stood up. He was an inch taller than Lassiter. He smiled without effort, the sort of smile that requires the whole face, crinkling the corners of his eyes.

"You're Farrel?"

"And you're Lassiter." Farrel gestured. "Won't you sit down?"

"I'm not interested in poker."

A hush began to settle over the men close around them. Farrel did not lose his smile. "I have met men before who liked to talk on their feet. I personally prefer to stand when I drink. Will you join me at the bar?"

It was either join him and or remain standing foolishly. Lassiter felt angered. He had arrived in Bearpaw determined, aggressive, but here was a quiet, smiling man who could take the offensive away from you.

Lassiter told the bartender, "Whiskey."

He matched the tilt of Farrel's glass.

"Mr. Lassiter, I know, of course, why you're here in Bearpaw. I knew your brother slightly. Are you sure you're not being hasty?"

"Your daughter tried to give me that same sentiment, Farrel. I'm beginning to wonder why. A letter from Mayor Bemis brought me here. He found the address in my brother's things, I suppose. I understand that my brother was found shot in the alley behind your saloon, Mr. Farrel."

"That's unfortunately correct."

"Care to tell me anything about what happened?"

Farrel looked at Lassiter a moment. "You're not at all like your brother, Mr. Lassiter."

"Don't maverick around the question, Farrel!"

"There's little I can tell you. But why not let the sheriff work on your brother's death?" Farrel put his back to the bar. "It's too bad you have to carry a blood grudge."

"I'm not worried about your opinion, Farrel. I know just two things—I rode into Bearpaw with enough money to pay my horse's keep in the livery a good long while, and I expect to stay until I finish what I came for. My brother was killed behind this saloon. You and your daughter are beginning to act like a pair of worried people. If everything adds up against

you, Farrel, you'd better be as fast with a gun as you are with a deck of cards!"

Farrel stiffened; his cheekbones whitened. Lassiter turned and walked from the saloon.

He located Mayor Bemis half an hour later having dinner in the big dining room of Miss Mary's boarding house. A frilly creature, Miss Mary pointed out the mayor, who was at a small table in the corner alone. Lassiter was disappointed in the man. Bemis was big and gross and had little, shifting eyes, a red nose, and red-veined cheeks. Soup on his chin glistened in the lamplight as Bemis stood up. He shook Lassiter's hand with a grip that was fat and warm.

"So you're Lassiter. Well, sit down, man! Miss Mary puts out the best dinner in town."

Lassiter sat.

"I was beginning to wonder if you got my letter all right," Bemis said. He picked up a piece of chicken, wiped it clean to the bone with one swipe through his mouth.

"What can you tell me about my brother's death?"

"Very little, Lassiter, very little. Personally, I think a certain gent named Phil Farrel did it. Farrel comes from one of the families back in Virginia that was big-dawg before the war. By the time Farrel got grown the family's fortune was plumb gone. Farrel took his so-called gentleman's knack of cards to the Mississippi boats, came out here after his wife died. To make a home for his daughter, he said. Couldn't leave her with hired help while he roamed the river—he's a lace pants. Him and his daughter said they found Harry. Said they heard shots. Well," Bemis shrugged his vast, soft shoulders, "don't reckon you can blame the sheriff any. No witnesses. Just Farrel and that gal."

"Was there anything in my brother's things that might point to—"

"Not a thing, not a thing."

Lassiter toyed with the food the soft-footed Chinese set before him. "I'd like to have my brother's things," he said. "His watch, gun, and that sort of stuff."

"It's down in the sheriff's office. You can get it any time."

"Did he still have the ring at the time of his death? A ring pa gave him a long time ago."

"Ring?" Bemis said.

"You couldn't have missed it," Lassiter said. "A gold ring with diamonds set in the shape of a horseshoe."

Bemis's eyes looked inward, almost as if they had turned their backs on Lassiter.

"You couldn't have buried him with the ring on," Lassiter said. "You would have seen it."

Bemis slammed his open hand on the table. "Maybe that'll do it. Yeah—maybe that'll cut it wide open."

His attitude caused Lassiter to lean over the table. "Mind telling me what you're driving at, Mayor?"

"Later." Bemis lunged to his feet, wiping his short, fat lips with the back of his hand. "If I'm right, you'll know quick. If I'm wrong I don't want to disappoint you. But you stick fairly close to your hotel. I'll get in touch with you tonight or tomorrow."

The rest of the night proved fruitless for Lassiter. He tried to trace Harry's movements on the night of his death. It was impossible. Harry had been but one of many people, a shadow lost in shadows until the violence of his death identified and made him an individual to Bearpaw. Lassiter went to the El Tovar and turned in.

HE SLEPT late the next morning. He'd been too many nights without the comfort of a bed; he'd been too steeped with fatigue. Once he'd gone to sleep, he'd been like a man drugged.

He blinked his eyes against the sun of the new day. He dressed, went downstairs and ordered breakfast in the El Tovar cafe. He'd put away ham, flapjacks and eggs and was finishing coffee when Bemis puffed into the cafe. Bemis paused in the doorway, spotted Lassiter, and came across the room like a big grizzly in a hurry.

Mayor Bemis wiped his face with a bandanna. On the table before Lassiter he dropped a ring.

Lassiter reached out for the ring and looked up at Bemis, his cheekbones tight.

"Would you believe me," Bemis asked, "if I told you I had a man look for that ring and that he found it in Phillip Farrel's office? Might'a been here a lot quicker, but breaking in Farrel's office when he wasn't in was tough."

Lassiter came to his feet.

"He was your brother," the mayor said softly.

Lassiter went out and started down Main street. The sun felt cold on his face. His throat was dry, as if he'd ridden a long time through a cloud of alkali dust. Now that it was here, he didn't like it. He didn't like it at all. Somehow, night had mellowed something in him, and looking back now on his meetings with Phil Farrel and his daughter, it seemed to Lassiter that maybe they were people a man could respect and like. If they weren't murderers. . . .

The Mother Lode was deserted, except for a lone barkeep, at this hour. Lassiter walked through the batwing doors, Bemis trailing him.

"I want to see your boss."

"He just came in," the bartender said. "He's back in his office. I'll tell him."

"We'll attend to that," Bemis cut in.

They walked to the rear of the Mother Lode, and Bemis gestured at a door.

Farrel was behind the desk at the far side of the room. He looked up, saw Bemis and Lassiter, and the expression

that writhed across his face showed he smelled trouble and plenty of it. But after that one fleeting expression, he smiled. He might have been squaring up a heavy poker pot on a Mississippi boat.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

"Are you armed, Farrel?"

"I'm afraid I am."

"Did you kill my brother?"

Farrell didn't speak.

"Do you deny killing him?"

"Lassiter, I haven't any quarrel with you. Why don't we have a drink?"

"I don't think I'm thirsty, Farrel. I tried to walk in here with an open mind—but I think now that Bemis here was telling me the truth about where the ring came from."

"You've convinced him I killed Harry, Bemis?"

"I'm getting convinced mighty fast," Lassiter said. "You're going to have to talk even faster—or fill your hand!"

"Bemis is perhaps a little better at talking than I am. That only leaves me one choice, doesn't it?" Farrel's hand streaked under his coat, toward his armpit. He never had a chance to get the gun from the shoulder holster. Lassiter's own gun was in his hand. He fired. Farrel staggered back. A thin stream of blood flowed down Farrel's cheek where Lassiter's bullet had lightly burned the skin. Farrel stood against the wall, drew a white linen handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed his cheek.

"Looks like you win, Lassiter."

"Not yet—I'm not finished yet—I want to see a gun in your hand!"

Lassiter was sweating, hot and cold. His teeth felt on edge. He jammed his gun back in his holster, watched the gambler, and waited.

A voice behind Lassiter said, "Unbuckle your gunbelt, Mr. Lassiter! And you, mayor, stand back there!"

Lassiter turned slowly. Ethel Farrel was facing him, a heavy Colt in her hands.

"I met the bartender as he was running down the street toward the sheriff's office. I remembered the Colt my father keeps behind the bar."

"Ethel," Farrel said, "you shouldn't mix in this."

"And why shouldn't I!" Her gaze bored into Lassiter's. "You're a hard-headed fool, Jim Lassiter! I told you I was with Harry when he died? I heard him talk. He told me about you—said you'd come. He didn't want you to come. You see he was a killer. Bemis hired him to come here and murder my father. Instead, father killed him."

Her voice died, and Lassiter could hear Bemis' fat, heavy breathing in the stillness. Lassiter looked at Farrel. "This is a hard bite and a big one for me to digest all at once, Farrel."

"There's no hurry," Farrel smiled, "as long as your digestion is good."

Lassiter walked out of the office. His hands were clenched and his throat was knotted. He tried not to think of Harry. He walked blindly against the sun down Main. He reached the livery stable, but there he paused. He didn't turn. He stood weighing the thing in his mind for a long hour; then he spun about and retraced his steps, hurrying back to the Mother Lode.

She was alone in the office when he burst in. She turned from the window to look at him.

"My father's gone to get his cheek dressed," Ethel said. "From what he told Bemis, I think our mayor had better resign."

Lassiter swallowed. "Since the old folks died recently there's not much for me back Las Cruces way. Maybe—there's more of a job I could do here."

She smiled at him, her eyes catching the sunlight and warming him.

"I owe your father a drink," Lassiter said. "When Phil Farrel gets back, I'm buying."

— THE ROAD

Where men trained to kill made a fine and perilous art of saving their comrades' lives!

IN THE fierce fighting of November 1876 when General Ranald S. Mackenzie erased Dull Knife's Cheyenne village on Willow Creek in the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming, the Army's casualties were seven dead and twenty-six wounded. The general ordered Second Lieutenant Homer W. Wheeler of G troop, Fifth Cavalry, to take the bodies to Cantonment Reno for burial and the wounded to the nearest field hospital, a hundred miles away on the Powder River.

The fight had taken place in rough country. This campaign was General Crook's famous winter campaign with a swift, mobile striking force unencumbered by wheeled vehicles. All supplies and equipment was packed on mules. So for his task Wheeler could command neither wagons nor ambulances.

The corpse problem was easy—the dead were lashed aboard mules. But the wounded were something else again. These had to be transported on *travois*. And these, too, the Army did not carry but had to construct on the spot or "borrow" from the Indians.

The borrowing wasn't so simple; in their zeal to avenge the Custer debacle at the Little Big Horn five months before, the troopers had torched all of the one hundred and seventy-five Cheyenne lodges. However, by dint of sedulous hustling and searching, about twenty-five *travois* were recovered. Also salvaged from the holocaust were a number of poles and some buffalo robes. From these the lacking *travois* were constructed.

By the light of the huge fires that the illumination detail kept going; the men labored all night at building the *travois* and strengthening the purloined ones.

A *travois* is simply two lodge poles lashed fast by the thick ends to some sort of harness, one on each side of a pony's rump. The thin ends dragging on the ground act as springs. A buffalo hide strung between the poles supports the load. Travel in a *travois* is a lot more comfortable than having to endure the jolting of an ambulance traversing rough terrain.

By dawn, all was ready. Not expecting Lieutenant Wheeler to keep up with the column, General Mackenzie assigned two troops of the Third Cavalry for protection of Wheeler's train. Besides that, Wheeler had a hundred and twenty-eight men and eight officers to help with the transport.

He assigned four troopers to each *travois*, one to lead the mule, two to ease the *travois* over rough places, and the fourth man to hold the horses.

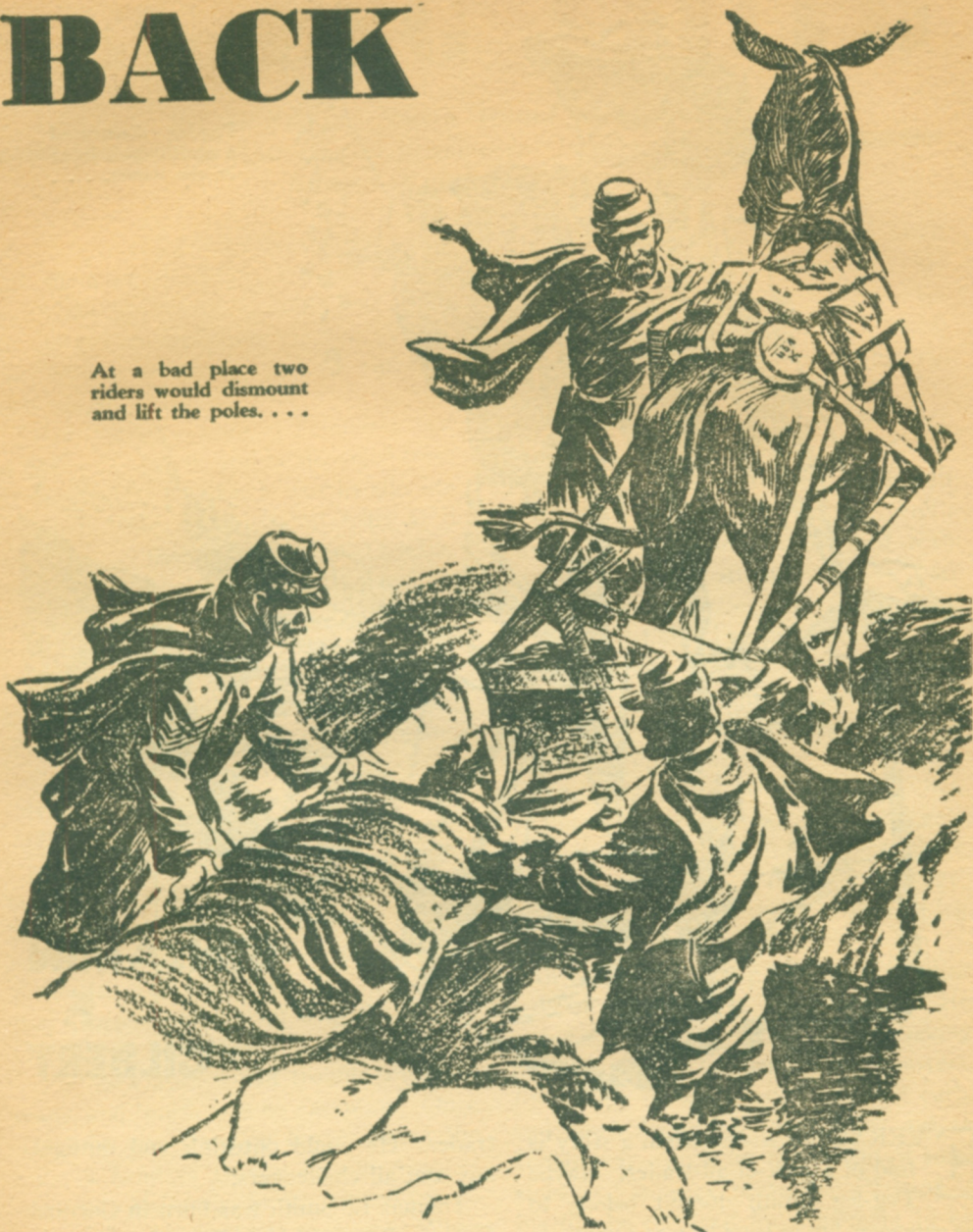
At a bad place, two riders would dismount to lift the poles so that no jar or shock discommoded the wounded. Fording a stream, two packers stationed at the bank would lift the ends of the poles and hand them up to the *travois* men who remained in the saddle. Two packers on the far side lowered the litter again. These men remained there till the whole train had crossed.

At one point a mountain trail proved so narrow and dangerously curved that the

By ROY VANDERGOOT

BACK

At a bad place two riders would dismount and lift the poles. . . .

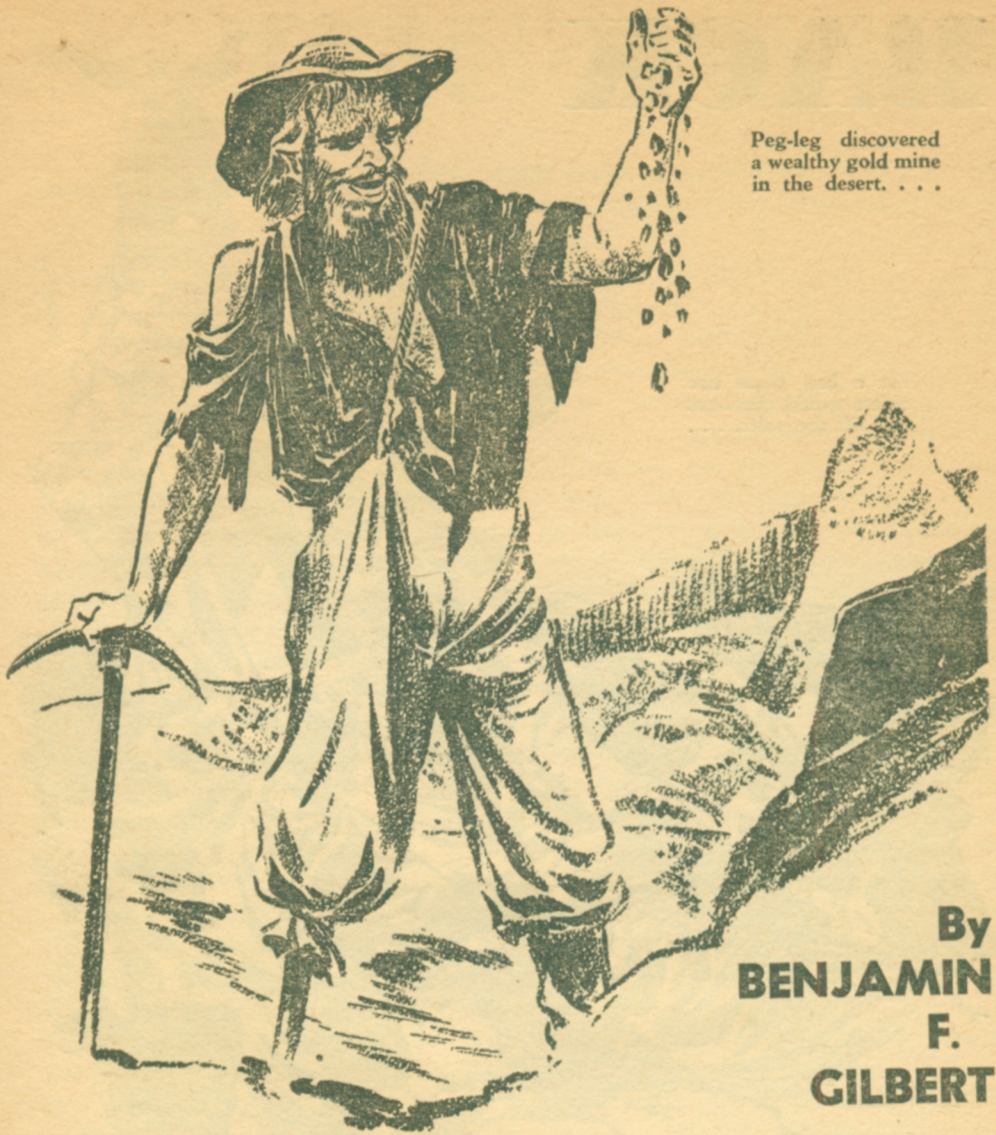


travois couldn't make it. So the litters were lowered down the steep slope by lariats knotted together to form a line two hundred feet long.

In the meantime others led the mules down the trail, and as soon as a *travois* got down, it was again fastened to its mule. Everything went like clockwork

and to General Mackenzie's amazement Wheeler's train kept right up.

Lieutenant Wheeler served in much of the subsequent Indian fighting, was appointed agent at the Darlington Reservation by President Cleveland, served in the Spanish-American War, and retired a full colonel in 1911.



Peg-leg discovered
a wealthy gold mine
in the desert. . . .

By
**BENJAMIN
F.
GILBERT**

EVERYONE smiles when a story is told of a jack-of-all-trades. Maybe Peg-leg Smith doesn't belong to this category, but at least he was a cracker-jack among the mountain men. True he didn't befriend or wrestle with wilderness beasts like James Capen "Grizzly" Adams or cut a galloping trail like Buffalo Bill Cody, but old Peg-leg is unique in himself. Foremost a trapper, his secondary skills were flatboatman, saloon bouncer, Indian fighter, gold prospector, and horse-

trader. He could outdrink and outfight any and all challengers.

Thomas L. Smith was born in Gerrard County, Kentucky, in 1797. As a boy he only acquired a scanty education. He later admitted he gave up learning the alphabet after reaching "K." The rest just seemed too hard. His home life was not the best. Constant lickings seemed to be his lot. On his sixteenth birthday his cruel father gave him a terrific trouncing so the young Smith borrowed a two-bit piece from his

PEG-LEG SMITH

*When Peg-leg Smith found himself with
one foot in the grave—he just cut it off,
buried it and moved on!*

sister's beau and left for Nashville to live with an aunt. Recalling the incident in later years Smith said, "I didn't keer about the old woman walloping me, but the old man and schoolmaster had no right to treat me so blamed bad."

Smith found his aunt in Tennessee just as bad as his father, and he departed from all family ties to seek a worthwhile life elsewhere. He made several trips as a cook on a flatboat to New Orleans. Between trips he worked as a bouncer in the saloons of New Orleans. On one trip a deadly smallpox epidemic broke out in the Crescent City and Smith decided to give up the river life. He returned north and wandered among the Pottowotamie Indians in the Upper Wabash River country. At Grand Council Smith met Antoine Roubidoux, the king of the early trappers and the founder of St. Joe, whose tales of Western lore inflamed young Smith's imagination. In 1820 he accompanied Roubidoux to the Kansas and Nebraska Territory, and for two years they trapped and traded with the Sioux, Osage, Sac, and Fox.

Fur men always had trouble with Indians, and Smith was no exception. Once when he was trapping beaver along the Gila, a band of twenty hostile Apaches came into his camp. Smith feigned friendship and ordered a feast prepared. When the white men and braves sat down to eat, Smith let out a war-whoop and in the ensuing battle the Apaches were slaughtered. Smith later dictated an account of the episode to a reporter in these words: "None of them fellows ever returned home to tell of that event; we fixed them all."

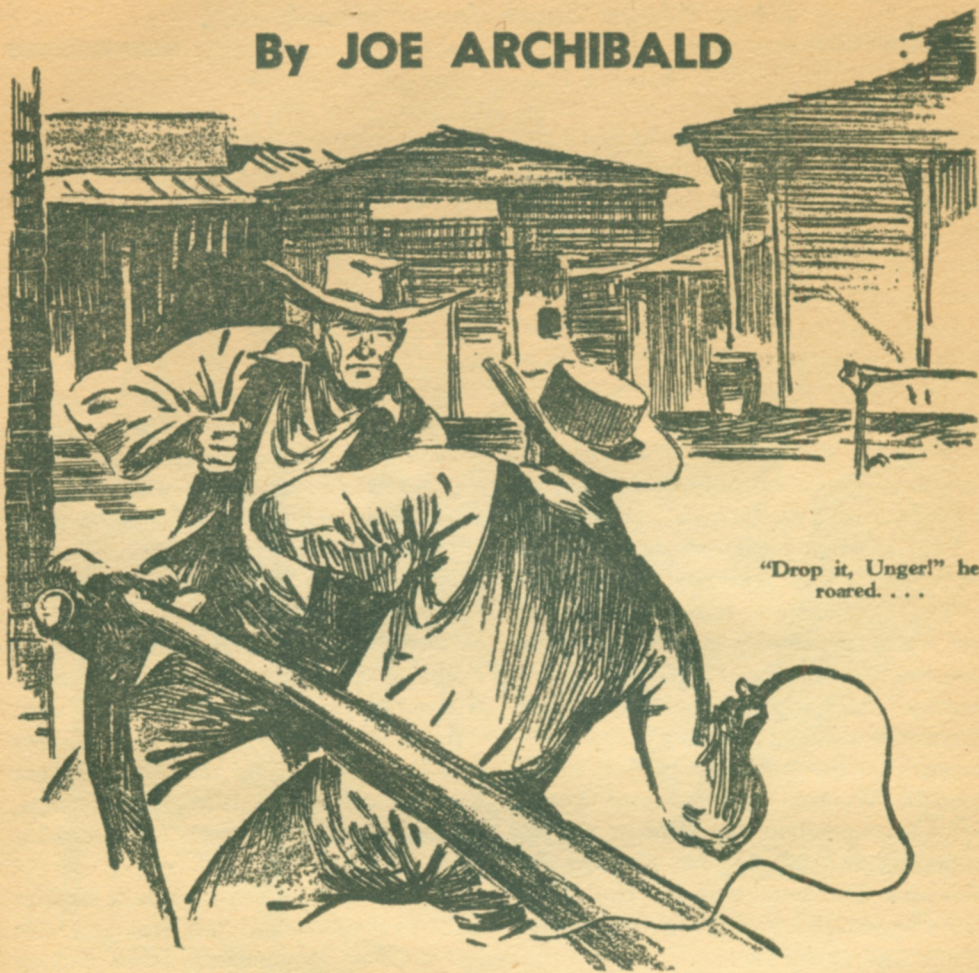
Once when with a party in the Uintah Mountains Smith was shot above the ankle by an Arapahoe. Two bones were fractured and the wound festered. Smith asked his companions to amputate his leg, but they refused so he did it himself. The trappers placed Smith on a crude litter and carried him 150 miles to a Utah village. Here he was nursed back to health by squaws. When spring came, Smith walked from his buffalo-robed bed with the aid of an oak stump which he had whittled out of a sapling. His fellow trappers dubbed him "Peg-leg," and the Indians called him "Wa-ke-to-co," meaning, "the man with one foot."

According to legend Peg-Leg discovered a wealthy gold mine in the desert somewhere between Los Angeles and Yuma, Arizona. He brought solid gold nuggets into Los Angeles, but then forgot where the mine was located. It may seem strange, but the search for the "Lost Peg-leg Mine" still goes on.

In his last days Peg-leg was a familiar sight on the streets of San Francisco. He loafed about Montgomery Street making the "Old Corner" saloon his headquarters. Frequently he would sit on a street curb, and when drunk he would holler out an Indian war-whoop for the benefit of some staid and unwary passerby. Perhaps in his fun he returned for a moment to his earlier trapping days. His habits made him infirm and he spent the remaining years of his life in the San Francisco City Hospital, apparently content with imbibing smuggled whiskey. He died on October 15, 1866, at the age of 69, and the career of one of the most colorful of the Western trappers came to an end.

BULLET CALL

By JOE ARCHIBALD



"Drop it, Unger!" he roared. . . .

"If you aim to wear a bigger man's boots, mister, make sure they don't end up in mid-air—doing a hangtree dance!"

LEE Sutton was in the Farwell barber shop scanning the pages of a back number weekly magazine when he saw the man ride by on the blue roan. He got up and took his hat from a wooden peg on the wall. "I'll be back for the haircut later, Fred," he said.

"You keep your eye peeled on that

jigger, don't you, Lee?" Kiner said, who seldom missed a thing that came into the vista afforded by his one big window. "All we got so far on Kip Unger is hear-say an' you got to have more than that. An hombre can look the part an' still be as innocent as a kitten."

Sutton nodded. "But when you smell

smoke you know there has to be a fire around, Fred. I better look over the town anyway. A lot too quiet." He went outside and watched Unger ride up to the tie-rack in front of Bannemann's and make the roan secure. He was a tall loose-jointed, furtive man. He'd never denied any of the rumors that had followed him to the county, yet at the same time had given no inkling that there was truth in any of them. When Lee Sutton had warily tried to draw him out, he'd said, "*You believe they're true, sheriff. Only you got to prove 'em on me.*"

Unger had been at John Hogue's Bradded H for three months now and during that time he had enjoyed the doubt and suspicion that had been in the minds of the men around him, and thoroughly relished the respect accorded him when in the company of men considered his own stamp. He was rakishly handsome and an unknown quantity and so stirred the interests of the women of Farwell—one in particular had found him the means of antagonizing a man she intended to marry.

Lee Sutton was uneasy, for he had spoken to Art Willig only an hour ago and the puncher from the 88 had been wearing his gun. He was halfway across the wide street when a bay horse at the rack became frightened by a piece of wind-blown paper and the animal, fighting to break loose, hit Unger with its rump and drove him against the blue roan. The man swore and lashed out with a boot, his spurs raking the bay's hind leg and making it squeal with pain. Unger grabbed a quirt from the saddle of the roan and slashed at the bay's head just as the deputy jumped in. "Drop it, Unger," he roared, and drove the puncher against the rail. The man gasped for breath as Sutton jerked the whip out of his hand and flung it into the dirt.

The commotion brought four men out of Bannemann's and one of them was Art Willig. "I saw him use that whip, Sutton.

Keep out of this, you hear?" The 88 puncher's hand, fingers splaying, were close to the handle of his gun. "I've took enough from that jigger and I'm settlin'—"

The deputy went in at Willig and pinned his arms and thrust him toward the other three men. "Take care of him 'fore he gets himself killed!" he ordered and then whirled to face Kip Unger.

Unger staggered away from the rail between the nervously stamping horses, a hand pressed to his side. "We'll forget it for now, Sutton, seein' you nearly crippled me."

"Would rather see you that way than a horse, Unger," the deputy said, and stared the man down. "Go your way and keep out of trouble."

Art Willig said as he watched the man walk away, "It's all right, boys. I've found my head." He looked a little scared, Sutton thought. "But if this keeps up, sheriff—"

Lee Sutton hooked an arm through Willig's and walked him up the street. Near the hotel he stopped. "He'll ride for a fall soon enough, Art. His kind always do. What satisfaction would it be to you if you got some lead in him and if he got enough in you first to kill you? You've got a girl you figure on marrying and what would that do to her?"

"Maybe she'd like it, Sutton," Willig snapped. "She hasn't been keepin' him away."

"Women," Sutton said. "They're the biggest puzzles, Art. They see a man with wild good looks an' don't know what he really is an' what he's done an' where he's been, and they see a fascination in him. Art, a rabbit sees a snake an' knows it should up and run but it stands still an' looks at it because—" He shook his head. "Who knows why?"

"Things have changed too fast," the 88 rider ground out. "Ten years ago there would be a man who'd have to find out

what made Unger tick, just how tough he was. They've about died out."

"And rightfully so, Art. Nothing was ever fully settled with a gun. Men are beginnin' to reason things out," Sutton said.

"I'm not sure," Willig said. "I haven't seen a sheriff reason the Palmas Killer into a jail yet."

"That one hurt, Art." Sutton grinned and shoved the 88 puncher toward the edge of the walk. "She's comin' to town tonight?"

"I'm not sure," Willig said tightly and walked across the street. Sutton watched the man until he went into Bannemann's, the Mecca of all work weary and thirsty men on a Saturday night, then walked toward Haine's Lunch to get a quick cup of hot coffee.

THREE men were coming out of the place and he recognized the short one. Stubby LaDore was foreman for the Half Moon and he was generally grinning and having fun. He said, "Hello, Lee. Hoped I'd run into you. Got two curly wolves with me Sam hired couple of days back. Names of Cantenbein an' Veh. Couple of hell raisers, Lee, so if there's any corpses layin' aroun' t'night when you sweep up the town—"

Sutton grinned, looked the strangers over—run of the mill cowpunchers who surveyed him with interest. Cantenbein had eyes as dark as Unger's but they were calmer. He was a tall man in his clean woolen shirt, levis and half-boots. Sutton wasted little time on the contours of the puncher's face. He was always interested in a man's hands, and he would tell you that was where character was. "Have a time," he said, and went into the restaurant. The unease kept brushing against the deputy's nerves and a big mug of hot black coffee eased it very little.

Sometime later, Sutton, observing the traffic in Farwell, saw a girl in range garb

step down from a buckboard in front of the hotel and she had no sooner stepped up to the planked walk when Kip Unger came from a doorway and tipped his hat. The two talked for a while and then Art Willig angled across the street, stopped for a long moment, then kept coming at a slower pace. Sutton walked that way when Unger put a few feet between himself and Fay Sheddon, and caught Art's brittle greeting, "Three is a crowd, Fay. Which one goes peddlin' his newspapers?"

Not smart, Art. You talk like a wet-eared yearling. Sutton stopped when the girl said something he couldn't quite hear and turned on her heels and stamped angrily along the walk. As she passed he gave her a good evening that was not returned and, grinning, turned and saw Art Willig coming after her. He thought, "I'd use a whip on her," and sauntered along the walk to where Unger stood rolling a smoke.

"You're no good for her kind," the deputy said. "You'll move on at any time, Unger."

"Maybe. Maybe not, sheriff. Maybe I get a big lift workin' over another man's brand," Unger said, and Sutton studied him closely to make sure of an opinion he'd formed the first time he had seen the Bradded H rider.

"You have quite a reputation according to many mouths, Unger," Sutton said easily. "Don't build it up around here. You're hounding a man who isn't sure of himself with a six-gun and that is all that has saved you. Maybe one'll move in who has no doubts about his skill."

"The Palmas Killer, Sutton?"

Lee Sutton turned abruptly and walked up the wooden steps to the hotel porch and from there he could see Unger crossing over to Bannemann's. He wondered if the jigger would have thrown his weight around if this was a night ten years or more ago when men of his breed were the rule rather than the exception.

The first night the man had appeared in Farwell, a drummer had come to the sheriff's office. Fat old Jake Fullam had been the incumbent then, but illness had forced him to quit. The drummer had said, "They tell me he's a puncher by name of Unger but I'm sure that is not his name. I happened to be sitting in that poker game in the hotel in Murtrie Falls when the holdup man jumped us. Lower part of his face was covered but I still keep lookin' at his eyes. He could be the Palmas Killer."

Several days before that robbery, a man of about the same height and build had shot the driver off the seat of the stage, across the line of the adjoining county, near the mining and cowtown of Palmas. Other crimes that had not been solved were placed at the bandit's door, and so built him up to a fearsome stature he must be smiling at himself.

Jake Fullam had said, "There was a day, friend, when I'd go right up to him an' stick a gun in his ribs an' ask him. I'd beat it out of him. Not now." He'd turned to his young deputy. "Lee, I'm quittin' in a week. This headache is yourn."

Sitting there, watching the town, Lee Sutton knew there was no move for him to make. Kip Unger, to all intents and purposes, was just another cowpuncher at the Bradded H and, until he proved himself otherwise, was free to go and come as he pleased. Fay Sheddon walked past with Willig and then got into the Half Moon buckboard, said something short to the puncher, and drove away. Willig stood and watched the rig until it was swallowed up by the shadows at the end of the street, then walked across the street to Bannemann's.

Lee Sutton, the promise of trouble running along his bones, followed Art Willig a few minutes later. Bannemann's was a big place. It had a long bar and a score of tables and was lighted by fancy lamps

that swung from the ceiling. A low stage had been constructed on one side of the room, its backdrop a gaudily painted scene representing an ancient bacchanale. Bannemann, people said, brought entertainers all the way from St. Louis and 'Frisco.

Lee Sutton dropped into a chair not far from the door, let his eyes get used to the smoke haze and tried to ignore the smells. A heavily made up woman had just finished her song and was acknowledging the applause, which shook bottles on the shelves back of the bar. She wore a low-cut full-skirted black velvet dress, and her hair was the color of clover honey and built high on her head. She moved toward the edge of the stage and three men got up to give her a hand. One thrust the others aside and reached up and lifted the woman off the stage and sat her on a table. It was Kip Unger.

Sutton's eyes roved quickly and they picked out Art Willig. The puncher's eyes betrayed the storm in him. His face was as colorless as tallow in the yellowish light, and the deputy knew what Willig was thinking. Unger had his arms around the painted girl's waist and only an hour before he'd taken Fay Sheddon's arm. Sutton knew that the 88 puncher was weighing his chances, and so he got up and walked toward the table where Willig sat with three other men.

Unger's coarse jests and his call for drinks cut through the babble of sound as he touched Willig on the shoulder. "Art, why don't you go out and breathe some fresh air? It would do you good."

Willig snapped, "Get out of here, Sutton. Leave me alone."

"The lawman's right," a man said, and Sutton grinned at Stubby LaDore. Cantenbein sat near the Half Moon's foreman, and he said, "Cuts quite a figure here, the buckaroo." He kept his eyes on Unger.

Art Willig kicked his chair back, got

up and followed the sheriff out. Near the tie-rack he blurted out, "A man has his pride, blast it! Maybe I'm not-fast enough to cut him down, and even if I did, Fay wouldn't look at me again. She said as much. Yet she's impressed by Unger's reputation."

"Women get stirred by certain qualities in a man," Sutton said. "If they see the same tendencies in the man they intend to marry they'll rake 'em out with their spurs."

Willig snapped, "I started packin' a gun too late in life," and loosened his horse from the rack. Sutton made sure the 88 puncher was well on his way before he started back to Bannemann's. Stubby LaDore and Herb Cantenbein and three other punchers were getting up from their tables and Sutton grinned. "Quittin' so soon?" he asked.

"Not if you got a hundred you want to stake us with," Cantenbein said. "Bannemann don't even trust in the Lord."

LaDore said, "You could try Kip Unger, Herb. Is his bankroll without bottom? When you git favors from Dolores you got to show more'n empty pockets."

"Maybe he's lucky at cards," Cantenbein said casually.

"Only once," Sutton said. "If he was the jigger that did hold up that game in Murtrie Falls."

"Heard about it," Cantenbein said. "The unluckiest hombre was the one holdin' the full house, kings an' eights. He got paid off with a bullet through his shoulder."

"Money don't last forever," LaDore said. "The law better keep a close watch on his flock, Herb."

Lee Sutton heard the friendly thrust only abstractedly and let his thoughts drift back to a visit he'd paid the Murtrie Falls sheriff. He'd talked with the man who'd been shot and now he wished he could be positive he hadn't gotten words twisted.

"If the man makes a slip, he'll be doin' Art Willig a favor," Cantenbein said quickly. "That girl of his is mighty sweet an' he'd miss a lot by dyin'."

A short, ungainly man shouldered Sutton roughly, half turned and mumbled his apologies, and seemed in a hurry to get out of Bannemann's. Sutton saw him stop in the middle of the street and look back and was sure the stubbled face broke into a grin.

"What's got into that little jigger?" Cantenbein said behind Sutton, and the sheriff turned slowly. "So you noticed him, too, Herb? Looks like he saw somebody that interested him. A man he knew somewhere before—with a price on his head, maybe."

"If so, Sutton, he'll soon be payin' you a call when the town empties more," Stubby LaDore grinned. "Everybody is gettin' spooky, buildin' things up inside their heads."

I'm finishing out Jake Fullam's term for him, Lee Sutton thought. Jake's way was the best it seems like. His kind never watched a pot boil; they kicked it over when they got impatient.

THE next day broke sultrier than the dozen preceding it, and Sutton stayed inside most of the morning catching up on some paper work, and thought he could hear the shingles over his head crackling in the heat. It was around five in the afternoon when two riders dropped down off the ridge at the south side of Farwell, and Sutton, standing in front of Syme's lumber yard, knew that trouble was moving in.

The horsemen angled toward the sheriff when they got into the town, and one of them was Cantenbein. He cuffed his hat back over his wet hair and sleeved dust and sweat from his face. "Sutton, we found a dead man over by Tabor's Creek, not three miles from here, an' he's been

that way since last night. Name of Jack Narbo, recently hired by the Bradded H."

"I'll saddle up," Sutton said, half expecting something like this. Near the livery stable he heard a child crying and saw the five year old tyke backed up against the side of the express office. A few feet away a dog of doubtful breed tucked its tail between its legs and slunk away. "There now, feller, he wa'n't aimin' t' bite you."

"He was so," the younker said. "They said he bit somebody this mornin'."

"They said, but did he?" Sutton grinned. "Give a dog a bad name—he maybe gits flattered by it." He thought of Kip Unger.

Sutton rode out with the Half Moon punchers, and a half hour later came to a mournfully murmuring creek partly hidden by a fringe of trees backed up against a high mountain wall. A bulky man with a drooping eye came out to meet them. "Glad you got back," he growled. "I ain't been havin' fun." He pointed to a pair of boots protruding from the brush.

The deputy knelt down beside the dead man and was not too surprised to recognize him as the man who had left Bannemann's in a hurry the night before. There was shock in his open and staring eyes, and a six-gun was in his right hand.

"Been here for hours all right," Sutton said dryly. "Stiffness all through him. Name of Narbo, huh? Who can tell?"

"Shot in the head and in the chest," Cantenbein said. "Figure he saw too much las' night an' waited too long t' tell you what it was, sheriff. Some men have t' build up nerve enough. When he had it he doubled back an' met up with a man."

Sutton said, "His gun hasn't been fired. There's dried mud on his left side an' I say he was shot off his horse an' was dead when he hit, yet he still held onto his gun. This is murder. Took a mighty brave man t' kill this little cuss, didn't it?"

Cantenbein said, "This stuff came out of his pockets, Lee," and dumped some stuff wrapped in a soiled handkerchief in the sheriff's hands. Cigarette makings, a crumpled bill and some change, a little notebook with a rotting leather cover.

"Wasn't there a jackknife, too, Herb?" a puncher asked.

Cantenbein's eyes flayed the man who had spoken up. He forced a grin and thrust a hand into his pocket and came up with a knife with a metal handle. He tossed it to Sutton. There were raised letters on the metal handle that said, "Ewart's Hardware. Pera, Montana."

"A cheap knife," Sutton said. "You are easily tempted, Herb." He felt a cold breath at his neck despite the blistering heat. "Somebody get the dead man's horse. We're takin' him in to Farwell."

"Save a lot of time buryin' this range bum here," Herb Cantenbein snapped.

On the way to Farwell, the body firmly secured to a claybank horse, the knife in Sutton's pocket seemed to burn through the lining and scorch his flesh, and he thought of a poker hand, and felt a deep distaste for his job. A man had let his cards fall to the floor when he'd turned and reached for his gun in that hotel room in Murtrie Falls. But Herb Cantenbein knew. . . . The man had the quickest looking pair of hands Sutton had seen for a long time. His eyes were dark and possessed that knack of watching everything around him closely without seeming to do so.

THE deputy was relieved when they dipped down off the ridge and came in sight of the town's parched roofs. Lights were being lit and half a dozen horses lined Bannemann's tie-rack. He rode through an areaway to Ed Traphagen's back door and rapped it with a bootheel. "Cut the body loose," he told the others. "Carry it in."

Traphagen opened the door and peered

out. Sutton said, "Have a body here, Ed. The way you fix 'em, can you keep it a couple of days? I have my reasons."

"Reckon so." He stepped aside and let the punchers pass. "Lay him on the table."

A few minutes later, Sutton walked out of the areaway and into the street, ignoring questions thrust at him by a group of morbid townspeople. Riders were straggling into town, drawn from all directions by news of the killing. Herb Cantenbein followed Sutton to the sheriff's office, and once inside the stuffy room, said, "You got any ideas about this, Lee?"

"An' I'm keepin' them inside my head, Herb," Sutton said. "I wish the hell somebody else wore this badge."

Cantenbein drew his breath in slowly and reached for the makings. "I guess we're all as anxious t' see the end of the Palmas Killer as you are."

Sutton said, "Clear out, Cantenbein. A lot of things I've got t' sift in my mind. I wish you'd come back in about two hours."

The puncher looked at Sutton, his eyes puzzled, "I might do that, Lee."

Sutton reached back in his mind for thoughts he had stored there and remembered things that had been said and things that he'd heard in Farwell. He had made up his mind when Art Willig walked in. The 88 puncher said, "Looks like a certain jigger really knew what the Palmas Killer looked like. But he shouldn't have waited."

"You have any doubts now, Art? I mean your chances?"

Willig's lips tightened. "Then you're sure of the Palmas Killer?"

"I am. Just give me time. But keep this under your hat, savvy?"

Willig nodded, then went out. The time dragged by and the town began to empty, its sounds stretching thin. Cantenbein came into the sheriff's office an hour before midnight and Sutton rammed

a gun in the puncher's ribs and emptied the holster he wore.

"What is this, Sutton?"

"Call it kings an' eights, Herb," the deputy said. "That enough? I talked t' the man held that full house. He said he held eights an' kings. Maybe he got mixed up."

"You got t' prove too much," Cantenbein snapped.

"Got to make a trip to Pera, Herb. I'll know then who Narbo spotted at Bannemann's. "He took the cheap jackknife from his pocket and tossed it ceilingward, caught it when it came down.

Cantenbein eyed the deputy, then let his breath sough out. "All right, it was me Narbo recognized. But you are wrong about the rest."

"We'll see," Sutton said. "I've put an extra blanket on the bunk, Herb. I'll leave a strong guard with you tomorrow."

"There is a price on my head, a small one," Cantenbein admitted, as he walked into the cell room. "It doesn't make my chances worth much."

"That is so, Cantenbein," Sutton said, and slammed a barred door shut.

The people of Farwell had no inkling as to what had happened until three horsemen stopped in front of Sutton's office at nine o'clock the next morning. They wore six-guns and carried Winches. A Bradded H puncher in town to make purchases for his boss became curious and crossed the street. Lee Sutton came out of the frame building and nodded to the riders. "Stable your broncs, boys. Then come back an' I'll swear you in."

"What you got in there so valuable, sheriff? the puncher asked.

"Think I've got Narbo's killer, mister." "Who, Sutton?" The man's cigarette fell from his lips and into the dust.

"Cantenbein," Sutton said. "That's all I can say for the time bein'."

The Bradded H hand swore incredulously. "Then Kip Unger ain't—"

"Ain't what?"

"Nothin', Lee." The tall man hurried away, forgetting the nails and tarpaper he was supposed to buy, and climbed into the buckboard across the street. Questions were thrown at him from the walk and he answered them quickly and then drove out of town in a cloud of dust.

The news spread as swiftly as a prairie fire, and Art Willig came into Sutton's office at noon, his eyes eager. "Cantenbein, huh? You never know, do you Lee? Ought t' have known a certain sheep killin' dog wouldn't go around yappin' if he really had wool in his teeth."

"Red," Sutton snapped at a guard. "Get this jigger's gun. If he's in town an hour from now, lock him up."

"Blast you!" Art Willig roared. "I got some rights."

"Not gun ones you haven't," Sutton ground out. "We might still be wrong an' I'm takin' no chances you'll get yourself killed. Go along, Art."

It wasn't long after the 88 puncher had left Farwell that Sutton caught the deadly undercurrent of sound running along the street. The ominous signs were everywhere and he was beginning to have his doubts. People gathered in small groups and kept their voices low and Sutton knew the tension would pyramid until it reached the breaking point. He crossed over to the express office and stage stop and talked for a while with the agent, Harry Wedell, then went back to the jail and talked with his guards.

"I'm holdin' you responsible for the prisoner," the sheriff said. "You have orders to shoot to kill if a mob comes after him. That clear?"

"He'll be alive an' kickin' when you get back, Lee. We're anxious to see him kickin' at the end of a rope, too."

Sutton went into the cell room and looked in on Cantenbein. The puncher said, "The sounds outside ain't invitin', sheriff. If I don't see you ag'in, thanks

for the hospitality. I'll take that with me.

HOURS later, Sutton came out upon a bench, its long fingerlike mesas reaching out from the mountains. A heat haze stretched visibility thin and he tried vainly to pick out the sinuous course of a stage road below. He spat out the stub of a cigarette irritably and thought he heard a disturbing wash of sound come to him from the direction of Farwell. *It is the chance I had to take,* he thought. *Jake Fullam, if he knew this, would laugh and swear to high Heaven. He wouldn't waste time by too much reasoning.*

This could go wrong. The mob no doubt was already moving toward the Farwell lockup. He built himself a smoke, told him they were the chances he had to take. He convinced himself another man was in as tight a spot as Cantenbein, a man who had lost the protection of a dreaded name and who was reduced to the use of what talents he possessed to preserve his position. *If I have not guessed what is in that man's mind, if I've made the wrong estimate, then I'll turn in my badge.*

He dropped down off the bench and, through scattered clumps of dark pine, to the foothills and found a little used road that came out on the main highway to Palmas about two miles away. *A woman hates a faker worse than do most men,* he assured himself. *Art Willig will need more convincing.* . . . And there was the beautiful woman's preference for men of a certain kind.

Sutton came into the stage road and roughly estimated the time as being close to nine o'clock and the distance approximately seven miles from Farwell. He rode into the hazy shadows alongside the road and listened to the sounds running through the night. He hoped he imagined the faint sounds of gunfire and fought to rid himself of nagging doubt. The

night's heat sucked the vital sap out of him and it fogged his mind.

He heard the drumbeat of hoofs and the rattle of a loose wheel spokes and leaned forward in the saddle. The sounds swept in toward him and were punctured with a woman's laugh. The stage loomed ghostlike out of the mist and rumbled past and he thought miserably, *Now I've reasoned wrong. What will I do with Cantenbein?*

He listened to its rapidly diminishing racket and contemplated a short-cut to Farwell—and then there was a surprised yell a half mile down the road, the frightened snort of a horse. A rifle cracked just ahead of a six-gun's duller explosion and the quick beat of horse's hoofs swept back and over Sutton. He swung his animal into the road and gave it the rein's hard knot and soon tasted the dust from the stage in his mouth. It stung his eyes as he swept the country on either side, and caught the vague outlines of a horse and rider limned against the hazy sky off to the right just before it dipped out of sight behind a brushy knoll.

Sutton drove his horse up the bank and followed the crashing sounds, caught sight of a horseman angling across a meadow, his mount knee-deep in swirling mist. The man appeared to be swaying in his saddle as the deputy bridged the gap, and suddenly twisted around and fired a shot. Sutton felt the burn of it along his thigh as he returned the fire, his aim unhurried. A grunt of pain washed back to him and then horse and rider were swallowed up in the shadows stretching from a string of timber. He got off his horse, crouched low and waited.

A horse came out of the blackness, its saddle empty, and Sutton went forward, nearer to the wall of trees. He thought of Narbo's killing and what was most likely taking place in Farwell and so he should have no compunction about what he had

to do. He saw the shadow in front of him move and dropped low just as the gunfire blossomed in the dark.

A voice tore out, "Don't shoot—I'm not—" and he cut it short with a deliberately aimed shot. The damp ground swallowed up the shadow and Sutton waited.

There was no sound save the nervous nicker of a horse out in the meadow, and Sutton moved forward cautiously until he could make out the motionless heap in the soaked grass. He turned the man over on his back, reached for a match and nicked it to flame with a thumb-nail. The fear and the desperation had not yet gone out of Unger's staring eyes, although he was dead.

"You wanted to be the Palmas Killer," Sutton whispered. "You got your wish. That stage crew was wide awake, Kip, but you wouldn't know about that. Sure, you had t' have a laugh on a sheriff who claimed he'd grabbed the man who really was the curly wolf. You had t' keep on bluffin' an' most likely you had the urge for a long time t' see if you could do somethin' worthy of the man you wanted people to think you was. The wheels inside the heads of some men turn in funny ways." He got up and hurried over into the meadow and got Unger's bronc, and a few minutes later had a second job for Ed Traphagen well on its way to Farwell.

HE TOOK a short cut, praying that the law still held a scare for most men crowding the cowtown, and came out at its western perimeter half an hour later. The sounds he heard fanning out from Farwell were no longer figments of his imagination. It was the chilling roar of kill-crazy human beings and it was punctured sporadically by gunshots. He brought Unger's horse down off the low butte on the run, hoping that the burden it carried would not break

loose. Coming into the main street between two great locust trees, he saw that his guards had held out, and he fired a shot into the air and roared at the surging mob.

Sutton hit it in the middle and a man tried to pull him out of the saddle and he knocked the jigger flat with a vicious kick of his boot and rode on through and up to the porch of the beleaguered frame building. Somebody in the crowd yelled, "He's brought in a dead man! Hold off, y' ranahans!"

The redhead, bleeding from the shoulder and leaning against an upright with a Winch held out in the manner of a Colt, flashed his white teeth. "Good thing you got here. Couldn't have held out much longer, Lee. Hat t' ventilate a couple! What you bring in?"

The armed mob pressed forward and Sutton said to let them come.

"I have the Palmas Killer," the deputy yelled. "Tried t' get the stage. Didn't it get in before me?"

"No sign of it," a man yelled. "Wait, I think I hear it, sheriff."

A man said hoarsely, "It's him, boys. Kip Unger."

Art Willig drove toward the rack and watched two men cut the body loose and roll it off the horse and into the dust, and his face got white in the dim lamp-light. "Had to come back an' stick your nose in, Art?" Sutton snapped. "See what you missed?"

"He was the Palmas Killer!" Willig said unbelievably, and drew his hand across his eyes.

"He never denied it as I remember," Sutton grinned, and watched the stage come in.

The driver yelled, "Nearly got held up. We buckled against a wall an' broke a wheel—had to patch it up the best we could. What's been goin' on here?"

Lee Sutton let the others enlighten the man, and walked inside the jail. He

grinned at Cantenbein. "Seems I made a mistake. I just brought the Palmas Killer in, Herb. Seems Kip Unger went a little stale—out of practice or somethin'."

Cantenbein said, his eyes calming down, "Dead, Lee?"

"How else? Had some bad moments?"

"I won't put 'em down in a diary,"

Cantenbein said emphatically. "You must have figured things down to a mighty fine point."

"Sometime I'll go over it from the beginnin', Herb, but right now I'm plumb sick of it all." He unlocked the cell door and let the Half Moon puncher out. "Can't think what I can hold you on."

Two hours later, the town was quieted down. Cantenbein, in Sutton's chair, said, "Me and my brother Joe had a small outfit up by Pera and were gettin' along good until the big spreads began t' hound us an' steal us blind. We got back at 'em in kind, Lee, but forgot law in some places protects only the big jiggers. They caught Joe workin' on a brand with a length of hot telegraph wire one night. They strung him up."

"Had to expect that," Sutton said.

"I loved that kid. Some men would have got over it quick. Drove me wild, though, an' I lost my head for a while," Cantenbein said. "Never killed a man, Lee—want you t' believe that. Kind of messed up a lawman with my fists an' lit out. A dodger they put out said I was an outlaw an' so I obliged 'em for a while. Narbo knew. Seems Narbo must have run into Unger when he doubled back t' town an' shot off his mouth. Hinted that maybe I was the Palmas Killer an' so signed his death warrant."

"Like I told myself just the other day," Sutton said. "Give a dog a bad name an' he might git to like it. Might even go out an' try to bite somebody." He lifted his arms high and yawned. "Clear out, Herb. I got to catch up on some sleep."

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 6)

and, going down to the gulch, picked up a handful of dry creek sand, placed it in the pan, faced the wind, and whirled it rapidly. The wind blew off the superincumbent dust and left in the bottom of the pan a few flakes of yellow. Prouse, seeing what it was, found it almost unbelievable that gold could be in this soil that burned and smarted, that killed men's souls.

He rushed back to the wagons and showed it to his comrades. The sight of these few flakes of gold excited no desire in the hearts of the immigrants for they reasoned that if gold was in this godforsaken place what must it be like in California? They wanted nothing less than the fabulous land across the Sierras. They urged him to throw it away and he did.

Before the train had scaled the Sierra Summit; outriders approached and informed Orr that the passes were blocked with snow. They could not break through the drifts and locate the divide to California. They must retreat until the snows melted.

Orr gave the order to turn about. He led his party again to Spafford Hall's Station, halting at the very spot where Prouse had discovered the gold. That night while mapping out his chart of the day's progress he named the spot "Gold Canyon."

The next day, having nothing better to do, Orr went prospecting in the gulch where Prouse had discovered the gold. Rapidly up the canyon he worked until, on the first day of June, he reached a point where the opposing banks of the ravine approached so near one another that there was but a narrow defile left between. Through the cut tumbled a creek of clear water so broad that it left no room for a path and Orr was forced to scramble as best he could over gray rocks.

He reached the "gate" and stood leaning against one of the rocky pilasters. He

gazed idly at the water cascading at his feet. At the edge of a diminutive waterfall he noticed a slab of slate with a diagonal crack across its face. What prompted him to action he never knew. He had a feeling that he wanted to sink his knife into the crack and split the slate wide open.

He dropped to one knee, sank his knife into the crack and deep into the earth beneath. There was a sharp, splintering sound as the slate cracked; a corner of it fell away. Water washed away the underlying dirt and disclosed a nugget of gold the size of a hazel nut. Orr thrust in his hand, drew it out, and held it up to the fading light. It was the first nugget he had ever seen.

Orr returned to camp and displayed the nugget before his comrades. They were dumbfounded at his luck. Nevertheless, a few days later when the passes were open, John Orr turned his back on "Gold Canyon" and led his followers through them to California.

When he rode away from "Gold Canyon" he changed the entire history of the Far West for he left behind him a fortune—not in gold, but in silver—for this desolate valley became the sight of the fabulous Comstock Lode.

He was not alone in his stupidity, however, for no less than 60,000 souls passed that very spot before one, Allen Grosch, realized the value of it. Many worked the canyon; some taking as much as \$30,000 worth of dust and nuggets in a single day, but, in the end they journeyed on to California because of that "damned blue stuff" that made the gold so hard to mine. Had they been better geologists they would have realized that that "damned blue stuff" was silver ore.

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 64)

one more decent chore to do. Miss Dailey, I don't suppose he'd tell you, but I will. He's yours. All yours. I never thought I'd say this, but I'd change places with you. He's the first man I ever really wanted, but I didn't have what he wanted." She gave Lydia a scornful glance. "But I'm telling you one thing. If you don't take him, I'll keep trying with everything I have to offer."

Lydia wanted to believe. She looked from one to the other. "But they told me you'd gone to Baxter's cabin—"

"He wouldn't spend five minutes with me," Tess said, "which comes under the head of being a full grown idiot, but if that's what he is, it's what he is. Rourke thought that when he got you out of camp, Lucky would come snorting into the Silver Palace and Boone would cut him down. Didn't work."

She turned to the door and didn't pause when Jornigan asked, "You'll be all right?"

"I've got Phil," she said, "and I'll hang onto him." She reached the door and opened it. "Unless this fine lady doesn't want her man."

"I want him," Lydia said firmly. When the door had closed, she added a little questioningly, "She loves you, Dan. I didn't think a woman like that could love anybody."

"You said something about hanging onto your man," Jornigan said. "Did you mean it?"

"Of course."

He kissed her, this time without restraint, and she answered with the hungry insistence of a woman whose faith is complete. This was solid ground, this was the foundation for the future. He looked down at her then, smiling a little the way a man does when he has all that he wants. Dan Jornigan was holding his luck in his arms.

GUN KING OF DOOM TOWN

(Continued from page 51)

Donkey Harris watched him come down the steps and get into saddle.

Winters swung the roan away from the rail and rode down the empty street. The wagon he had noticed as he entered Perdition had pulled out. He could see it far up the trail ahead of him. The wind pushed against him as he rode, hot as a blast from a furnace, and he ducked his head against the stinging sand. The roan shied away from a rolling tumbleweed.

A quarter of a mile out of town he reined in and looked back. Donkey Harris was still sitting on his box outside his shack. The smoke from his chimney was thinning, fading against the sky.

Winters took a deep breath, feeling like a prisoner who has served his time and now stands outside the prison gates.

A day's ride ahead of him lay Clearfield. He shifted his weight in the Texas saddle and lifted a hand to his beard.

What I need is a shave, he thought solemnly. Can't open up a pharmacy looking like a bum.

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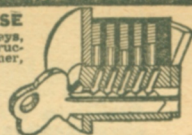
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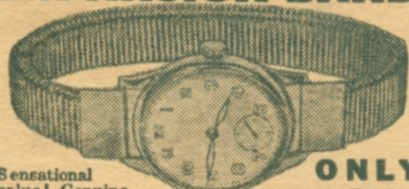
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 84)

on his face and didn't get up. He wouldn't ever get up.

Duke didn't move. It seemed like a long time that he stood there while nervous little ripples ran up and down his back. He heard a door open, a door close, and a cry from a woman. He was looking at Big John now. He was still sprawled there on the floor, his hands still clutched his guns. One of the silver-plated pistols was out of his vest holster now. Just out. And there was a hole in the floor the big .45 slug had gouged. The shot that had made Kramer jump.

Martha Stevens didn't have to be told what had happened. She knew. Maybe women just knew things like that. She was kneeling on the floor now beside Big John, crying softly. Duke slipped his gun back in his holster and knelt beside her. He felt of the big man's neck again. The pulse was still there. It was faint, but it was still there. Then the same eyelid came up again, and the same glassy eye looked up at him, then the lid dropped. It was a wink.

"He's not dead," Duke said. He got up and headed for the door. "And he's not going to die."

She looked up at him then. Her mouth said, "Thank you."

He went around to the front of the house where his horse was. "Boy," he said, "just one more fast ride. One more, and then we'll take it easy."

It was a fast ride. And when the business was over they went out of town the way they had come in it. Slowly. When they came to the big tree in the Y of the dusty roads they stopped. For a while Duke looked at the sign that was still on the ground where he had thrown it. Then he got off the horse, found a rock and nailed the sign back where it had been.

"Big John Waco," he said. But he grinned a little this time when he said it.

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