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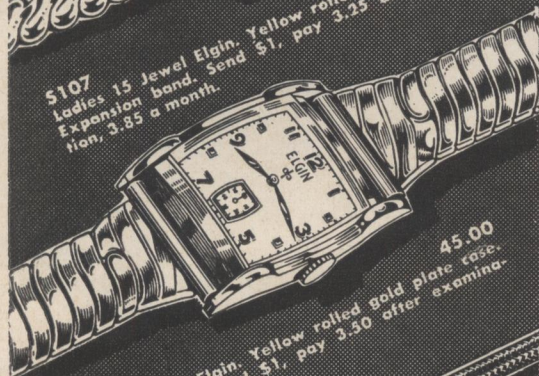
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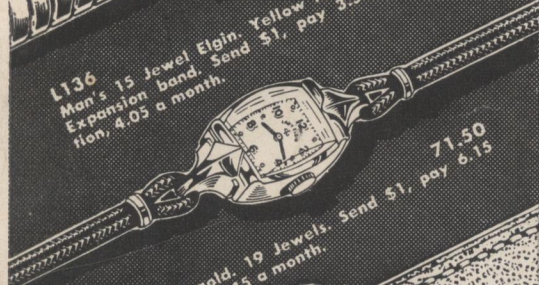
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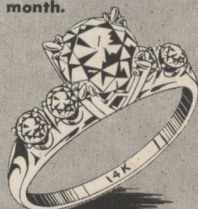
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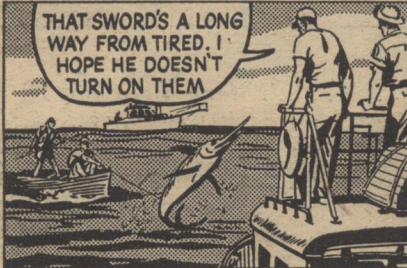
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The ivory-tickler played a gun song—for an owlhooter no law could hang!
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"If you make your own law, mister—make your own grave!"
7. **LAST DRAW FOR THE GALLOWS KID**.....*Talmage Powell* 89
The owlhoot trail ends where you and a faster man meet!
8. **DEAD MAN'S RECKONING**.....*Clint Young* 108
Don't cross the owlhoot or the law—or you'll have to shoot faster than both—or die right sudden!
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"When you bought this valley—you bought plenty of room to die in!"
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"Some men are fast on their feet, some are fast in a fight—and some are first in boothill!"

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By GEORGE BAGBY

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Legend has it that he was frequently attacked by both Indians and wild animals, but had acquired an immunity to violent death from arrows or bullets by a diet of herbs. Devoutly religious, Johnny carried a Bible and tracts, which he distributed in lonely wilderness cabins, frequently tearing a book apart and leaving a section at each cabin and interchanging the sections on his next trip through. Once, in church, Johnny surprised a minister who had just expressed a purely rhetorical desire to meet a Christian traveling to heaven barefoot and wearing sackcloth.

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● ON THE TRAIL ●



WE'RE glad to have you tying up with us at trailside once again, gents. Hunker down and we'll talk things over. Steve Frazee's novel of the wild trail to Santa Fe, *Six Bullets West*, is the master at our December drive, and we'll be waiting to hear whether it's to your liking. We think it's got plenty. Don't be bashful about making yourself heard on the subject.

Since we want to give you as much space as possible to sound off in, let's get right down to this month's correspondence, which, as usual, is a rich vein of Western lore brought in by you readers. We'll start off with this interesting letter from Oklahoma:

Dear Editor:

You may consider this a queer letter. However, I have always been a great believer in the difference between what I call right and wrong. Also I am a great person, when reading an article, for digging what I see in print. To me it seems that, even in a court of law, some defendants are punished more than they deserve if found guilty, while others are not punished enough. This, of course, is due to a slick-tongued lawyer or peace officer, who either wants to crush or protect the defendant, according to the circumstances involved, and

either a bought or dumb jury. Further, I have no respect for the peace officer who merely takes the side of the law because it serves his own purposes better, while in truth he is as much a crook at heart as are the criminals he is hunting. The article in your August issue of *Fifteen Western Tales* about Bill Longley (*Three Times Dead - Ed.*) prompted me to write this letter. According to the article, Bill was executed in 1878. At that time I was just a four-year-old child living in Lincoln, Nebraska. However, as a young man I moved to Fort Worth, where I lived for years. During that time I became acquainted with quite a lot of men who claimed to have known Bill Longley. Every one of them said Bill Longley was hanged at Bellton, county seat of Bell County. While I do not believe in murder, and I suppose he was bad enough, still I feel that he got too big a dose from the law.

Look at the record of Jim Brown, the sheriff who executed Bill Longley. If you search the Chicago police records of 1893, during the first World's Fair there, you will find this same Jim Brown getting himself killed in a battle with the police, when they were attempting to arrest him in connection with some race track racket. He is buried at Fort Worth.

Respectfully yours,
Ben J. Snivly
Sallisaw, Oklahoma

Thanks a lot, Mr. Snivly, for your thought-provoking letter. Sometimes it is hard to draw the line in cases of that kind.

(Continued on page 129)

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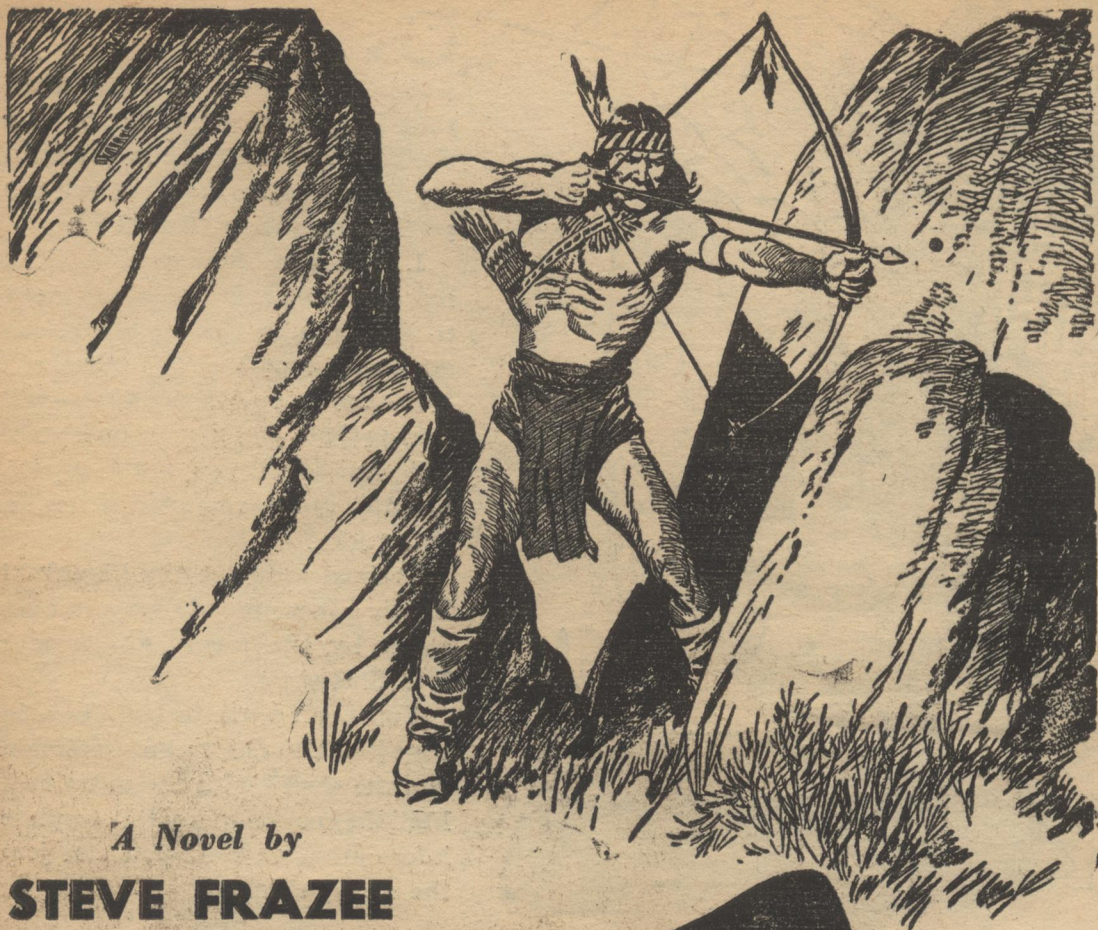
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A Novel by
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Sun Bear pointed the arrow
at Dorricott's chest. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

The Arrow Trail

GABRIEL DORRICOTT twisted in the saddle of his tired black mare to peer through bloodshot eyes over his three fur-laden pack mules at the rolling hills behind him.

Two of the Comanches were in sight. The other three, willing to let their more reckless brethren draw a second range

Hard as gunflame, swift as an arrow, he blazed a hellborn pilgrimage . . . the phantom from the land of scalps and gold who swore he'd shuck his guns six feet under or take—six bullets west!

test of the mountain man's breech-loading Hall rifle, hadn't yet come to the hazed skyline of the last hill. An hour before, there had been seven of them.

Put 'em on the ground alive, Dorricott reasoned. The two whose ponies he had killed miles back would be slogging along far behind, awkward as only dismounted Comanches can be, and sooner or later some of their companions would drop back to pick up their unhorsed brothers, which would increase Gabe Dorricott's chances of reaching St. Louis, some few hundred miles east. Not that he'd had any idea of going there in the first place. . . .

He stopped the mare with a word and the pressure of his knees. The pack mules snaked long necks around to look at the pursuers. When Dorricott raised his rifle, the leading Comanche wheeled off to the right and brought his *grulla* pony to a quick stop.

About three hundred yards, Dorricott estimated. He could put a ball into the pony, or with luck just right he might be able to send the rider splashing into the fall-crisp grass; but there was no hurry yet.

He sighted and pressed the trigger.

The half-inch ball of lead fell fifty yards short. Brandishing a horn bow, the *grulla* rider yelled defiance and rocketed ahead. Just short of where he thought the range lay, he spun off at a right angle and rode back and forth, shouting insults.

None of the five were *coup*-happy youngsters, and they knew they had all the best of it, Dorricott saw. From the pocket of his blackened *parfleche* shirt he took a large, silk-wrapped cartridge, and during the seconds it took to load the piece, the feel of smooth, warm silk reminded him of where he would be now if things hadn't gone so sour.

He primed the gun and snapped the guard over the pan, and then the deep-chested black mare and the mules were trotting once more toward the sprawling

sands of the Arkansas River, about ninety degrees from the direction Dorricott had tried to travel for three weeks.

He watched four riders join the first one, and go into a pow-wow on the hill. To them this was a sport, with time and space to play for hours, but before night they'd get over-eager, be a little too sure about the range of Dorricott's rifle. Then he'd put at least two more of them on foot, which would serve to cause the whole caboodle to lose interest in him.

That should solve his immediate problem, but it was too bad about Taos. . . .

A man went where his stick floated. This year the little pueblo on a warm bench of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains just hadn't been meant for Gabe Dorricott. He'd been coming out of the bitter cold of the central Rockies by way of a great inland valley, within two days of a joyous time in Taos, casks of good wine, peppers by the string, salt that wasn't yellow from age and water, new buckskins, silk for cartridges. A raiding party of young Utes, steaming over a rebuff at the hands of Cheyennes, had forced him eastward over the mountains, not giving a whoop about his having been married—for two winters—to a daughter of the chief of one of their tribes in the Uncompaghre. It wouldn't have happened if they hadn't been so mad because they had left two scalps with the striped-arrow users and were coming back without any Cheyenne hair, but unsuccessful raiding parties had to take it out on somebody.

Dorricott took another look behind at his current troubles. They were coming again, the *grulla* and a pinto in the lead. Dorricott took some time to be sure that the rider of the pinto was armed only with a lance and buffalo-hide shield.

Being forced over the mountains hadn't been too bad, Dorricott reflected. He intended then to travel down the east side of the Sange de Cristos and then recross by one of the passes north of Santa Fe,

but he ran smack into the same band of Cheyennes who had just taken Ute scalps and were now willing to add a bushy black one to the flapping trophies on their lances. They were too eager and confident.

Since he had brief time for strategy, Dorricott killed three of them with a deliberateness that left the rest feeling sullen awe at such ferocity. They would have got him that night, but he led them east and camped on the haunted battlefield where Cuerno Verde and his band of Comanches had been wiped out by a Spanish governor's army thirty years before.

Dorricott had made the dark hideous with death cries in Comanche, and then with ghostly howlings of an evil spirit speaking Cheyenne; and when there rode from the trees at daylight a monstrous, furry figure topped by tremendous horns festooned with bloody scalps, the few striped-arrow users who had braved the night fled down the valley with a fearful legend growing in their minds.

Until he was sure he had scared the daylighters out of his besiegers Dorricott stayed inside the flapping beaver plews, holding on his shoulders cedar antlers that protruded from the stifling mass. At six dollars a hide he was out eighteen bucks for adornment of the tree limbs, not to mention the cut on his chest which had supplied blood for the "scalps."

Three cautious days later, the Spanish peaks gleaming on his flank, he had left the Arkansas and was swinging toward a fortified pass that would lead him over the mountains to his joyous winter in Taos, and then he met four barefooted Mexican riders scouting for horses stolen from a pueblo north of Santa Fe. They had news, foremost of which was the information that two hundred raiding Navajos had crossed the pass and were working eastward.

"You come south around the mountains with us," the Mexicans advised.

"I'm straight for Taos," Dorricott said. There might be about twenty Navajos, he thought, and probably they were already slipping back across the Sangre de Cristo range.

The Mexicans put liquid, questing eyes upon the fur packs, and then they had another careful look at the owner, observing how carelessly he held his rifle, and, like Indian women, studying the expression of his eyes. They bade him God's protection in his madness, used the silver-spurs on their calloused heels and rode south on the desolate sweep.

To give the Navajos a chance to get back where they belonged, Dorricott camped for two days, and then he went toward the pass, where two years before he and seventy traders and trappers disguised as Indians had given the Spanish fort rough treatment.

He found the Navajos several hours before they discovered him. He tried to flank them and go north to another pass, but the decorated young men were alert and eager. They tried to get him, but succeeded only in driving him toward the plains. After a two-day running fight he decided in disgust that his stick must be floating toward St. Louis after all.

HE DID have a few days of peace before the seven Comanches took over. Indians sure did run in streaks. There had been times when he'd gone for years without half the trouble of the last few weeks.

He looked again at his pursuers.

The leaders had crept inside the two hundred and fifty yards they considered safe, which was a bad sign, considering they thought they had a cinch anyway. Scanning the country ahead, Dorricott read the answer in the gray blobs of smoke on a sandy dome a mile away.

Enemies . . . river . . . the signal said. In this year of 1821, when even the most hopeful had given up trying to reap lush

trade dollars in Santa Fe, the enemies would be another group of Indians, perhaps Cheyennes or the Arapaho.

Whatever they were, those behind wanted no outside help with their work. Dorricott put the mare into a gallop. The faster the chase, the more excited and careless the Comanches would become, and the more chance there would be to play one group against the other.

Gabe Dorricott had seldom seen the time when he figured he couldn't get out with his life—but the mules bore four thousand in furs, the fruits of wading icy streams waist-deep, of sleeping in wet buckskins, of wolfing it when ice was edging toward the middle of beaver ponds, of fighting dangers all alone, of starving two winters in smoky Ute teepees.

He hadn't caught all the signal. "On the river" might mean anywhere within miles along the sands, where cottonwoods almost hid the gleam of water. He swung around to threaten with his rifle, but going as he was he knew any shot would be a waste of powder, and so did the Comanches, who were closing in now, worked up by the thought of losing prey to enemies. No longer hesitating, the three who had held back now skimmed wide to the right to crowd Dorricott toward the dome from which the signal had risen.

The black mare and the mules chopped a trail through whispering grass and plunged over the last hill on a long slope to the river. And then Dorricott saw the wagon.

It stood on the north bank, a great blue ark drawn by ten or twelve oxen. A rider on a gleaming chestnut flagged out from a group near the wagon, waved his rifle and shouted. Dorricott whooped an answer, but he had no intention of trying the shallow river until he took care of other matters, disliking the possibility of being bogged down in tricky sand while the two nearest Comanches arrived to work him over from the water up.

Near the bottom of the slope he cast off the lead rope and brought the mare to a sliding halt. The mules shot past without urging. They would test the crossing better than a man with a stick.

Gabe Dorricott was composed of what had happened to him in thirty years; during the last ten in the mountains much had happened to him, and he was still whole, scarred but sound. So now he waited calmly for the two Comanches to come over the hill, while one quick glance told him that the mules were feeling their way into the river, drinking as they went.

The first rider shot over the crest. Oddly, it was the pinto rider, the lance-bearer. Dorricott let him come and waited for the other, who appeared seconds later. Both saw the wagon, but neither hesitated. Heads close to the manes of their ponies, they came boiling down the slope.

Trembling from near exhaustion, the black mare tried to hold steady when the rifle came up. *Try for a rider, miss, and be in the stew*, Dorricott thought grimly. Pressed between his little finger and palm, a cartridge waited for the second shot.

High in the narrow chest he shot the racing *grulla* pony of the bow-and-arrow man. It went down so quickly he knew the ball must have carried back into the spine. The rider rolled for twenty feet as arrows from a bear hide quiver spilled in the grass.

Seconds were plenty for reloading and priming if a man didn't try to hurry. When the Hall came up again, the pinto rider was so close, upright now, poising his lance, that Dorricott could read the war marks on his broad features.

The ball knocked the Comanche over the rump of his horse, pinned him in the air an instant while his lance fell from one hand. The rawhide war rope looped around the wrist of his shield arm drew tight as the horse went on.

Dorricott bellowed a victorious "Weigh-ee!" and whirled the mare

toward the river. From the first cottonwoods on his right, the whisper of an arrow passed inches in front of his chest, and he knew that he had too long overlooked the three Comanches who had swung right. With a hideous *plop*, an arrow drove into the neck of the mare. Dorricott barely had time to kick free, and then he was falling end-over-end in mud and sand at the edge of the river.

He heard a Comanche yell exultantly. A heavy rifle boomed. Hoofs splashed close as he came to his knees, half blinded, groping for his rifle. He found it. The barrel was choked with mud. Like a grizzly lunging from a trout stream, he came up with his dag free of his belt. No ordinary tomahawk, the dag was a short-handled axe, balanced for throwing, heavy enough to cleave the bones of buffalo or elk.

Dorricott read the picture quickly and saw that he was completely out of it. A

Comanche, probably the one who had killed the mare, had burst from the cottonwoods, but he was down now, clinging to the war rope of his pony, half crawling, half dragged by the animal.

A man on a chestnut horse, clubbing a rifle in both hands, bouncing in the saddle, was riding straight at a lance-bearing Comanche, who was just leaping on a pinto. Dorricott felt a tug of admiration for the second Indian, for it was the one he had spilled from the *grulla* a few seconds before, and now, after rolling down the sandy hill, the Comanche had retrieved his dead companion's lance and pony.

As if made of the same flesh, the pinto and its rider wheeled to face the chestnut, the movement contrasting vividly with the awkward riding of the white man. In a vicious thrust, the lance went out. Instinctively the chestnut veered, throwing its head high. Leaning out, almost unseated, the rider swung his rifle in a sweep

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that knocked the lance aside and carried through to batter the Comanche from his pony with an explosive grunt. He lost his war rope as he fell.

Like a wild man, the rider of the chestnut looked around for other foes. For an instant, Dorricott thought he was going to charge the Indians in the cottonwoods.

"Back to the wagon!" Dorricott yelled, and started.

He caught a stirrup when the chestnut came churning by and slapped water with the horse until they gained the north bank, where Dorricott's mules were already making themselves at home by trying to kick the heavy wooden yokes from the oxen.

It occurred to Dorricott that no shot had come from the five men standing near the wagon.

He recognized a red-bearded giant cradling a heavy Pennsylvania rifle. Gervais Levassor, half French, half Irish, a sometime trapper, mostly trader, who had worked all along the eastern toes of the Rockies. Levassor once had wintered with mountain men in Taos, where his over-ready lust and brutality had been too much even for that boisterous pueblo, where morals were of little concern to anyone except the over-worked bishop in Santa Fe, who had already inherited a mountain of toil and sorrow in keeping virtue breathing in his own ancient but lively city.

Dorricott remembered Levassor best from the attack on the Spanish fort north of Sangre de Cristo Pass. The trader glanced at the rolling hills. A lone rider was scooting down from the dome where the signal had been. "How many?" Levassor asked.

"A handful," Dorricott said. "They'll be on their way now."

Levassor's slaty eyes were busy. "There's two that won't go any farther," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Hold Your Gun!

ACROSS the river, the wounded Indian shot by Dorricott's rescuer had made the trees. The other live one, twice unhorsed, had recovered from the second spill and was staggering awkwardly toward the trees, burdened with the one Comanche Dorricott had killed. *A tough one, by Ned!* Dorricott thought. For a Comanche, the man was extraordinarily tall and slender, the trapper observed.

Carelessly, one of Dorricott's smoke-tanned paws clamped the barrel of Levassor's rifle and forced it up an instant before the trader shot. "I got a gutful of that stuff when we mauled the Spanish fort," the mountain man said.

The Comanche turned his head to look. A little later, when the Indian was safe in the trees, Dorricott gave a bellow of applause in Comanche. The rider of the chestnut whooped a cheer in Spanish. Levassor said nothing. He was busy reloading his rifle. Then there was a flash of ponies in the gray tangle of cottonwoods, and the Comanches were gone to score their losses and make their excuses to each other, like any fighters who have lost.

Levassor's laugh was soft for a man so large. "No trapping in Comanche country, Gabe. Why'd you let him go?"

Beyond a code the trader could never understand, there lay the thought in Dorricott's mind that his gesture might be remembered if someday his luck ran clear out against the Comanches. If captured, he might be given the quick death of an unafraid warrior who had fought honestly and saluted bravery.

His same practical foresight had not let him overlook the jet of hellfire in Levassor's eyes when the rifle was forced up. Levassor would never forget that. Dor-

ricott looked at the four buckskin figures behind the trader, men who bore the deep marks of dangerous experiences forgotten, the hard inquisitiveness of men who knew their way west of Old Muddy. They studied him quietly.

"Santa Fe?" Dorricott asked.

The four said nothing. Levassor nodded.

Dorricott raked sand from his whiskers. "Your outfit?" he asked the trader.

"Mine." The man on the chestnut was dismounting.

For the first time, Dorricott took a good look at his rescuer, a clean-shaven youngster whose eyes and brows were strangely dark in contrast to curly blond hair. The face had met much weather, for it was deeply bronzed; the eyes had lifted to far horizons, and yet the youth lacked the indefinable marks of a plainsman or mountaineer. Maybe it was his soft woolen clothing, Dorricott thought, but wherever he had come from, a man was what he did, not looked.

"I'm obliged." Dorricott twisted his beard toward the river.

The blond lad thrust out his hand. "Bill Donnohue," he said. He had an honest grip.

So did the four others he introduced, but none of them had gone toward the river. Levassor was smiling now from the depths of his great red beard. "I reckon we owe you thanks, Gabe, for discouraging that bunch, but at first we thought you were bringing the whole Comanche nation in on us."

So they had leaned on their guns at the wagon and done nothing, Dorricott thought. He said, "I'll take out my thanks by going back toward Taos with you."

"Good!" Donnohue smiled. "Where's Taos?"

"North of Santa Fe," Levassor said, frowning with his eyes as he glanced at Dorricott's mules. "You're welcome, of course, but—" he made a dubious lip

that was all French—"you won't get no eight dollars a plew in Taos like you would in Franklin or St. Louis."

"My stick floats toward Taos—at last." Dorricott watched the silent wagon guard sizing up his packs, and noted that there were fourteen big California mules with the wagon. "Turning south to the Cimarron Desert?" he asked Levassor.

"No." The trader shook his red beard, not meeting Dorricott's eyes, and then he turned to the frontiersmen. "We'll camp here, boys!" he shouted.

"Levassor knows a pass," Donnohue said.

Dorricott knew them all, passes Levassor would never see, but this blue monster with its eight-inch tires, wheels high as a man, and heavy oaken planks, would never cross the mountains, not even the low, rocky pass that led to the base of the Sangre de Cristos by way of a miserable little pueblo near the headwaters of the Purgatoire.

Something with this party was quite wrong.

Gabe Dorricott cleaned his rifle carefully. He took care of his mules and went over to retrieve the saddle from the mare. Looking at her for a few moments, he regretted the escape of any Indian he could have killed, but in the end, which, in rare moments of introspective thinking, he allowed might be the next hour or day, he knew that he would be able to look back with no regret.

He was chopping into the *grulla* pony with his dag when Donnohue waded across and stared questioningly.

"I like to see what my bullets do," Dorricott explained. From such bloody work on grizzlies, elk and buffalo he held knowledge that had kept him on the right side of the fine line between life and death, and he was still learning.

Donnohue watched in silence while Dorricott cut and explored and recovered the misshapen bullet, which had

ranged from the base of the pony's throat back and upward to the loin. Sufficient for a light animal, Dorricott considered, but not very good. His powder, dirty when he'd got it two years before from a trader on the Rosebud, must be losing strength, and galena lead bullets didn't hold together as well as they should. Maybe if a man mixed another metal. . . .

"You might as well have said Levassor was lying about a pass for the wagon," Donnohue said suddenly.

Jerked away from an absorbing line of thought, Dorricott blinked and gave Donnohue a sharp look, reappraising the keenness of the dark eyes. Indian-like, he didn't answer quickly. He looked across the river. Two men were riding out to scout. One was watering animals and another was busy at the wagon. Levassor was leaning against a wheel, his red beard gleaming in the sunset.

"You got fourteen mules," the mountain man said.

Donnohue shook his head. "That wasn't the idea. Levassor said he knew a route we could get through."

Dorricott walked to the water and began to scour his hands with sand. "You should have taken that land barge southwest from the Caches to the Cimarron." He hesitated. "Another thing—what makes you think you won't lose your goods and be dumped in *carcel* the minute the Spanish cavalry see you?" He pointed at the water. "We're standing in Spanish territory right now, not that they haven't been known to gobble up Americans a hundred miles inside our own boundary."

Donnohue shrugged. "Someday they're going to be glad to see American goods. Who knows exactly when without trying? We might be lucky."

"What's your stock?"

"A little hardware. Mainly cloth. In all, at Franklin prices, we've got twenty thousand dollars worth of goods in the wagon."

Dorricott's blood began to stir. In Santa Fe, where good cloth was worth twenty dollars a yard, the wagon load of merchandise would stand well over a hundred thousand dollars. He wondered exactly how much Levassor and Donnohue knew about the northern province and the chances of exchanging goods for large, soft Mexican dollars.

"You and Levassor splitting up the middle?" he asked.

"Levassor gets ten per cent of the sale value for the trip."

Dorricott grunted like a startled Indian. "How'd you fall in with him?"

"He was recommended by merchants in St. Louis." Donnohue's eyes were expressionless. "The wagon guard is his, hired by him, to be paid by him."

THE trail to Taos was getting longer all the time, Dorricott thought. He couldn't abandon a man who had ridden out to save his life. "American traders aren't welcome in Santa Fe," he said. He searched Donnohue's bronzed face. "Twenty thousand is a lot to give the Spanish governor, not to mention a few years in some filthy jail."

Donnohue shrugged with his whole upper body. "In trade, you take chances. I did for years, smuggling goods to the Mexican coast." He looked across the Arkansas at Levassor. "You take long chances—and sometimes you win big stakes."

Looking at Levassor, Dorricott said, "And just once you get your throat cut somewhere this side of the mountains."

Donnohue nodded. "Before you came, I would have said that was so, but now. . . ." He studied Dorricott.

The trapper rubbed his hands on the sleeves of his buckskin shirt. "Now there's two throats to cut before your goods go into Santa Fe under new ownership, since I'm a business partner."

"So?" The younger man's eyes gleamed

like black marbles in a cup of milk.

"You just cut me in for four thousand dollars worth of interest in the goods for my furs, didn't you?"

The dark eyes made fresh appraisal of the big, black-bearded man. "The last time I had to deal fast was when my goods were ashore on the Mexican coast and a Spanish man-o-war was nosing around a few miles away. I had to take mules instead of gold." Donnohue smiled. "It made little difference, however. The Spaniard ran me aground an hour later and blew the ship apart." His white teeth flashed. "It's done. You're a partner. You'll make a good companion when we're feeding rats in the dungeon under the governor's palace in Santa Fe."

"Uh-huh," Dorricott said. "How'd you know about that dungeon?"

"There's one under every Spanish building, isn't there?"

Dorricott nodded absently. A Spanish jail was the least of his worries. He was thinking of fandangos, of warm-eyed women in flimsy *camisas*, of casks of good wine, of days and nights when the air tingled with liquid music flowing, and of the other delights that would have to wait in Taos while he played at being a merchant.

First Indians, and now white men wouldn't let his stick float where he wanted it to go.

Big white teeth shone in Levassor's red beard when he heard the news of the deal. He looked like the happiest man in the world, but Dorricott had seen the same expression when the trader was using the advantage of bad whiskey to unload soft axe heads, lead-patched cooking pots and cheap hawk bells on Sioux Indians.

Dorricott was Indian-sure of Levassor's heart, and, like an Indian, he considered the sensible plan: challenge Levassor and kill him on the spot. That was merely common sense, but here on the

great sweep of rolling land, with law still a century away, something in Gabe Dorricott held out for proof before action.

Prairie darkness came thick and hard and cold. Sleeping among his picketed mules, Dorricott rested well but lightly, dag and rifle close at hand. The actions of the animals roused him fully each time the guards changed. For years he'd slept like that, conditioned to the noises and sensations of the night; only in an Indian lodge in deep winter had he ever felt complete security.

He was wide awake, the dag gripped for a quick blow or spinning heave, when Job Utley, the guard he was to relieve, came to wake him. The man worked past the mules slowly, cursing when one snapped viciously at him and another sucked air and kicked with both feet. Some distance away from Dorricott, the guard paused to call his name softly before coming closer. Dorricott feigned sleep until Utley was close enough to prod him with his rifle butt.

The man was smart, Dorricott thought, or perhaps he and the others had not been taken fully into Levassor's plan. He strapped on his belt and stuffed his bushy hair inside a fur cap and was fully dressed.

"Quiet as the grave," Utley said. "The next time I have to roust you up, I'm throwing rocks from fifty feet away. I'd liefer steal a Comanche woman from her pappy's lodge than come amongst your damned mules again at night."

Utley's face was only a blur, but Dorricott could picture its wrinkled eyes, brown beard and the nose that turned up so the nostril holes were always visible.

"How much is Levassor paying you boys?" Dorricott asked.

"A thousand apiece in Santa Fe."

"Quite a pile, ain't it?"

"Uh-huh," Utley said carefully.

"What if you get paid off by being dropped out of sight in a Spanish jail?"

Utley was silent for a while. "How's that?"

"Four thousand is a lot of money to pay when there's no longer any need. Supposing Donnohue and me were killed by Indians, say, before we get to Santa Fe—"

"It could happen," Utley said.

"It won't, but say it did, and the rest of you were lucky enough to do business with the Spaniards—do you think Levasor would pay four thousand, when half of that would be enough to bribe somebody into tossing four men into jail, where they never would be able to tell what happened to the real owners of the goods?"

Out on the prairie, a coyote howled for something lost before the beginning of time. Across the river, wolves were snarling over the carcasses of the horses.

"I don't figure on no Spanish clink," Utley said uneasily.

"All right," Dorricott said softly. "You and the others get paid off as agreed. The streets of Santa Fe are dark and narrow. The clink of money and a little wine will hire sharp knives, and word will someday go back to the Big River that you and the others insulted Spanish women or caused some other trouble."

The tiny sound of Utley licking his lips came to Dorricott. For a short time there was no sound in the cold prairie night, and then the feasting wolves were snarling again.

"Like Donnohue—and now me—you four were never meant to go back to St. Louis, Utley," Dorricott said. "You must have guessed part of it by now, if you didn't know at the start."

"We can read sign," Utley said, "but how do we know what Donnohue will do? He's a Creole. From what we heard of him, he works right along with the Spanish, damn near like he was one of them. His name ain't Donnohue by a long shot." Utley spat and shook his head. "Right

from the start, this whole trip has had a man wondering which way to jump."

Dorricott tapped his dag lightly against his rifle barrel. "Don't jump the wrong way, Utley," he said easily. "Get your money, and live to go back to St. Louis."

CHAPTER THREE

Sun Bear Rides

PACING soundlessly around the silent camp, an hour later, Dorricott stopped quickly when the snarling of the wolves across the river ended. It wasn't close enough to dawn for them to have left of their own accord. He waited for several minutes, and was sure the wolves had slipped away.

He went back to his own mules. One of them had its ears pointed across the river, but was not unduly alarmed, as it would have been if it had caught Indian scent. Dorricott was not satisfied. He squatted at the edge of the river, peering along the sullen blackness of the water. No sound of the current gurgling against some stealthily moving obstruction came to him. Far out on the prairie, a wolf howled and momentarily stilled the yapping of coyotes.

Still uneasy, he made a wide circle of the camp. Once more he checked the animals and saw that they were not alarmed.

He was standing beside a California mule when the first dim grayness began to crack the night. He heard the rustle of grass twenty feet away, where there were no mules. Just as he crouched to look along the ground, he heard the thump of a bowstring, and an arrow made a solid chunking sound against the shoulder of the mule.

The Hall rifle split night and sleep wide-open just as the wounded mule lunged and knocked Dorricott shoulder-first to the ground. He saw a dim shape

running, and heard the whisper of dry grass against legs—and then the hurried thumps of men leaping from their beds near the wagon. There were no startled outcries to furnish attackers with sound targets. Two men came out of the night to Dorricott—Utley and young Donnohue. They asked no questions, but stood ready with their rifles.

"One man," Dorricott said. Except for the wounded mule lunging on its picket rope, the night was quiet. "Where's the rest of our bunch?"

"Three at the wagon," Utley said. "Levassor and one man went toward the river."

Dorricott went to his own mules, his companions following. Few Indians cared for night fighting. Comanches would have gone for the horses first of all. But the night was quiet, and the mules were looking toward the river. The mountain man left Donnohue and Utley with the animals and made a quiet circle of the camp. Levassor and a wagon guard named Uriah Frink were crouched at the river bank.

"Anybody try the river?" Dorricott asked.

"No," Levassor answered. "You're sure you saw something to shoot at?"

Dorricott took the insult evenly.

"There's an arrow in one of the California mules."

Levassor's big laugh rolled across the dark water. "Probably your old friend, the Comanche."

"Maybe," Dorricott thought of the bow and quiver of arrows that had tumbled in the grass across the stream. He knelt beside Levassor, feeling the man's trousers below the knees. The buckskin was dry.

At dawn they roped and threw the wounded mule and cut a Comanche arrow from its shoulder. Dorricott went across the river. The bearhide quiver, bow and arrows were gone from the slope where he had seen them spill when he killed the *grulla*. Donnohue asked a question with his eyes when Dorricott returned to camp.

"Grass slopes don't leave clear footprints." The mountain man shrugged. "Somebody got the bow and arrows." He went to unpicket his mules, and Donnohue walked with him. The others paid them no attention, except Uriah Frink. He scratched his chest through dirty buckskin, then rubbed his grizzled chin, and looked uneasy.

"Just once, it would be nice to feel safe with your own crew." Donnohue laughed. "But I never have on any voyage I've made."

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"I know nothing of the sea," Dorricott said. "But I wouldn't want a man like Levassor on any trip."

"We can kill him now," Donnohue suggested simply.

"Would you, on a ship—if you had no more evidence than we have that he intends to be the master and owner of the whole shebang?"

"Perhaps." Donnohue shrugged. "But no, I usually waited until I was quite sure."

Dorricott grinned. "My throat is as tough as yours."

They rode together far out on the right flank as the wagon rolled toward the mountains. On the second day, Levassor came in from the left flank at noon, and said, "I saw your Comanche brother. He's trailing wide and staying with us."

"Is that a fact?" Dorricott also had seen a rider on a pinto far to the south, only moments before Donnohue's keen eyes had picked him up.

"It's your chum," Levassor said savagely. "I'd know that thin-shanked brute in hell. He's up to something."

No doubt, Dorricott thought. That skinny Indian was a tough-fibered lad for certain. He hadn't slunk back to camp with the others, to endure the scorn of failure in the sport of war. He wanted a scalp or two and some horses to wipe out the bitterness of defeat. Dorricott waited for Levassor to say the obvious about the night attack, but the trader filled his red beard with buffalo meat and chewed. Smart, the mountain man thought. Levassor was letting him make his own conclusion.

"This pass you know of, Levassor—where is it?" Dorricott asked.

"Through the Ratons." Levassor looked surprised.

"No wagon will go through there."

The trader gestured the thought away with a piece of meat. "Maybe no wagon has, but it's worth a try. If we don't make

it, we can always go on with the goods on mules." He looked at Donnohue. "Gabe's told you we should have gone the other route. He's never been on the Cimarron Desert."

"That's right," the mountain man said.

Levassor gulped a bite and raked between two teeth with a huge fingernail. "Days without water. Sand. Drinking oxen blood. When you decide to shift your load to pack mules, they're too weak to carry themselves. You leave everything and try to get out on foot. And the Indians are waiting to pick you up if you make it." He shook his head. "I'll stick to the north trail, Gabe. Even if we have to leave the wagon, it won't run off, and it won't be in the middle of a desert."

He was logical, Dorricott thought; so logical that he could be trusted as far as a sick papoose could throw a bull buffalo by the ears.

Dorricott slept lightly each night, surrounded by his mules. Donnohue should be safe for a while, possibly because Levassor hadn't tightend his plans to the point of action—and now had two men to contend with. Then too, perhaps Levassor figured that if Spanish cavalry snapped them up, the Creole, as the owner of the goods, would have to take the worst punishment for trying to get rich in forbidden land, while Levassor would say he was merely a guide. So Dorricott reasoned, and he wondered what Job Utey had told the other guards. Only Frink had seemed uneasy or unduly watchful as a coil of tension wrapped the camp each night. Maybe it would be well to sound out the other guards, but maybe, Dorricott considered, he had talked too much to Utey already.

It was a mess. Indians sometimes were bothersome, but the woes of a merchant were very bad, and the bright, warm days in Taos were passing, one by one.

Out of blue haze, the mountains loomed like distant smoke, and then the peaks

sprang, white and gleaming. The blue wagon left the Arkansas and turned southwest, and like an evil omen far out on the flank, the rider of the pinto paced the wagon, day by day. Through a long glass that Donnohue dug out of his gear, Dorricott had a good look at the Indian. It was, sure enough, the tall one who had led the Comanches. He might be hanging on to strike a blow alone, Dorricott thought, but maybe he had been studying the habits of the wagon party against the time when some of his companions would return with unblooded warriors, to make a strong attack.

The telescope also showed Dorricott signal fires far ahead in the mountains. Most likely *mestizo* hunting parties from some pueblo, he thought. The Spanish in Santa Fe would know of the wagon long before the party ever crossed the Ratons and started down the east side of the main range.

ROCKY, broken ground spotted with cedars made slow going as the wagon followed a small stream toward the headwaters of the Purgatoire. No longer was the huge blue ark a servant, but a monster that drained energy and patience. Levassor grew more cheerful, joking with the wagon guard, laughing deep around the fire at night, but showing nothing in his slaty eyes. *Beware a man who laughs with murder in his heart*, Dorricott thought, and slept with the time-clock of his mind geared to every movement of the night.

One moonlit night after they had made a few hard miles, sometimes using mules with push-bars behind the wagon as well as mules ahead to aid the oxen, Job Utley hesitated when he changed guard duty with Dorricott. The Spanish Peaks were shining coldly in a frosty sky. Utley's eyes and the nostrils of his upturned nose were dark holes. He spat upon the shadow-jumpy ground and said, "I'm with

you and the Creole. Maybe Levassor ain't figuring on anything at all, but this waiting is enough to make a bitch bite her pups."

"How about the others?"

"I know Frink stands with Levassor," Utley said. "The other two ain't speaking. They'll go either way."

Grizzled Uriah Frink had been crouched with Levassor on the bank of the river the night an arrow had almost got Dorricott, the mountain man remembered. "You're sure Levassor was in his blankets when that Comanche arrow hit the mule?"

"He was," Utley said. "That cursed Indian that's been trailing out there! What with everything else, that gets on a man's nerves."

"Uh-huh," Dorricott said thoughtfully. "He may have help in a day or two." That no well-guarded wagon ever had been seriously molested by Indians on the Santa Fe Trail, Dorricott knew well enough, although in taverns in St. Louis, like other mountain men, he'd often expanded small affairs into major, bloody battles. But there was a first time for everything, even American traders being welcome in Santa Fe. The Indian was an obstinate cuss, with a lot of lost honor to regain. It would be well to have a talk with that Comanche.

"All right," he said, "you've swung with Donnohue and me. If anything happens to him tomorrow while I'm gone, you're in for trouble with Gabe Dorricott."

"He'll be safe," Utley said. "Where you going?"

"To have a pow-wow with that pinto man."

"But how?" Donnohue asked, when Dorricott told him the next morning. "Maybe we can't catch him alive." He looked dubiously at Dorricott's mules.

"Not 'we'," Dorricott said. "I'm going alone."

"I'll give you my horse," the Creole said.

"I won't need it." The chestnut was a beautiful animal, but Dorricott knew that, if it tried to outrun the Indian pinto, the chestnut would be staggering and exhausted when the pinto, which lived on nothing and was made of double-smoked rawhide, would be still going strong.

"Pair up with Utley until I get back," Dorricott said. "He may be the only man we can trust."

Gabe Dorricott rode his mule through the cedars, across rock gullies and toward the ridge on which he had last seen the Indian the night before. On a ridge a quarter of a mile farther west, the tall rider of the pinto appeared. Dorricott raised his right arm in a signal of peace and rode forward. The Indian waited motionless in the rising sun. He was dismounted and ready with his bow when Dorricott approached, and the mountain man was ready with his rifle.

"I come in peace," the white man said in Comanche.

"Your rifle is ready."

The Indian was lean to the point of gauntness, long-boned and wiry. He was no Comanche, Dorricott decided; more likely a Sioux or Cheyenne who had been captured as a child and carried back to a Comanche lodge. His eyes were fiercely watchful, but he bore the air of one who could wait long, and with great patience, for revenge. There were scars on his dusty chest. His right cheekbone had been smashed by some long-ago blow of a tomahawk or war maul. He was marked hard by the fierce freedom of the plains.

"I come in peace," Dorricott said. He dismounted. He put his rifle under a cedar and restrained his mule from charging against the hateful smell of Indian pony.

With quiet dignity, the Indian laid aside his weapons. The bow was not of horn, and the quiver was not of bearhide, Dorricott observed. He was Sun Bear, the Indian said, a sub-chief of the Com-

anches. He would hear what the shooter of ponies had to say.

"There will be much wailing of women in your lodges if you and those you wait for ride against the seven rifles with the wagon." The mountain man hoped for but did not expect a boastful retort that would give a clue to Sun Bear's plans.

The Indian's eyes showed only scorn for so weak an argument.

"The night that followed the day your young men could not catch me on the Arkansas, one of you came like a Pawnee to our camp, and, like a Pawnee, his arrow was not true. Who kills the buffalo for your followers, who cannot send their arrows straight and who sneaks by night to wound mules instead of men? Or do your young men feast only on crippled buffalos and sick ones that no warrior wants, crawling on their bellies to shoot them in the darkness?"

The insult touched a tender spot. Sun Bear's eyes glittered. "When I or my followers come to your camp by day or night, you will not ride the rising sun to ask about it afterward."

Dorricott had one of the answers he wanted. No Indian had shot the arrow. He was almost sure of the second answer, that Sun Bear was waiting for help.

"I go now," mountain man said. He picked up his rifle. "When you ride against me again, I will not shoot your pony."

Sun Bear accepted the challenge with a scornful smile. His weapons were in his hands. "Sun Bear will be ready," he said quietly. "Go."

As he rode away, Dorricott observed that the wagon had not started. At least there was no sign of dust, and the ark was still hidden in the rocks where the party had camped. It was well enough that it hadn't moved. Here was as good a place as any to leave it. Time was pressing now. If Sun Bear's beaten followers came up with recruits and caught the party tangled

in the rocks with all that stock and heavy wagon, the Indians would be more troublesome than a nest of hornets.

Dorricott stopped suddenly. Miles up the valley, where it began to narrow, he saw the glitter of sun on brass, the tiny flow of dark movement against the drabness of the country. Spanish cavalry! Fifty at least, coming straight down the valley. Those smoke signals in the mountains had roused action in some outpost sooner than he'd expected. He tried to urge the mule to greater speed, but the animal took its time, not loafing, but not trying to break its neck while crossing gullies and weaving through the rocks.

Gathering its long body for a final lunge up the side of a caving bank, the mule stopped suddenly, its ears cocked forward. Dorricott started to swing his rifle, but he was too late. Sun Bear was standing between two rocks, the feathers of an arrow even with his battered cheekbone, the bent bow a tense picture of terrific power. For an eternity the arrow hung there, the heavy war head straight at Dorricott's chest. There was no expression in Sun Bear's eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Life for a Life

"YOU gave me life when the one with leaping fire on his hairy face would have killed me as I carried my brother away at the river,"

Sun Bear said. "And now I give you life."

The bow unbent and Dorricott passed. They were even now. The code had been fulfilled and one would kill the other if he could at the next meeting. But it would not be today, for as Dorricott retired carefully, he saw the Indian running toward the pinto almost hidden in the cedars. Sun Bear, too, had seen the approaching cavalry.

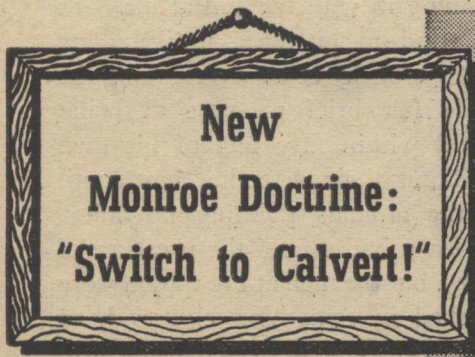
Dorricott was much lower, still out of sight of the wagon, when Job Utley came whipping through the cedars. "Levassor got Donnohue and tied him up at the wagon!" Utley shouted.

Dorricott stopped and felt his dag for freeness, and quickly snapped the cover of his priming pan back and forth.

"I barely got away!" Utley yelled, and came in, pounding hard.

Dorricott freed his dag.

Utley slowed his horse when he was quite close. He was still talking as he raised his rifle. He tried to shoot and duck at the same time, but Dorricott had twisted in the saddle as he threw his dag, and the bullet only ripped a fold of blackened buckskin on the mountain man's shirt. The axe spun twice. Dorricott saw the nostrils of Utley's upturned nose, dark with hair, disappear as the man pulled his head down and threw up his left elbow. The dag would have taken him full in the face, but as it was it skidded off the slope of his skull. It knocked him from the



NEW YORK, N. Y.—George H. Monroe, New York singer and entertainer, advises men of moderation: "Switch to Calvert Reserve—as I have. Calvert really is lighter, milder, finer. It always makes your occasional highball taste better."

saddle and left him lying by his fallen rifle, while his horse shied away to stand, trembling, by a cedar.

Gabe Dorricott gathered up a few weapons while he waited for Utley to come alive. There was just a faint haze of dust up the valley, but Dorricott was too low to see the cavalry now. He stood beside Utley and watched the prostrate man feel stealthily for a knife that wasn't there.

"Was it you or Levassor that tried to kill me with the arrow?" Dorricott asked.

Utley opened his eyes and said nothing.

The mountain man tossed his dag and caught it and rubbed the blade against his cheek. "I won't waste much time. There's Spanish cavalry coming, and you know what that means."

Utley jerked his head to look up the valley. He staggered upright, forgetting his bleeding head as he watched the dust haze. He cursed nervously.

"You or Levassor won't have to ride ahead to find out if the Spanish have changed their minds about American traders," Dorricott said grimly. "Who fired the arrow?"

"Levassor," Utley said sullenly.

"He waded over bare and got the bow and arrows, and then came back and put on his clothes, and you lied about him being asleep all the time?"

Utley nodded, watching the dust. His eyes shifted to his horse, and then to the dag, and he stayed as he was. "You're sure that's cavalry and not Indians?"

"We'd be better off if they were Indians. Ever been in a Spanish clink, Utley? Sometimes they forget about you for years."

"They'll get you too!" Utley said, and seemed to get small comfort from the thought. "No matter what went on before, we'd best forget the damned wagon and run for it now. We're white men. We got to stick together!"

Dorricott's face showed contempt. "Tell me what you and Levassor had in mind,

and I may let you go before the Spanish get here."

Utley didn't hesitate. "We were going to take the goods, but Levassor didn't figure to kill Donnohue unless we had clear sailing into Santa Fe. Then you showed up and bought in, so we were going to get you." Utley looked at his horse again. "Now, let me go."

Dorricott let the dust come a little closer. "Who else at the wagon was in with Levassor?"

"Nobody. The others guessed the truth, but they didn't know what to do about it."

"You said once that Donnohue wasn't using his real name."

"Rivermen that came with him to St. Louis from New Orleans told me that," Utley said. "I don't know what his real name is."

Dorricott got on his mule, watching over his shoulder as he rode away. Utley collected his weapons hastily and left in the same manner, riding east toward the plains. High on a cedar ridge, Dorricott saw the flash of a pinto. With the Spanish at hand, the wagon would be safe from all the Indians Sun Bear could muster against so tough an obstacle. The Comanches would have to pick up what scraps they could. Utley had made his choice. He was plains-wise. He might get through, but if he didn't, he deserved no better.

Two hundred yards from the wagon, Dorricott left the mule and made a half circle, coming in with the sun at his back and the wind in his face, until he lay screened by a bushy cedar overlooking the camp. He felt brief pleasure at being able to get within fifty feet of his own mules without their detecting him, until he saw the animals pointing up-valley. They, at least, had sensed the presence of the cavalry, but the men at the wagon were too absorbed in something else to have noticed.

Donnohue was tied to a wheel, arms and

legs spread, his back bent against the hub. One side of his face was bloody, but he was quite alive as he watched every gesture Levassor was making. The trader's beard was fiery in the sun as he addressed the wagon guard. Uriah Frink was standing a little apart from the others, as if he felt no kinship with them. Now and then, his face lifted in the direction Dorricott had gone.

"... Five thousand for each of you," Levassor was saying. "You'll be kings in Santa Fe!"

One of the plainsmen spat without taking his eyes from Levassor. "What makes you so sure the Spanish will let us in?"

Gabe Dorricott cocked his gun and aimed at Levassor's neck. Never yet had he killed a man, white or Indian, from ambush, but there was a first time for everything, if it had to be.

LEVASSOR'S big voice boomed. "I know they will! There's been a change down there. The *gachupines* have been run out and the Mexicans are in the saddle."

The backs of the wagon guards were to Dorricott, and he couldn't judge how they accepted Levassor's statement.

"What about him?" One of the plainsmen took a hand from his rifle long enough to indicate Donnohue.

"One Creole less!" Levassor laughed. "The three of you will shoot when I give the word, and then I'll shoot the man that misses Donnohue."

Cold-blooded strategy, calculated to insure silence of the three, Dorricott thought; until Levassor found means to still them permanently.

Uriah Frink cocked his grizzled head. "I don't like it, Levassor. I want no part of it." He glanced toward the north ridges.

"Forget Dorricott," Levassor said. "You heard one shot, and it was Utley's rifle."

"I don't like murder," Frink said stubbornly.

"You don't like it!" the trader roared. He flung a hairy hand toward Donnohue. "He don't like it either, but nothing is going to stop me!"

"You're stopped, Levassor!" Dorricott yelled, and for an instant thought he was going to have to pull the trigger. The guards swung around and then stood motionless. "Everybody but Frink drop your rifle!"

The guards obeyed. Levassor hesitated, his slaty eyes prying at the bushy cedar, and then he obeyed.

"My God!" one of the guards shouted. "There's ten thousand Indians coming!"

Dorricott walked toward the wagon. "Spanish," he said. "You're leaving, Levassor. You're riding east now. Utley's already started." Hard, common sense told Dorricott he should kill the man, but a gaunt savage had given Dorricott his life only minutes before, and now he could do no less, even for a man who needed killing. Then too, there was the matter of the cavalry. The Spanish showed only delight, generally, when white men killed each other, but now and then they built ponderous legal problems out of very small matters.

"Let me meet him man to man with knives," Donnohue pleaded.

They could hear the cavalry now.

"You might kill him," Dorricott said. "And then he wouldn't be able to think of the hundred thousand dollars he almost had, and he would miss the fun of getting away from the Comanches, who ought to be pretty close now."

Levassor showed no fear. Hatred as fiery as his beard burned in his eyes as he looked at Dorricott. "I've got money coming for this trip."

"Collect it in hell," the mountain man said. He spilled the priming from Levassor's rifle. "Get out, before I remember I'm a white man instead of an Indian."

With one long hell-bred look at Gabriel Dorricott, Levassor rode away.

Dorricott shook his head, and watched one of the guards untying Donnohue. And then the cavalry was in the camp, dark Creole officers, stiff with dignity that would vanish after formalities of greeting; curious *mestizo* troopers, some barefooted, all wearing huge silver spurs. What Levassor had known from some source; what Dorricott had known from the two riders who had warned him of the Navajos, was true. The Treaty of Cordoba had been signed. For the moment at least, Mexico belonged to Mexicans.

"I welcome you to a new, free country!" a lieutenant said, and swung his arm at sky and rocks and cedars.

Going up the pass with their goods on mules, escorted by jabbering troopers, the mountain man and Donnohue rode side by side. Donnohue's hands were busy as he talked.

"You'll see the day," he said, "when there will be a road through here, with stations, with forts to ward off Indians and robbers. A wagon on the Santa Fe Trail will never be free of the dust of another wagon, and twenty—a hundred—of them will be ours." He frowned briefly. "Of course the customs will cut into profits before long, and there'll be a little political bribery that we'll have to do, but I know how to handle that." His voice regained its enthusiasm. "Why, with the profits of this first trip we—"

"Not 'we,'" Dorricott said. "I knew, when I forced that deal on you back on the Arkansas, that the *gachupines* were out of power, and that the trail was open."

Donnohue showed his gleaming teeth. "I knew it too! My cousin is Juan O'Donoju, the new viceroy of Mexico. I saw him in Vera Cruz nearly five months ago, when it was a certainty that the *gachupines* and high Creoles already had lost the revolution."

Dorricott was silent for a long time.

"What will you do with the fortune you make?"

"Lose it," O'Donoju said cheerfully. "I always do. Many right guesses are wiped out by one wrong one."

"What about the wagon guard?" Dorricott asked after another silence.

"I will pay them as they were promised, except Frink. I will give him five thousand dollars, the same as Levassor promised for my death, and then, instead of having him killed in Santa Fe, as Levassor would have, I will see that he merely loses his money, so that I can hire him for the next trip. One loyal man in the ventures of trade is worth a fortune."

Dorricott nodded. The ventures of trade were highly complicated, as he had learned without getting very far into the matter. "I never intended to hold you to that deal I made for my furs," he said.

O'Donoju laughed. "I knew that lay in your mind all the time, but you will not take your furs to Taos. They go with me as planned. The deal was made. Your share of the profits will be waiting for you in gold in St. Louis when you finally come from this beloved Taos of yours. However, for the bits of silk and other small items you will want to buy in Taos—what an outlandish place that must be—I have five hundred in gold that you must take. Will that be enough?"

"Five hundred," Dorricott said, laughing, "will buy the whole pueblo!"

At sunrise, he was deep in the mountains, looking for a pass he'd never tried before. The chestnut that he rode, a gift that O'Donoju had forced on him without much effort, was not as trail-wise as the black mare killed by Comanches, but there would be time for it to learn.

Ahead, the mountains were clean and bright with snow, filled with dangers that Dorricott had met and conquered as routine. He wanted to sing a booming tone in the tingling air, but there would be time for that in Taos.



By
M. KANE

KILLER'S LAND

*East of his last sundown—just west of hell—a
two-gun sawbones made the biggest medicine
the Old West ever knew!*

LITTLE known today, and dismissed in his own day—at his own request—as a quack and charlatan, John Sappington currently has been hailed as the man who did more than any other in history to open up for human habitation the lands beyond the Mississippi.

The valleys of the Mississippi, Arkansas, Ohio, and Missouri Rivers in those days were malarial fever beds, and the then medical science had been helpless to work out a cure. Sappington, on his own, began to experiment with quinine, traveling the frontier trails on horseback, two-gun fashion, administering the medicine where he could.

He met tremendous medical opposition, and despite the fact that his patients almost invariably lived when he got them in time, people began to distrust him. A misunderstanding gave him one of those ideas that have made the West and Westerners live in the imaginations of people all over the nation.

Sappington had ordered a small quantity of quinine from an Eastern manufacturer—who misread the order and sent him nearly all the available supply, which

no one else wanted. Sappington hit upon the scheme of hiding the quinine in pills rendered palatable by licorice and other sweet ingredients.

With quinine thoroughly discredited, Sappington next launched a typical patent medicine advertising campaign, with Barnum and Bailey trimmings, traveling medicine shows, etc., with hawkers panegyricizing the pills as a brand new discovery with mystic properties.

The results were phenomenal. The pills became a cult. Throughout the malarial Southwest, church bells rang at appointed hours, reminding townspeople to swallow "another Sappington pill"—malaria was licked.

Sappington cleaned up a fortune—which he then spent in revealing his trick by printing and distributing, at a loss, a book describing his own research and findings, and dedicated to the people of the United States and to such doctors as were unembarrassed by the limitations of their educations.

The medical profession finally accepted his findings. The dosage he worked out is still being prescribed today!

BLOOD ON THE FORTY BELOW

By DAN CUSHMAN

SHERIFF Jim Ford was still standing in front of the doctor's office when Monk Whitford rode up to tell him about the bank holdup at Porcupine.

The sheriff's face didn't change with the news. It remained lean and hard, and it looked older than its thirty-two years.

Monk Whitford got most of the details out in his first burst of words, then, when Ford gave no indication of even hearing, he started to repeat, "Three of 'em. Figure it was Millard White and a couple more. They were there when Barlow got back from supper."

"How much did they get away with?"

"More'n ten thousand, and that not counting the gold ingots from Scratch-gravel."

"All right."

Whitford was ready to say a great deal more, but the sheriff was already walking away, his boots squeaking the snow-packed platform sidewalks that ran along Tolbert City's main street.

Whitford called after him, "If you need a posse—"

"If I need a posse, I'll ask for one."

Jim Ford turned to look at him. "You better get that horse inside if you still want a horse."

The horse had been run hard, and his heavy coat was steaming in the frigid December air. "All right," Whitford said, still staring after him. "All right, Sheriff."

Jim Ford walked to his office and stepped inside. It was dim and cold. He sat down at his desk, unlocked a drawer, and took a battered green strongbox. It

contained five gold pieces—a double eagle and three fives. Aside from three dollars in his pocket, it was all the money Jim Ford had to show for six years of risking his life as sheriff of Clayton County. He put the money in his pocket, laughed, and slammed the drawer shut.

The laugh was bitter, to match his face. Six years of running down cattle thieves and road agents, through the raw-hot heat of summer and the forty-below of winter. And all he had to show for it was forty-eight dollars—just eight dollars a year.

He walked to a wall cabinet and took down a thirty-thirty rifle. Then he found cartridges, but he still was not thinking about the bank holdup at Porcupine. He was thinking of what the doctor had just finished telling him.

"You'll have to get her out of here," the Doc had said, referring to Nellie. "I don't think she'd ever take another seige of the strong cold. Southern California, that's the place for her. A couple months in a sanatorium, and then a year or so in that warm, easy climate."

Jim Ford had just stepped outside when Whitford rode up with news of the robbery. He'd heard what Whitford had said, and automatically taken note of the facts, but all the while he'd been thinking of his wife.

Men shouted questions at him as he cut across the street toward Proctor's Livery Stable. They asked about the robbery, and he answered them, still thinking of Nellie, the girl he'd promised so much to when he'd married her four years ago.

He changed to wool socks and moccasins.



The slug connected, driving Leux back. . . .

A manhunter is a gambler too, as Jim Ford knew when he went out into the hills to give the killer odds—two lives to one!

sins while the breed kid was saddling his bay horse. He pulled on a pair of angora chaps, tied a shawl over his head, and put his Stetson back on top of it. Judging by how the thermometer was dropping, it would be ten below by midnight.

Proctor came in when the kid was cinching the horse.

"Going alone?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I was looking for Millard White, I'd want ten good men at my

back, but I guess this is what you're paid for."

Ford laughed with a jerk of his head. The gold pieces jingled in his pocket when he found the stirrup and swung to the saddle. It made him remember them, so he handed them to Proctor.

"You might hand those to Nellie."

Over the fresh, warm stable smell came the odor of Proctor's cigar. A man in the livery stable business could afford cigars like that.

"Good luck to you, Jim," Proctor shouted.

Jim Ford rode through the door that the kid was holding open for him. Upon a slight rise of ground at the north side of town he could see his house. White-painted—not tar-papered like most of the shacks in Tolbert. He had no time to see Nellie. He told himself that, all the while knowing he didn't have the guts to see her.

Proctor's voice followed him, "Anything Nellie might need?"

He pulled in and said, "Thanks, Proc. You might send one of the boys up to make sure her fire's going. She hasn't been up long since that last sick spell."

It was snowing lightly as he left town, following one of the hard-beaten tracks of the stagecoach. It was night when he rode through little, jackpine-covered hills to the mining town of Porcupine. A pick-up posse of half a dozen men had just ridden back after losing the robbers' trail at the head of Blackfoot gulch.

Chase Fenton, owner of the bank and the Scratchgravel mine, came out wearing a huge ratskin coat and wailing the loss of his money. Jim Ford took his mittens off and rolled a cigarette, thinking that a tenth of Fenton's yearly income would be all he'd need to get Nellie to that California sanatorium. The price of her life. . . .

"What are you laughing about?" Fenton cried in his magpie voice. "If you see anything funny in—"

"I was just thinking about how damned sorry I am for you."

"I'm a taxpayer!" Fenton screamed. "It's my money that pays your wages, don't forget that."

Ford rode away, and Fenton still shouted after him.

The gulch narrowed beyond Porcupine, and the trail was powdering over with new snow. It was harder going near the Blackfoot Divide, with the snow getting

deep, and the temperature settling to fifteen or eighteen below. Jim Ford dismounted and went ahead, leading his horse. The wind pounded at him, and he could see the country stretching away in the bluish winter twilight, limitless and apparently abandoned.

In the early morning he stopped at a line shanty that had been built long before by the Warbonnet spread, and when the sun appeared he rode on, picking up a partly-covered horse trail leading into the maze of badlands called Blackfoot Coulee.

The sun came up, pale with no heat in it, and he saw a rider coming towards him. It proved to be Jack Slavin, a stocky little line rider for the Two Dot outfit.

There was something strange in the way Slavin pulled up and sat hunched down in his sheep-lined coat, waiting for him.

"You're lookin' for White, ain't you?" Slavin asked.

"Yes."

"It'll probably mean a drygulch bullet for me one o' these days, but they're yonder in the jackpine, by the turn of the gulch. They got a telescope, so don't look or they'll know I'm tellin' you."

"Thanks, Slavin. And don't worry too much about that bushwhack bullet. Who's there besides White?"

"There's him and two more. I don't know them, but I thought one was that Canuck-breed, Pete Leux. What they done, anyhow?"

Ford told him, and rode on. Ahead, on a low sidehill among the jackpine, was the spot, but he could see no sign. Not even a trail leading down to it. They'd set the ambush cleverly enough. The distance diminished to three hundred paces, to two-seventy-five. He estimated the distance as he kept his horse moving along the narrow trail, all the while imagining the face of Leux, the halfbreed, behind his propped-up rifle. It would be Leux rather than Millard White for that

long bushwhack shot. The Breed was good with a rifle.

AT TWO HUNDRED and fifty yards, Ford dropped from sight behind a little, pine-topped knoll. There he sprang from his horse, dragged the Winchester from its scabbard, and ran knee-deep through the powdery snow, circling uphill. A tiny branch-gully gave him protection. He came out on the bare side of the gulch, with the thick pine fifty yards below.

He lay flat and raised himself slowly. There was Leux with the rifle, all right. The halfbreed was rolled to one side, the gunbarrel propped over a fallen log.

A second man's legs were visible, and he could see tracks where a third man had gone.

Ford worked the lever of his rifle to make certain the action had not frozen, then he started forward, belly-down, working his way from elbow to elbow, staying beneath the level of the snow.

He stopped after a while, raised himself for another look. He'd covered half the distance. There was movement, and he could see that third man. It was Milard White himself. Ford had met him over at Miles, five or six years ago, when he was a cowboy riding for the N Bar 6. He was a thin, rather intelligent-looking fellow, not the type one would expect to turn road agent.

Ford was in plain sight, but he didn't duck down the way a less experienced manhunter would do. He remained quite still, and White paused on one knee, apparently speaking to Leux, his back partly turned.

Ford went on, still ploughing through snow, working from elbow to elbow down the slope.

A snowshoe rabbit suddenly jumped, making a rattle of frozen buckbrush, and bounded down the slope.

The noise made White spin around. Ford raised to one knee, his Winchester ready. His voice came sharp as a whip-crack.

"You're under arrest! Come out with your hands up—all of you."

White never stopped moving. He merely twisted and flung himself shoulder first for snow and brush. He had a gun in his hand and it exploded, but the shot was wild.

Ford fired, knowing instinctively that the bullet was high. He could have got White with the second one, for the man had tripped and was face down, but Leux was coming around with his rifle, and Leux was dangerous as a striking rattlesnake.

So instead, Ford cut the halfbreed with the knife-edge front sight of his rifle and touched the trigger.

The slug connected, driving Leux back. He struck the snow with arms outflung

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and tried to rise, then he crumpled and rolled over with the life gone out of him.

Ford swung back and sent a bullet into the brush and snow where White had disappeared. He was answered by two guns from the thicket, a sudden fury of bullets that he answered until his gun was empty.

He backed away through the deep snow, found protection behind a rock reef, and there he came up again, but the two men were out of sight.

He waited for movement, but none came. At last he caught sight of a rider leading three horses behind him down the gulch.

Just one man! A thought occurred to him and he moved down the slope. Leux was face down, turning stiff from cold. A sound was audible from the deeper timber. A man's breathing. It was heavy and irregular.

"You're covered," Ford said.

"You don't need—a gun." The man had a hard time getting it out. "Here I am. Can't you see—done for."

Ford was still wary. He moved along, parting the branches of scrub pine. A man was lying on his back, looking at Ford. A man of thirty-five, with a high-beaked nose and bloodless, tight lips. The lips tried to smile.

"You got me with a lucky one," the man gasped.

"Who are you?"

"None of your damned business. You won't—count *coup*—on me. I'll just be—prisoner unknown."

"Which way'd he head?"

"White?" He tried to laugh, but didn't make too good a job of it. His lips twisted. "Damn him. He went off—left me. Even a lawman wouldn't do that."

"Which way were you headed?"

The man drew air into his tortured lungs. "Sure. I'll tell you. You know Otowe Creek? Shack there. Grubstake. Figured on lying low. Four miles back

from Whitcomb River. Old Warbonnet line shack...."

There was nothing to be done for the man. An hour later, he died.

Cold was settling, and there was north wind, not strong, but it cut like a saw. He picked up White's trail and followed it. It grew dark with the wind moving around to the west, and it snowed, slowly at first, then rising to a blizzard.

Jim Ford hunted the shelter of a cutbank and waited for dawn. It was gray and sunless. No wind or snow, but the sharp cold settled again. Moisture kept forming little slivers of ice at his nostrils and he kept breaking them off with the back of his mitten. It could have been thirty-five below, or sixty below. A man ceases to distinguish the deepening degrees of cold after a certain point.

That night he alternately dozed and fed cottonwood sticks to a little fire against a cutbank deep in the badlands, and next day he reached Whitcomb river. He moved carefully from there and located Otowe Creek buried deep beneath snow. The cabin was there, where the dying man told him it would be.

He circled, left his horse in a tiny hill pocket, and approached warily on foot. No sign of life. The roof and chimney were rounded with snow. No tracks. The cabin had not been approached since before the blizzard.

He stood up and cursed. Evidently the man had lied to him, and by now Millard White was two days gone to God-knew-where.

He started down toward the cabin, but something was moving across a ridge to the south. He watched as a rider came in sight. It was Millard White. Ford waited until he was close to the cabin before stepping out with his rifle pointed.

"All right, White. You're under arrest."

White blinked with half-snowblind eyes, and a smile twisted his lips.

"Well, I'm damned. If it isn't the long

arm of the law himself, beating me here. I always heard you were the toughest sheriff north of the Wyoming line, but I never knew you carried a Gypsy fortune-teller in your warbag. Or do you do it with coffee grounds?"

"I find dead men along the way."

"Sure. That's what I thought."

White rolled off the horse, but his legs seemed to have gone dead, and he sprawled face foremost in the snow. Ford reached under the man's mackinaw for his gun, then he dragged him upright, and helped him inside the house.

"Your feet are frozen."

"Then I won't run far."

Ford built a fire in the shepherd stove and walked around the cabin. Plenty of grub—flour, beans, bacon. They'd planned to hole up there for a month or two, all right. Afterward, he had a look at White's feet. They'd been frozen, and only time would tell whether he'd get over it without gangrene.

The day passed, and the long night, and more in dreary succession, with the country gripped by the strong cold.

Ford turned away from the tiny hole he'd scratched through the frost of the window and saw White grinning at him from his bunk.

"This was my big haul, till you and my damned frozen feet spoiled it. All for me, too. Not that that makes any hell of a difference. There was enough for three.

Enough for two." He came down hard on that "two" and grinned more than ever. "You and me, Jim. You take your half and go home. Buy that kid you married a new dress and get her out of that shack you're living in. Me—I'll drift south. Nobody will ever know the difference."

Ford had turned again and was peering through the frost hole. His face was lean and craggy. There was no sign he even heard as White went on.

"I CACHED it back—yonder. I never counted it, but there must be ten or twelve thousand of the easy-to-carry, and some ingots, if you want to chance getting rid of them. It wouldn't make either of us rich, but it's a nice stake. Set a man up in the ranching business. Hang and rattle till the increase made a country squire out of him. Look at me, Jim! Look me in the eye and tell me you wouldn't rather be a man on your own ranch than out ducking bullets and fighting it here on the forty-below for old Chase Fenton's dough."

The glass had frosted over, but Ford didn't notice as he stood with his back turned.

White laughed and propped himself up to roll a cigarette. The fellow was snake-clever, and deadly with a gun, but he wouldn't try anything with his feet in the shape they were in.



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"Five thousand and the ingots. They'd make six thousand more. How about it, law-dog?"

"The hell with you."

"All right. I've gone to hell already, in your estimation."

Ford spun around and said, "By next summer, you'll be dead or in the pen."

"Who are you to talk about being alive? In your job, it's always even money you'll not be alive to campaign for the next election. And what do you get for it? Maybe a hundred and a quarter per. You'll die broke, and the boys around town will have to take up a collection so your wife can bury you."

"Where'd you cache the money?"

White reared up in the bunk, grinning, "You mean you want that fifty-fifty cut?"

"I asked where you cached it."

"Or again, maybe you want more than a fifty-fifty cut. Maybe you'd like to get hold of it all. No, lawman. You won't get it. Anyhow, I couldn't tell you how to find it if I wanted to. I'll have to find that place myself."

No more was said on the subject that day, but next morning White was at it again.

"Think maybe they'll hang me, lawman? Well, maybe. You never know what's in the cards, do you? If they do, then Fenton'll never get his dough. It'll lie there in the cache to the end of time, unless the prairie dogs dig it up. But they won't hang me. I never killed anybody in this county. They'll give me a jail term. Ten years, and pretty soon some governor will pardon me so I can vote for him. Then I'll go back and dig it up. All of it. Say I'm in for five years. That's four thousand per, gold included. Better than you'll do out here on the forty-below, ducking bullets. Tell you what I'll do, Ford..."

Jim Ford had pretended not to listen, but when White paused he spun and said, "Yes?"

"When I get out, I'll peel a couple of hundred off that roll and buy a tombstone for you. A nice gray granite one, like they make in Butte. And do you know what I'll have engraved in it? Something like—*Our hero—he laid down his life for Moneybags Fenton and one-twenty-five a month.*"

White realized he'd found a sore spot in Ford, so he kept probing it. Ford stood with his back turned, digging a hole through the frost of the window. The sun was shining, but there was no heat in it, and the country lay solid white, save for a gray line of cutbanks to the south. White was still talking.

"Ever hear how Fenton got hold of the Scratchgravel mine? I'll tell you. I was a kid around this country, and you weren't. Old Leatherpants Hargreaves made the original quartz location, you know, but Fenton was too tricky, so one day he said to—"

"I don't give a damn how he got hold of the mine."

White rolled another of his countless cigarettes. He lighted it and laughed smoke from his lungs.

"It's like I always maintained. Lawmen ain't human. They don't care about anything except what's written in the Territorial Statutes. You got a wife, haven't you? That pretty little Nellie Waldron? What a hell of a time she must have, stuck off in a shack at Tolbert City, wondering which day they'll bring you in, roped over the back of your horse."

Ford remained with his back turned, but he didn't see the gray lifelessness outside. He saw his wife's face—the way it had been when he married her, and the way it was now.

White went on as though he knew exactly what was in Ford's mind, "Little Nellie! I met her one time, you know. Dance over at Allen's Ranch. What a sweet kid! Always looked like she was about ready to cry. Those pretty blue eyes

of hers. Brightest I ever saw, and those freckles across—"

"Keep still!" Ford's fists were knotted, and he spun around, his face gaunt and savage.

"I only said—"

"Keep still about her."

"All right, Sheriff. Only remember, when you decide to kiss that money goodbye, you're doing it for her, too."

Five minutes passed, and there was no sound in the shack save for the contraction snapping of cottonwood coals, turning to ash in the little shepherd stove.

Unexpectedly, Ford said, "All right, Millard. I'll split with you. Fifty-fifty. Take your end and get out of the country. I'll report you dead."

White didn't seem to be surprised. He merely lay back in the bunk and smiled thoughtfully at the pole ceiling.

MILLARD WHITE still limped a little from the tenderness that freezing had left in his feet, but the swelling was gone, and he was able to get his boots on. There was a bullet-gray cast in the sky that looked like chinook wind coming up, so they waited a day, and then another, but the chinook didn't materialize, and it was still fifteen or twenty below when they saddled and started back, retracing White's tracks down Otowe Creek to Whitcomb River.

They stopped to build a campfire and thaw a pan of beans.

"You might give me my gun now, Sheriff," White said.

"Now who wants all that money?"

"You don't trust me far, do you?"

"I trust you within range of my gun."

The trail led down river ice, then it crossed and took them along a steep-sided bank, where shelves of reddish sandstone poked from the snow.

"Here it is," White said, pulling in his horse.

They dismounted and climbed afoot.

One of the ledges was undercut with a hole that looked like an abandoned coyote den beneath.

White got down on his knees and commenced groping with one hand. He couldn't seem to locate what he was searching for. He lay flat, got hold of something, and rocked back.

Ford was standing a half-dozen steps away and slightly above. He realized at the final instant that White had a gun.

He flung himself aside, shoulder toward the snow. As he fell he tore open his mackinaw and drew his forty-five. White was turning with a double-action Smith & Wesson in his hand. The gun exploded, but Ford's sideward movement had saved him, and the bullet merely whipped powder-burn across his cheek.

He fired from his side. The forty-five slug smashed White and spun him half way around. He dropped the Smith & Wesson. It clattered on sandstone and disappeared in the snow. Then he stumbled and fell face down with one outflung hand almost touching Ford's moccasin.

He should have known White for what he was, but until that final instant he hadn't expected a double cross.

Ford got to a kneeling position and listened for heartbeat. There was none. It would be a one-way split after all. If the money was there.

He lay down and groped beneath the ledge. His fingers touched cloth. A war-bag, partly filled. He dragged it out. The money was there in two packets, tied with bits of store twine. He took time to leaf through it. Mostly yellowback tens. It took five minutes more digging to uncover the ingots—little bricks of impure gold, cast from the melted sponge of retort amalgum. Too heavy to carry, so he put it back and kicked snow over it to hide it, though it was a hundred to one against anyone riding that way before spring. The ingots could wait. It was like money in the bank.

He took the currency downhill and placed it in a saddlebag. Darkness found him near the Blackfoot Divide. He changed saddles to White's horse, and rode on, reaching Tolbert City about two hours past dawn.

He looked at his house. There was no smoke coming from the stovepipe. It made him sick from apprehension, but he didn't want to ride there directly. People might suspect he was hiding the money. He drew up in front of Proctor's livery stable.

The breed kid opened up, and Ford climbed down to limp some life back in his chilled legs. The money was thrust in a saddlebag, and he left it there. He didn't want a thick roll of currency in his pants pocket. For the first time, he knew how a thief feels when he expects to get searched. But no one would search him.

The door of the stable office opened, and Ford caught an odor of cigar on the draft that coursed through the barn.

"Jim!" It was Proctor, walking towards him. "Jim, how'd you do?"

Ford still limped for a while. He knew that once he'd made an answer that could be no retreat.

"I made out all right."

"I don't see any prisoners."

"They made a fight of it."

Proctor nodded. His teeth were biting hard into his cigar. "I'd hate to steal anything and have you on my trail."

At a hundred twenty-five a month," thought Jim Ford.

"Get the swag?" Proctor asked as an afterthought.

Ford limped away and back again. He was thinking of Nellie. She hadn't married him because he had money. She'd turned down men like Mark Choffield, who had cattle on the range and money in the bank. He still had forty-eight dollars, a couple of horses, a saddle and some guns he could sell. It would see him

to California, and he'd raise the rest, even if he had to deal Faro in one of those dives on the Barbary Coast.

"Sure, I got old Fenton's money. It's there in the saddlebag. Better than ten thousand. The ingots are yonder, in the breaks. I couldn't wrestle with a hundred pounds of metal."

Proctor seemed to take the return of the money as a matter of course.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "it's no use your going to your house. You won't find Nellie there."

The words stopped Ford, and the expression on his face made Proctor laugh.

"We sent her to California. Why in hell didn't you tell us she was sick before you lit out for the hills? Nobody would have known, if it hadn't been for Doc Gerhardt. He said she had to get out of the country, so of course all the boys chipped in. God knows this country owes it to you. It wasn't a safe place for a man to raise a family before you took office."

Ford started to say something. His face looked leaner and more craggy than ever as he set it against a show of emotion.

"And you're pullin' your freight for the winter, too. Vacation with pay. There's five hundred waiting for you in the lock-box over at the Elkhorn Saloon. And you'd never guess who contributed it. Old Moneybags Fenton! Committee roused him out of bed one night and he shelled out. First time he ever contributed more'n six bits to anything. Of course, the boys had a rope along, but nobody did anything except wave it around a little...."

Ford was trying to roll a cigarette. His fingers pressed too hard, and the paper tore in half. He threw it away.

"I guess I'm the luckiest man in the world," he said.

He wasn't thinking of that five hundred at the Elkhorn Saloon. He was thinking of the money he'd empty in Fenton's lap from that saddlebag.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 55)

How's your aim, pardner, so far as answering questions about cowpokes and the West is concerned? In other words, how much do you know about the open range? Below are twenty questions about Western lore in general. See how many of them you can draw a bead on . . . without giving any incorrect answers. If you can answer eighteen or more correctly, you're top-notch. If you can answer sixteen or seventeen, you're still good. But get a score of less than fourteen, and you're crowding into the greenhorn group. Good luck!

1. True or false? In the language of the cowpoke, the term, "to dry camp," means to camp without water.
2. What does the cowpuncher use the slang expression "dynamite" in reference to?
3. Which of the following is a "haywire" outfit? A ranch which is primarily engaged in farming, food raising, etc.? A ranch that is inefficiently run? A ranch run by Easterners, and consequently joked about by the local cowpokes?
4. What is a "hard-mouthed" horse?
5. If the ranch boss sent you out for his "horse jewelry," what would you return with?
6. True or false? "Hot stuff" is a slang expression used in reference to a heated branding iron.
7. What is a "line camp"?
8. If a cowpoke acquaintance told you that a "long rider" had just come into town, which of the following would you do? Check your gun? Go seek the man and offer him a place to rest? Engage the man in a game of poker?
9. "Nellie" is the slang expression for which of the following Western things: The ranch boss? The second in command on a ranch? A very thin cow?
10. What is "a nickel-plated woman," according to the cowpoke's slang way of talking?
11. True or false? An "Oregon pudding foot" is a type of horse?
12. What is the common Western meaning of the Spanish word, *orejano*?
13. If a cowpoke referred to a horse as being "cultus," would he mean he thought the horse was very good or very bad?
14. What is "poor doe"?
15. True or false? A rope made of braided leather is sometimes known as a *reata*.
16. Which of the following is a Mexican name sometimes used for wrangler? *Conejo*? *Blanquillo*? *Remudera*?
17. True or false? *Sabino* is a term used in reference to a sort of pinkish color horse with a pure white belly.
18. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "rustle the pasture"?
19. If a ranch boss was said to have "snake blood" in him, this would indicate: He had a mean disposition? He was a good shot? He was very courageous?
20. What kind of gait (of a horse) is a *sobre paso*?

The DEVIL'S DEAL

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

*When Satan deals the aces in a game of midnight death
—some man has lived too long!*

Packard drew his gun. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Two-fisted Town

BOB PACKARD sat at his desk in the bank of Santiago, watching the street through his window. It was something which usually gave him pleasure and satisfaction. He had helped found this town, and he had built his business up with his own money. At thirty, he was the youngest bank president in the state. But there was neither pleasure nor satisfaction in him now. There was a worried wrinkle in Bob Packard's forehead, and dark



thoughts were working in his mind.

He had watched the fight across the street from its beginning. Others had poured out of the bank, running for a closer view, but he had stayed where he was. Bob Packard liked a good fight as much as the next one. In times past, he had bruised his own fists. There was an animal spirit in a man which could find no other satisfaction. But this had been more savage than the spirit of any animal.

It had been like all the others in which Hal Castle had engaged since he had first ridden into Santiago some weeks ago. The cause was unimportant. Castle could make a cause out of nothing in an instant. It had started in Ole Swenson's big, well-run bar, and had come boiling through the doors out onto the walk. Castle's antagonist this time had been a rider from Pete Vogel's big Ladder spread, a spunky, windmilling kid who had tried to stand up to the husky, dark man who was so lethal with his fists. The Ladder boy had no chance from the first. Castle had beaten the hell out of him before Marshal Jocko Eckels had come running along the street to halt it.

The puncher was being led away now, legs unsteady and face streaming blood. Hal Castle, unmarked, was laughing—attempting to josh away with his infectious laughter the grimness on the faces of the bystanders. Packard's eyes swung to the bank's front door. Thyra Lansing stood there, hand against her throat. She was the loveliest thing in Santiago. Honey-colored hair, smooth and tight against her head, was drawn down in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a spotless white shirtwaist and a neatly tailored serge skirt. Packard swore softly, noting her agitation as she continued to watch Castle, across the street.

He spoke quietly, "Maybe we ought to have somebody in at least one of the cages, Thyra," he suggested drily. "We are open for business, you know."

Startled, she wheeled about, and he saw she had been so absorbed in the fight that she had forgotten all about her work for the moment. Quick color stained her high cheekbones. She nodded confusedly.

"Of course, Mr. Packard. I'm sorry."

Thyra hurriedly returned to her work. Bob growled another soft curse. He had not been cut out for small things, and this taking advantage of their business relationship chafed him. Still, he could not forget that he had seen a great deal of Thyra Lansing outside the bank—until Hal Castle had come to town.

Bob glanced through the window again. Jocko Eckels was talking to Hal Castle. The marshal said something which brought an indifferent shrug and a sneer from the dark man. Obviously angry, Eckels went back a step, and for a moment every man in the crowd froze in place. It looked as though another quarrel might boil up from the turbulence of the first. Then Jocko turned abruptly and moved away. Castle laughed again and waved those about him into the bar for a drink. Eckels changed his direction and came straight toward the bank.

The rest of Bob's employees were returning, together with the customers who had been before the wickets when the trouble started. The marshal came in and approached the railing around Packard's desk, his face still tight with anger. He was not a big man, but the uncompromising fixity of his eyes and the ramrod straightness of his back made up for his size.

"Bob, you got a minute?" he asked.

Packard nodded, then jerked his head toward the street.

"Bad business, Jocko," he said.

The marshal grunted in agreement, pulling a chair up to the desk.

"I keep hoping that bucko will meet somebody with a fist bigger than his," he growled. "But it ain't likely. Not many men come that good."

"What started it this time?" Packard asked.

"What's it ever take to start that fire-eating son?" the marshal asked bitterly. "I asked Ole. Seems Vogel's rider came in on an errand for his boss and stopped for a quick drink before heading back to the ranch. Castle had been around since noon, blotting up maybe a dozen drinks to pass time. Ole was down at the far end of the bar and didn't hear what was said. All at once, Vogel's boy took a slice at Castle, and the two of them went piling out to the street faster than Vogel could wink. I asked the kid about it just now, but he didn't have anything to say. I asked Castle, too, and he told me to go to hell. His right, I suppose; he's got a witness that he didn't start it."

Packard grunted, thinking of the back-trail of violence Castle had piled up since he had come into the valley a few weeks back, taking over an abandoned nester cabin out on the creek some miles south of town. He idled around most of the time, doing no work, but he seemed to have plenty of money. He dressed well, rode a superb horse, and he liked to swing his fists.

"How many tangles does that make for him, Jocko?" Packard asked.

"Six, here in Santiago," Eckels said. "He also beat up Hank Marner over at the Crossing one Sunday afternoon. Why is he wasting his time around here? He could go east and clean up in the prize ring. Look at the count. That big bouncer at the Circle first, a bucko who's hard to hurt and handy as hell. Quite a battle. Castle took some hard wallops, but he rode out to his place and came back that same evening to have another bout with Pinto Hardin. He seemed fresh as a daisy—handled Pinto faster than he did this kid today."

Packard nodded. He understood the marshal's puzzlement. A man used his fists in this country; he had to. But he

also had to have a reason—a reason more convincing than a mere love of violence. And Castle's swagger was not confined to his fists alone. One afternoon he had staged a private show in the corral back of Darrell's Livery. The town had afterwards buzzed with excitement over his skill with the heavy gun he always wore.

"Bob, something has got to be done about that gent," the marshal said grimly. "I'm not going to be able to live with myself if I don't make a try. I want you to answer a question for me. Did you cash a cattle buyer's draft for Bert Anson yesterday? If so, how much?"

Packard nodded, puzzled by this change of subject and the questions it brought. Bert Anson had a small ranch, well out of town, and he had long been bucking a small rancher's usual run of sour luck. Bob had been happy to cash the draft on sight, without waiting for it to clear the St. Louis bank upon which it was drawn. He knew Anson needed the money, and was glad to see the man's luck brighten.

"Two thousand dollars, Jocko," he told the marshal. "I tried to get Bert to leave some of it here, but he said he had a lot of bills and wanted to clean them all up at once. Why do you ask?"

"BERT didn't pay his bills," Eckels said soberly. "Changed his mind and decided to take his money home to show his wife. She didn't get to

see it. A little after dark, only a couple of miles from home, somebody jumped him out of the brush and bent a gun over his head. When he came to, his pockets were empty. He got a second's slantwise look before he was hit—says he saw a big man with very wide shoulders. He was certain of the time he was stopped. A little after seven. Bob, where were you at a little after seven last night?"

Packard straightened in his chair.

"Look here, Jocko!" he protested. "Do you think that I—"

Eckels shook his head.

"Oh, hell, no!" he said impatiently.

"You and Castle have got titles staked to the same claim, though, and it makes a man curious to know how things fit together. I'll answer a part of my own question. Last night, you finished your supper at the hotel dining room a little before seven, like always. You put on your hat and walked up the street to the Lansing house, where Thyra lives with her mother. You stepped up onto the front porch, where the girl was sitting, and stayed there maybe a minute. Then you came back to the hotel and played solitaire all evening in the dining room. It's that minute I want to know about, Bob. When you stepped up on the porch, was there anybody with Thyra Lansing?"

Packard shrugged.

"You know the answer to that, Jocko. Hal Castle was there."

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Eckels nodded.

"Sure. I knew, but I needed corroboration, and I didn't want to ask Thyra. You stepped up on the porch and he was sitting in the swing with her. You spoke to them both and then came back uptown—at maybe five minutes after seven. So Bert Anson must be wrong."

"About what?" Packard asked. "Give the devil his due, Jocko. You can't make Castle a brush thief just because Bert thinks he saw a big man with wide shoulders."

"You know me better than that, Bob," the marshal said quietly. "Bert saw more than the size of a man and his shoulders. He saw a face before that gun barrel hit him. He swore he was open-eyed, cold sober, and couldn't have been mistaken. The man was Hal Castle. But a man couldn't be sitting in Thyra Lansing's porch swing and hitting another man over the head with a gun, a dozen miles out in the brush from town, at the same time."

Packard frowned thoughtfully.

"No," he agreed. "He couldn't."

"I'd like to turn up Bert's thief for him, Bob," the marshal said. "I'd like to lock Castle up or get him on the move out of here. But I'm going to have a hell of a time inventing a way for him to be two places at once."

After the departure of the marshal of Santiago, Bob Packard sat at his desk, ignoring the work before him, lost in deep thought until his force moved into the closing chores of the day. The sounds of ledgers being stacked and of the vault being locked for the night brought his attention back to his bank. He closed his own desk, said goodnight to his people as they filed out and waited for Thyra Lansing.

The girl came slowly from her wicket, head down. Bob sensed in her a reluctance for his company. It hurt. If the girl was feeling something else—if she was worried

and puzzled, as he was and as Eckels was, he wanted to know it. He wanted to help her.

"May I walk home with you, Thyra?" he asked.

"All right," she agreed hesitantly.

"Glad you're so happy to have me," he said wryly.

The past ten years had been a long, consistent struggle for Bob Packard. He had brought the first trail herd into Santiago Valley. He had sold it, and his horse and saddle, to open a bank. He had fought for the bank and for the town and for the valley. All were growing now, and his plans reached constantly ahead even farther into the future. However, there was a limit to the pleasure a man could take from building and accumulating alone. No man knew success until he could share it. For three years, Bob had known he wished to share his with Thyra Lansing.

Her interest and friendliness and understanding had been a spur to his planning. He knew that for him things came in a slow and solid fashion, and he had been content not to hurry the girl or the growth of their relationship. Now Hal Castle was in the town—a slightly swaggering, pleasantly easy-talking, agreeable, audacious sort, colorful, exuding a challenging kind of fascination.

Looking back as he walked along the street with Thyra Lansing now, Bob tried to reconstruct how it had happened. He thought that the mistake was his own. He thought that he should have long ago let Thyra Lansing know that there were two Bob Packards—one who was now president of the Santiago Bank, a quiet, soft-spoken man by choice, and another who had owned and bossed his own ranch at nineteen—who had been competent also in whatever sort of violence was necessary to defend what was his. He had worn a gun and he had used it. He had broken knuckles and he had torn the flesh of others.

Thyra was a quiet girl and she had lived a quiet life. When her father had died, a year before, Bob had given her a job at the bank, sensing that she was not yet ready for the decision he wanted of her. It was a move which had chafed him, but it had worked out well enough; she was a good worker, and their relations had not greatly changed. Nothing had greatly changed until Hal Castle had come to town.

Maybe it was one of those things no man could figure in advance, or understand. Perhaps the very quietness of her life had made Castle with his hot temper, his recklessness, and his high relish of life, irresistible. Packard had heard of such things before, and it was too late now for him to tell Thyra that even her boss was also in part a son of the devil.

One thing, however, was certain. Bob knew he had to do something to break the links forging between Thyra and Hal Castle. The man was no good.

When they reached her walk, Bob stopped the girl for a moment.

"Did you hear about Bert Anson?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Yes. And I hate to hear of things like that in our valley, Bob."

"You brought me the cash from the vault yesterday when Bert presented his draft for payment," Packard said slowly.

"Yes, Bob. And Mr. Himber checked it."

Bob grunted. He hadn't remembered this. Himber was his cashier, a garrulous sort; Bob had been casting about for someone better to fill his job. It had been his thought that Thyra might have mentioned the withdrawal of so much cash by Anson to Hal Castle, and that something might be made of that. But, if there had been any leakage of information from the bank, it would be more plausible to suspect Himber.

He smiled again at the girl.

"Good night," he said.

She nodded and went inside. There was no invitation for him to stay for supper, no smiling talk of an evening visit. These things had ended with Castle's arrival in the valley.

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil's Rider

RETURNING to town, Packard stopped at Swenson's place for his evening drink. There was a thin crowd present, including Hal Castle down at the far end of the bar. Castle came up along the mahogany to plant his elbow beside Packard's.

"I hear you did me a favor this afternoon, Packard," he said pleasantly. "Much obliged."

Bob studied him—white teeth flashing in an easy smile, a reckless, prodding mockery in handsome dark eyes, a big, sunbrowned fist resting carelessly on the bar. There was, he thought, an overwhelming charm in Castle when he chose to use it. The trouble was, Castle was aware of it. The man was as dangerous as a sidewinder without rattles, and possessed a snake's unthinking cruelty as well. A man who would certainly ruin any woman with whom he came in contact. One who would destroy a girl like Thyra Lansing—not, perhaps, because he wanted to, but because he knew no other way of conduct. Packard had known other men similar to Hal Castle, but none who had possessed so many satanic qualities to such a degree as he did.

"I usually do favors on purpose, Castle," he said quietly. "I don't remember this one."

"Seems a brushgrubber named Anson has been making some talk about me. Eckels heard it. He carried it to you. The marshal of your town would love a chance

to snap cuffs on me and plant me in the Santiago calaboose. You spoiled his fun by telling him where I was at the time Anson got his skull creased. Right friendly, Packard. I appreciate it."

Swenson came up and spilled silver on the bar.

"Change from your twenty, Castle," he said, in the wooden manner he reserved for men he disliked.

"Want to make something of this?" Castle asked Packard mockingly, as he scooped up the silver. "Your thinking reads like a book. You see this cross-grained Swede throw change from a twenty at me, and right away you wonder where I got the twenty."

"Where did you get it?" Bob asked quietly. "Wondering's natural, Castle, when a man who hasn't got a job runs to ready cash."

Castle laughed.

"It came out of my pocket, Packard—not Bert Anson's," he said. "Maybe when I run low, I'll pay you a visit at the bank."

"Do that," Bob agreed. "A loan, maybe."

"Maybe. You keep plenty of cash on hand, I've heard."

"Enough," Bob answered woodenly.

Castle grinned mockingly again.

"Buy you a drink, eh?" he asked.

"No," Packard said bluntly. "I limit myself to one, before supper. I've already had it."

Castle's smile faded. His eyes ran over Bob Packard's figure.

"About of a size, aren't we?" he said speculatively. "I've heard you were quite a man before you started picking up belly-fat behind a desk. I sort of like to try out a man who's made a name with his fists. Wonder how you'd stack up against me?"

"I've wondered that, myself," Bob said.

"Maybe we'll find out one of these days," Castle suggested.

"Never start a fight," Packard said curtly. "And I never swing the first blow."

"But maybe something will come up that'll prod you into jumping me, eh? Of course, a man can't tell about that. But I like to wonder what it'd be—what'd shake you loose and start you swinging, Packard, I'll see you later. I've got to ride out to my place, change my clothes, and take care of some chores before coming back to visit a certain girl in this town." The man grinned suggestively. "Maybe that stirs you some?"

Packard tossed a coin on the bar to pay for his drink and stepped back, ready to go. He shook his head.

"No, Castle. I'm not stirred."

"You're a plain damned fool, then," Castle laughed goadingly. "A man doesn't get anything in this world—including women—unless he's willing to back his claim with his knuckles."

Bob Packard had a normal man's distaste for talk about a girl in a saloon, and he had a normal man's inability to stomach more than his quota of rasping by another whom he did not like.

"Friend, I think I've had a little more than enough," he said.

Castle nodded in exultant satisfaction and squared around to face him, rocking back a little on his heels. Men down the room began to move forward, the inevitable ringing movement of an audience about a point of friction.

The dancing light in Hal Castle's eyes had turned cold. His lips lifted a little and his body tensed.

Then he seemed to remember something, and turned his head for a quick glance at the clock over the backbar mirror. He swore sharply. He looked back at Packard, his body relaxing. His smile lost its twisted, self-satisfied harshness.

"Hell, Packard, I forgot that favor you did me," he said. "I'll pay it back. I won't

push this—not now. I'm late as hell, and I've got to be riding."

He pushed past Bob Packard and out of the saloon. Swenson lowered the scattergun he had scooped up back of the bar.

"I'll be damned!" the Swede said blankly.

Packard nodded.

"I will, too," he agreed. "And I'll also break a rule of long standing, Ole. I'll have another drink."

Packard moved on from the bar into the hotel dining room, where he had his lonely supper. He was lighting his cigar and looking forward to the prospect of another dreary evening of Solitaire when Jocko Eckels came in, looked around, and moved quickly over to join him.

"I just heard about that brush at Swenson's, Bob," he said. "What the hell got into you?"

"What got into Castle? That's more important. You heard what he did? I had a chip on my shoulder that he put there on purpose. He all but shoved it down my throat, and then walked out on me."

Eckels grunted.

"It doesn't make sense," he admitted. "But that ain't the point. I hunted you up to tell you to watch your step. He's back in town."

"Back!" Packard's brows jerked in surprise. He pulled out his watch and

studied it in amazement. "When did he get in?"

"Just a couple of minutes ago. I saw him ride past."

"That man shouldn't be in a prize ring," Bob said slowly. "He ought to take that horse of his and hunt a race track. He'd make a fortune with it."

"That's kind of funny, too," Eckels growled. "He didn't come back on the same horse he rode out. Changed at his place, I reckon; he's got three good mounts out there. I rode out one day for a quiet look around, and saw them. He came to the door and politely ordered me to get the hell out and stay out. He had a point, too; my authority doesn't run past the town limits."

"He lives in that nester shack out there alone?"


"Sure," Eckels said. "Who else would live with a heavy-handed son like that?"

"I don't know," Packard said thoughtfully. "I just wondered—"

Eckels settled back in his chair, shaking his head.

"You're still thinking about Bert Anson, eh? Look, Anson was mistaken in the whole thing. He came into town this afternoon and told me so. I guess that robbery busted him good. He and his wife are pulling out—going to live with her folks. He tells me he saw a big man all right, but he guesses he sort of jumped at a conclusion for the rest of it. And we

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know he did. We know Castle was right here in town."

Packard shrugged.

"All right," he said. "And if it makes you feel any better, Jocko, I'll try to keep to my own side of the street. I think Castle would like a tangle with me—matter of fact, he said he would. To impress Thyra, I guess. I won't disappoint him, if he steps on my toes, but I won't go ramming them under his boot. If it's my choice, I'll keep clear."

"Couldn't ask for more, Bob. That's the best way to handle it. I'm going up to Doc Tilton's for a look at that puncher Castle messed up this afternoon. Want to come along?"

"I'd like to," Packard said.

They moved out to the walk together and turned south. They had gone but a dozen steps when Eckels grunted, clamping a hand on Bob Packard's arm. Hal Castle was heading toward them down the walk.

HE CAME up with his swaggering stride. Bob moved over a little to give him room. The man nodded casually.

"Evening, Marshal—Packard," he said.

"Evening," Eckels growled.

"Castle—one minute—" Bob said.

"Sure," Castle agreed, pausing and shoving thumbs into his shellbelt with a mocking grin. "You want me to say hello to Thyra for you? I'm headed that way."

"No," Bob said. "We all had our talk in front of the bank this afternoon—remember? It seems to upset her when you get in a fight. Like a woman, I guess. It was nice of you to talk to her so easy—"

"Listen," Castle interrupted. "What in hell are you talking about?"

"You don't remember?" Bob asked, with a show of surprise.

"No," Castle snapped. "I don't. Look, just why did you stop me, anyway?"

"To thank you for keeping a decent

tongue in your head when you were talking to Thyra and me this afternoon. You did a better job of it then than you did at Swenson's a while ago."

Castle's face darkened. He leaned slightly toward Packard, then glanced at Eckels and straightened.

"Get out of my way," he growled. "I'm late, or we'd dig into this a little deeper."

The man shoved on past, walking away fast. Eckels pursed his lips.

"Just what in hell did that mean—that talk about you and Thyra gathering with him in front of the bank?" the marshal demanded. "He knows damned well nothing of the sort happened."

"Does he?" Bob asked. "He didn't act like it."

"Look, the touchy son acts all sorts of different ways. You can't judge anything from that! You tell me—"

"No—just let it go," Bob said. "I'm trying to figure something out in my mind, and I don't know what it is myself. Maybe I'm only being a fool, and the best thing is to forget it."

"I'll try," Eckels growled. "But you're fartherest from being a fool of any man I've ever known. Be damned if you're not making me as jumpy as Castle does!"

They continued in an easy silence to Doc Tilton's cottage. The doctor stepped aside after opening the door, pointing to the boy stretched out on his office couch with a damp cloth over his eyes.

"He all right, Doc?" Eckels asked.

Tilton shrugged.

"If wearing a crooked nose and a cheek scar I can't erase for the rest of his life is being all right—yes. Three busted ribs and some teeth gone, too. He's going to live, if that's what you mean. Vogel is sending a buckboard in for him sometime this evening."

Packard crossed and bent over the young puncher.

"This is Bob Packard talking, son; you know me," he said gently. "I want a little

information. How did that fight you had with Castle start?"

The boy stirred a little, swollen lips working. He spoke in a harsh whisper.

"He said he'd kill me with his fists, next time, if I did any talking—"

"He won't," Bob assured the boy. "We're not putting you in any danger. What you say will be kept secret. There's something wrong with this man, and we want to dig it out."

"He's a mean son, Mr. Packard," the boy muttered. "Forty pounds heavier than me, and built like a bull. I walked into Swenson's for a quick glass of beer, and he was standing there. I've heard about him, and I gave him plenty of bar; I didn't want any trouble. He moved up and said hello. We started talking—"

"About what, son?" Eckels asked.

"Range conditions, how our stock was coming, and had Pete Vogel sold any beef lately, or was he going to. Just talk. Trying to be friendly, I mentioned that I saw him near town last Sunday night. He flew off his handle over that for some reason. Called me a damned liar, that he hadn't been here, and for me to swallow what I'd said. I'd seen him plain, and I'm a mite stubborn. I was out north of town, going to visit a girl, and I saw him riding in from the north, cutting across quite a bit off the road. It was him. I couldn't have been mistaken."

"Then he slammed you?" Bob asked.

"After I hit him first," the boy said ruefully. "He piled a bunch of names on me that lit a fuse under my temper. I took a swing. I don't remember much else."

The doctor stepped forward.

"This boy needs rest," he said. "He's got a tough wagon ride ahead. Do you have what you need?"

Jocko Eckels looked at Packard. Bob nodded.

"I think so," he said slowly. "Yes, I think so, doctor—"

Back on the street, Eckels growled half-angrily.

"Why'd you tell Doc we had the information we wanted?" he demanded. "Hell, we didn't learn a damned thing from the boy!"

"I think we did," Bob disagreed. "We know now that Castle didn't want anybody to know he was around town on Sunday night. Now what we've got to find out is why he didn't want anyone here in town to know."

"Kind of obvious, ain't it?" Eckels snorted. "You aim to go down and ask Thyra where he was? He was bound to be heading there, and why should he care if the whole town knows about that? We're all aware by now that he's sparking her."

"She lives north of town," Bob said. "And he lives south. Why would he come in from the north, off the road, when he could ride up to her house right on the main street?"

"I don't know," Eckels said in fresh puzzlement. "Just what in hell does it mean?"

"I think you'd better find out if anything happened Sunday night—if there was another robbery somewhere around, maybe. And when you find that out, we'd better pin Castle down."

"Why, you just heard the kid say where he was that night! No matter what might have happened, we're his witnesses now that he couldn't have done it. Look, Bob, do you feel all right? You've got me dizzy with this kind of talk."

"I feel fine," Bob said. "Sure, the kid said he saw him. And Bert Anson said he saw him, too. Maybe they were both right. You go ahead and check on Sunday night, Jocko. Meanwhile, I'm going to set up a stack of chips and try a play of my own."

"What?" Eckels asked suspiciously.

"Wait and see, Jocko," Packard said. "Wait and see."

CHAPTER THREE

Double Guns

THE hour was late. The other employees of the Santiago Bank had gone, but Thyra Lansing still worked in her cage. Seated at his desk, Packard watched her. He had asked the girl to stay over to handle some special tally sheets—not that he needed any tally sheets checked, but he did need the girl here. This was the first move in the plan he had set up to trap Hal Castle.

He got up to light the lamps and paused for a moment in front of Thyra's cage, feeling the ache of a longing in him. Standing there, he wondered briefly if he was not making a bad mistake. He wondered if his whole suspicion of Castle did not add up to a natural dislike because the man had taken his girl away from him. He wondered if he was right in attempting to judge whether Castle was the proper man for Thyra Lansing. The man had a violent temper, but he also had charm and a manner the girl apparently liked.

A rancher had been robbed and an apparently innocent rider from Vogel's place had been badly beaten, but neither was any explanation for Castle's plentiful supply of money and his evident idleness. A man's business was his own, and a banker should confine his attention to the problems of his bank.

The girl became aware of Bob's troubled gaze and looked up.

"Only two more sheets," she said. "Only a few minutes more—"

"I'll walk you home," Bob offered.

There had been the beginning of a smile on her face. It vanished, now.

"No, Bob. Not tonight, please."

He nodded slowly.

"Someone else, Thyra?" he asked heavily. "Castle?"

A faint inclination of her head told him his guess was correct. She looked down,

her pencil nervously tapping against the high desk.

"Bob, you—you never said anything to me. We had no agreeemnt, I guess, but I should have told you about Hal when it all began. I should have explained. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Bob said. "It's your life, Thyra. Nobody has any right to interfere."

He said this with the knowledge that he was interfering, and that it had to stop. But someone tapped against the front door, interrupting him. It was dark on the street now, and lampshine from within reflected on the faces of two men standing on the other side of the leaded glass panes. Con Henry, the local stage manager, and one of the local stage guards, standing with a rifle sloped watchfully under his arm.

Bob turned toward the door. This was the next step. And he'd have to take it, or there'd be talk in the town of a kind that wouldn't help the bank. He had to take it, or both Con Henry and Thyra might wonder seriously if there was something wrong with him and his management of the bank. Bob shot back the bolts and Henry stepped in, nodding.

"Here's the special shipment you ordered, Mr. Packard," he said deferentially. "I waited till after dark to deliver it, as you asked. It's been guarded every minute."

He came on in, a sizable bundle that had been heavily wrapped in thick brown paper cradled in his arms. He deposited this carefully on Packard's desk and grinned.

"The prettiest kind of hay in the world, eh? I'd sure like a fistful of what's in this—"

"Open the vault, please, Thyra," Bob called. He offered his brusque thanks to the two men and showed them out. Picking up the package, then, he carried it back to the vault. The president of his correspondent bank in Denver must have been

greatly surprised at the message he had received from Santiago two days ago—the morning after Bob's talk outside Doc Tilton's house with Jocko Eckels. But the Denver man had done what Bob had requested.

Thyra watched him curiously as he put the package away in the vault and relocked it. He spoke his lie to her harshly.

"Something big is coming up, Thyra. Something I can't talk about now. We needed some extra cash."

She nodded, with a good employee's discipline of curiosity, and went back to her work. A few minutes later, she finished and left. Immediately afterward, Packard blew out the lamps and also moved outside. He saw Hal Castle angle across the street to join the girl, a block distant. Castle took Thyra's arm and walked on beside her.

Packard went wearily to the hotel, and spent a lonely evening shifting cards on a table top when he had finished his dinner, and as his fingers worked with the cards, he went through it all again. He had planned a trap and set its trigger. It couldn't be unset, now—not short of morning, at least. And the plan had been with the thought it would probably work out—if it worked at all—tomorrow morning.

A man or men, he had thought, who would be interested in a small rancher carrying two thousand dollars, should certainly be more interested in a haul promising many times that amount.

It was going to be hard to wait.

Late in the evening, Jocko Eckels stopped in the dining-room doorway, saw Bob and nodded, but moved on without coming in. Eckels was apparently busy with some project of his own, doing a lot of riding away from town. Bob had seen little of him during the past two days. He had a feeling Eckels was angry because Bob had not declared him in on his own plan.

Sometime after midnight, Bob's belly

was full of *solitaire*. Castle's visit with Thyra, he thought, must have ended several hours ago. And if the girl had mentioned the package in the bank vault, and Castle was interested, the trap was already starting to spring. There was nothing left now but to sleep until morning.

The Santiago House boasted no night clerk. Bob took his key off the board and went upstairs. He unlocked his door, went inside—and stopped.

The room was thick with smoke, and a cigarette end glowed brightly from the chair beside his bed.

"Kind of a nighthawk, Packard," a hard voice growled. "Close that door easy and keep quiet. I've got a gun centered on you, and I'd as soon turn you inside out as not. That's a handy shed outside—made a nice ladder right into your room. You weren't exactly expecting a caller, were you? Know who I am?"

"Hal Castle," Packard said with certainty. The other laughed.

"Hal? No. I guess I overestimated you, Packard. I hear you've done some boasting about a talk that never occurred between you and another man and a girl, in front of your bank. And sending Eckels all over the county on some wild riding, looking for something that did happen on a Sunday night. You've sure raised hell, Packard. After you told Hal that phoney story about the talk in front of the bank, he came back to the shack on a lathered horse, ready to skin me clean for making a play for his girl."

Packard smiled thinly.

"I thought that might happen, if my hunch was right," he said. "A pair of brothers—twins, eh? One of them working nights, and the other showing only during daylight. Hal had the night shift, and he got the girl."

"That's it," the man in the dark agreed. "Women can raise hell in our business; I don't want any part of them. I tried to tell Hal. The damned fool was in such an

itch to see her the other night that he passed me half way to town. Made you kind of curious about his horse, didn't it?"

"Yes. Short of flying, a man couldn't make the round trip that fast, even if he did change horses."

"Well, it's all quiet now, except for the last hand, Packard. I've taken care of Hal. I didn't dare skin his face up before, but I've sure as hell skinned it now. When he gets his pieces put back together, he's going to promise to stay away from women the next time we set up a game."

The man rose to his feet and shoved forward.

"So you want to know what happened Sunday night?" he went on. "Well, another fool rancher who carried too much money on him got knocked over. He was stupid enough to try fighting back. Now he's dead—up Dry Coulee with some brush piled on him. And me? I was at the Crossing that night, being right conspicuous a good dozen miles away. If Hal hadn't turned aside to visit that girl for a couple of minutes after handling the job, and if he hadn't been seen by that puncher from Vogel's spread, it would have worked out fine. As it is, we've got to move out before Eckels guesses the truth, too."

"What comes now?" Packard asked quietly.

"Well, you've conveniently ordered in a nice package of cash. I'm going to take it. It's what I've been waiting for. Hal could talk a bird out of a tree, and he got news of that cash shipment from the girl tonight. In a couple of minutes, she's going to open up your vault for me—"

"No!" Bob said sharply. He hadn't anticipated this.

"Oh, yes," the other said mockingly. "But first, there's something else—"

Packard sensed the swing of a heavy gunbarrel, and tried to dodge it. Hot pain sheared through his temple and cheek.

He staggered. He was hit again. He went down, and a boot slammed into his side. His antagonist had been in the dark for some time, and he could see. Bob could not. He got up to one knee and swung a fist. He felt the blow slam yielding flesh, and felt brief satisfaction. Then the gun barrel chopped again, slamming him into a blackness much thicker than that of the room.

Bob Packard regained consciousness to find his body struggling against recurring waves of pain. It cost him much effort to roll over and climb to his feet. He got his back against the wall, breathing in short, quick inhalations because deeper breathing drove knives into his ribs. He fumbled at his face with both hands. It had been hammered mercilessly out of shape.

He opened the door of his room blindly and went through it, aware that he was staggering drunkenly, but unable to walk a straight path. He found the stair banister and reeled downward, pausing at each step and then forcing himself to go on, remembering the urgency of the moment.

Moving out to the walk, he found the town still slumbering in pre-dawn blackness, with only lamps alight in windows here and there. He looked down the street to the amber lantern burning over Jocko Eckels' office door, and shook his head. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious. He didn't know how much time was left him, if any. He could not afford the delay necessary to find Jocko.

With the night air against his face, his head steadied and he walked with increasing rapidity across the street toward the bank. He had baited his trap with cash and had used Thyra Lansing to lead his prey to it. He had not meant to involve the girl more deeply. Yet Hal Castle's brother had boasted that Thyra would open the vault. The man was bleakly callous. Thyra was in grave danger. Packard could think of nothing else. This

man, who had given him a brutal beating, far beyond necessity, would not be in a good mood when he found worthless paper in the package which had come in by stage express. He might turn on the girl after she had opened the vault.

The bank door was slightly ajar, and there was a glimmer of light inside, at the back. Bob pushed the door open and limped inside.

HE SAW Thyra first. Her hair was disheveled, sleep was still in her eyes, mixed with terror, and she wore a dress which had been hastily pulled over her nightgown. She seemed to be in a daze, induced by absolute puzzlement. She was holding a lamp while the man tore at the wrappings of the package from the vault. She saw Packard as he appeared in the doorway, and she spoke quickly, phrasing the thought echoing repeatedly in her mind.

"He isn't Hal!" she cried. "He looks like him—but he isn't Hal—"

"I know," Packard said.

The man swore harshly, dropping the package and swinging his gun at Bob.

"A fake shipment!" he snarled. "You got a plant here, Packard? You got guns on the street to blast me the minute I stick my head out?"

"No," Bob said, speaking with difficulty through his bruised and swollen lips. "You're free to go, Castle. There's some

cash in the vault. The girl will get it for you."

"I've made it a rule never to trust a banker," Castle growled. "We'll go together, all three of us—you two ahead of me, nice and easy. This town has been a wrong game for me from the beginning. First, Hal got tangled up with this whey-faced girl, and now you try dropping a tanglefoot noose over me. You two are guaranteeing that I get clear. Think of what's going to happen to both of you when I get tired of your company and don't need it any longer—and start walking!"

Thyra put her lamp down on Bob's desk with unsteady hands. She looked at him wordlessly, eyes wide and bright. He thought the fear was gone from her now, and he suddenly realized, with a pleasant shock, that the only reason for this could be his presence here. She had confidence in him.

The man's gun stabbed savagely.

"Turn around. Get beside him, girl. Now start moving, both of you."

Thyra's hand groped for Packard's, and he gripped it tightly. This thing had the quality of a nightmare, and Bob thought that a man could awaken from a nightmare if he willed it strongly enough. He sat his mind to it. They stepped together toward the door, with the man closing up behind them.

Castle heard the scrape of boots from

they're

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the walk outside at the same instant Packard did, and he called a hurried order. Bob halted. Thyra stopped beside him.

Someone was coming along the walk toward the bank, his boots beating as unsteady a tattoo as Packard's must have done a few minutes before. A shadow appeared suddenly in the door, leaning against the jamb, breathing hard. Bob saw the man's face. It had been hammered with hard fists, cut and bruised as his was. This was Hal Castle. This was the second of the twin brothers who had deliberately intensified their resemblance to each other in order to plague one place after another with holdups for which ironclad alibis could be proved.

The man in the doorway ignored both Thyra and Packard, his eyes blazing savagely at the man behind them.

"I warned you, Dick," he said raggedly. "I warned you never to put your fists on me."

"Shut up, you fool!" his brother snapped. "Get on your horse. This was a trap. We can make it clear, but we've got to pull out fast."

"I warned you, Dick!"

His brother swore sharply and shot at him, over Bob Packard's shoulder. He had been hurried, and his aim was unsteady. He missed.

Packard had thrust Thyra out of the way as Hal Castle started his draw. Bob swung now, striking at the face of the brother behind him. He felt grim pleasure as his knuckles bit deep into flesh, rocking the man back. He stepped forward, intending to close in, but a gun roared behind him, and Dick Castle shuddered. He clutched the buckle of his belt and folded over it. Hal Castle's gun fired again in the doorway, and his brother spilled heavily onto his face.

"I warned you, Dick!" Hal Castle said woodenly for the third time. He tilted his gun. "Damn you, Packard, stand still for yours now!"

Bob ignored the order. He had looked down gun muzzles before. He had felt pain before. He knew it could mount only so high before it became inconsequential. Almost contemptuously, he gave Hal Castle the one shot the man could make—powderflame so close it scorched his face. And then he hit him with everything he had.

He hit him with fists and elbows and up-jolting knees. He caught his gunhand and broke the man's grip upon the weapon. He was for a moment again the Bob Packard who had driven the first trail herd of stringy brush longhorns into Santiago Valley.

Hal Castle fought with a savageness which indicated his skill and ability were no less than his brother's, and Bob remembered how Pinto Hardin had been so quickly and ruthlessly smashed down. Hal had made that fight, at least—maybe others as well. Bob didn't know, but he was sure that equal savagery would be needed on his part if he was to win. Hal was a big man and efficient at dealing out hurt, but Packard was efficient also, in this skill that was not easily forgotten. He took blows to give them, finishing the work Castle's brother had started on the man's face, watching and waiting coldly for the opening he needed to finish the ugly business.

It came, and he struck with explosive violence, driving Hal Castle through the door to the walk. Bob went after him. He was aware of shouts and the sound of running footsteps as he piled himself on Hal's struggling body, continuing the murderous punishment.

An urgent hand locked on his shoulder, and he was pulled back.

"Good Lord, leave enough of him to hang, Bob!" Jocko Eckels begged.

Bob backed away, looking at the limp form on the planking before him.

"Too bad," he said. "I would have liked to have met him even. But he had

already been softened up a good bit."

"So had you, judging by your looks."

Thyra Lansing put her hand on Bob's arm.

"Come on up to the house," she said quietly. "I'll take care of you."

Bob nodded. They moved slowly along the street. Curious townsmen, running toward the bank, stepped off the walk to give them room. Bob's arm tightened against Thyra's hand.

"It's horrible, Bob," the girl breathed.

"It'll look better in the morning."

"I know. But there's something I want to tell you before morning. I didn't want this, from the first. I've been miserable, but I couldn't seem to help myself. I knew there was something terribly dangerous—something terribly wrong with Hal, but I couldn't understand it, and I didn't know what to do. I knew he was wheedling information about the bank out

of me, and I couldn't seem to help that, either. Several times I almost spoke to you about it, but you didn't seem to care."

Bob nodded.

"I know," he said. "I made a mistake, one that started a long time ago."

The girl stopped, facing him, a slender silhouette against the rising light of dawn.

"Then tell me now, Bob," she begged.

"Tell me! I've always wanted to know."

He struggled for a moment for words, and then suddenly bent to kiss her, relishing the warm softness of her lips against his own swollen ones. Straightening again, he saw her smile, and he smiled in return. Words, Bob Packard suddenly realized, were for people who did not understand each other. And what had happened here had resulted in an understanding between Thyra and himself which would endure. He put his arm around the girl and they walked slowly on.

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 39)

1. True. To "dry camp" means to camp without water.

2. The expression "dynamite" is generally used in reference to bad whisky.

3. A "haywire outfit" is an outfit that is generally considered to be very inefficiently run.

4. A "hard-mouthed" horse is one that does not readily respond to the bit.

5. If the ranch boss sent you for his "horse jewelry," you should return with his fancy riding gear.

6. True. "Hot stuff" is an expression used in reference to a hot branding iron.

7. A line camp is a cabin or other dwelling used to accommodate line riders.

8. If told that a "long rider" had just come into town, the logical thing to do would be to check your gun. "Long rider" is a term used in reference to an outlaw.

9. "Nellie" is a slang expression of ridicule applied to a very thin cow or certain other livestock animals.

10. A "nickel-plated woman" is a very desirable woman, according to the cowpoke's

way of thinking. Anything very desirable is likely to be referred to as "nickel plated" by the cowpuncher.

11. True. An "Oregon pudding foot" is a type of horse.

12. *Orejano* is a term used in reference to an animal which has not been earmarked.

13. If a cowpoke referred to a horse as being "cultus," this would mean he thought the animal was of very poor quality.

14. "Poor doe" is simply venison of poor quality.

15. True. A rope made of braided leather is sometimes known as a *reata*.

16. A Mexican term sometimes used as a substitute for "wrangler" is *remudero*.

17. True. *Sabino* is a term used for a pinkish color horse having a white belly.

18. The Western slang term, "rustle the pasture," means to bring in the saddle horses.

19. If a ranch boss or other person is said to have "snake blood" this simply means that he has a mean disposition.

20. A *sobre paso* is a slow Spanish trot.

GUN SONG

By GARDNER F. FOX

The ivory-tickler rode his hell-song from Nogales—a song made up of thundering sixes, a tinhorn's luck—and the heart's blood of an owlhoot no law could hang!

HE SWUNG down off the big Overland, tall in his black store clothes, face white and untanned under the brim of his brown beaver. He looked like a gambler, standing in the dusty street and sizing up the Silver Dollar Saloon, the Red Gap, and my Wagonwheel. I could see right away he didn't think much of my place.

Well, that was all right with me. He made one more in this little town of Red Gap who felt that way. I turned my back on him and went into my place, thinking about Ike Tarrant and his Flying T spread, and how Tarrant ran the town and couldn't see the Wagonwheel for dust. It was all on account of Lily Kalere, who sang a few songs in my place whenever we had any customers. Lily looked down her nose at him as if he was something Spot, my wolfhound, had dragged in off the sage flats.

Tarrant was the lead steer around Red Gap. He was big and muscular, with the impatience of an active man. He ran a horse to death every once in a while, out on his ranch. He was used to having his own way, and took it for granted that everyone and everything would yield to his push. He had blasted a canyon wall out of existence once to give his stock a shorter path to water. That the new water wasn't fit to drink he didn't bother to learn until the canyon wall lay as flat as the sagebrush country. The first time he saw Lily Kalere he swung her off her

feet and kissed her. His left cheek still wore a scar that her long, red fingernails put there.

I made a dollar here and a dollar there from the townsfolk, who were stubborn and proud enough to think that Ike Tarrant didn't run their lives. But on Saturday night, when Ike and his Flying T hands rode into town, I might as well have boarded up my place.

There was a step on the boardwalk, and the batwings moved inward. The gambler stood there, looking at the stuffed buffalo head, the baize-topped poker tables near the east wall, and the long bar. There was a piano in the corner to my left, but he didn't see that, not at first.

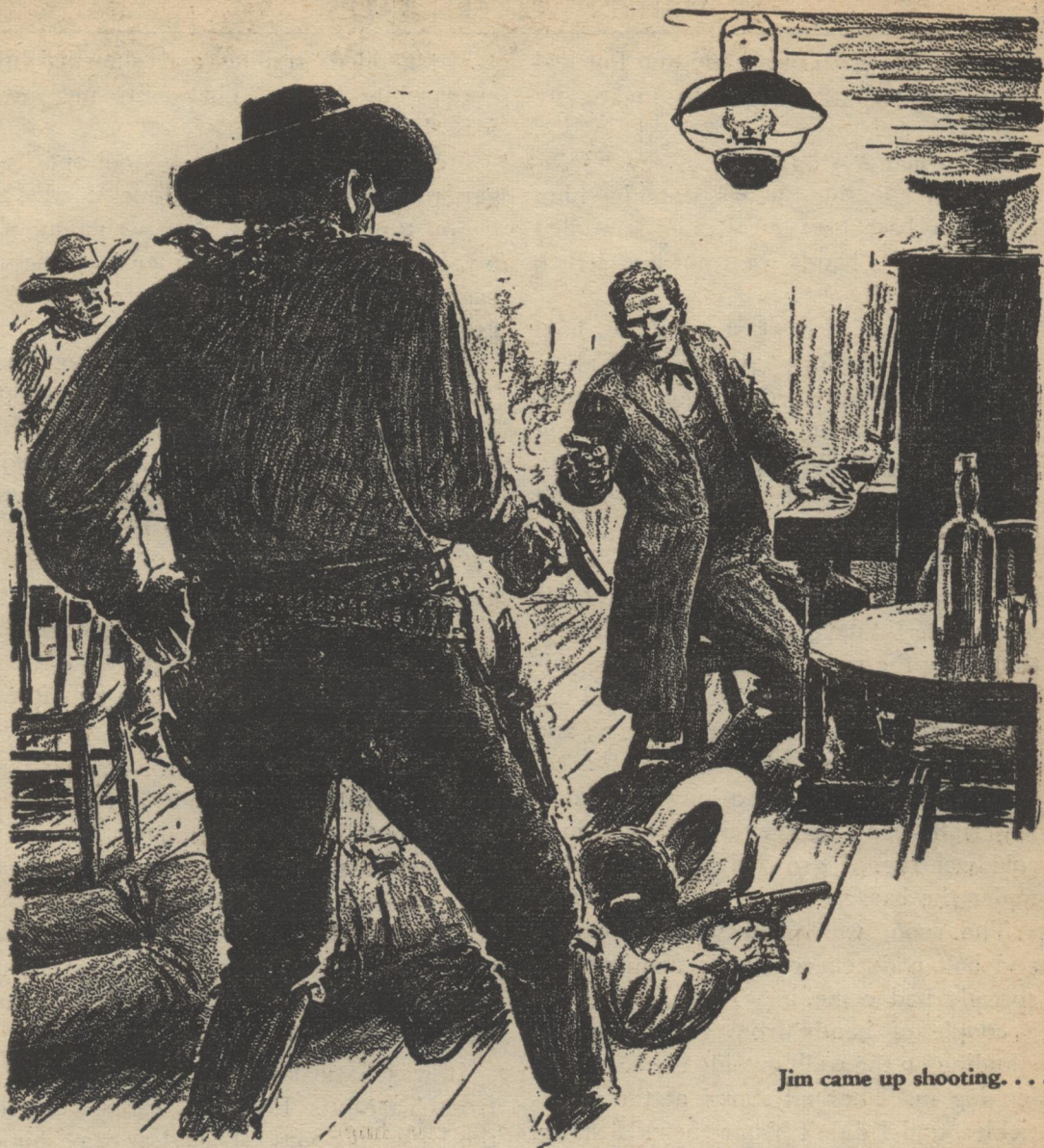
He dropped a coin on the bar and said, "Make it short." The way he said it, I knew he wasn't a drinking man. He made a face, getting it down. His hands were white, his fingers long. His eyes were burning black holes above his gaunt white cheeks.

"Know a man named Yerkes?" he asked. "Albie Yerkes? 'Bout thirty-nine, forty. Big hombre. Two guns."

"Never heard of him."

"He's around these parts. I've followed him up from Nogales, and been eleven years getting here. He's in this town. I met a man who saw him."

I leaned across the bar, smiling with my lips. "Look, friend. I don't know why you're after this Yerkes, and I don't care. But advertising your business in the Silver



Jim came up shooting. . . .

Dollar and Red Gap ain't exactly healthy."

He shrugged casually. "I didn't ask there. Something about those places I didn't like." He hesitated and eyed me as I went on wiping glasses. "Any place in this town got a job for a man?"

I took another look at those gambler hands and shook my head. The Silver Dollar and Red Gap ran faro tables, and had half a dozen chuck-a-luck boxes working, but I just kept my tables for friendly games, as when old John Sedgewick rode in from his Lazy L ranch. Some men,

like old John, can't live without their regular games, just as others need liquor. But mine was no house for a professional sharper.

I told him, "Sorry, not a thing."

He was turning away when he saw the piano. His dark eyes grew bright and his large, wide lips smiled. The smile made a big difference in his face. You didn't see the hunger and the lines in it, then. It was like a starving button being offered a seat at a Christmas dinner.

He walked over and stared down at

the keys. He put out a hand and touched them gently, not enough to make any noise.

He turned. "All right?"

I nodded, wiping the bar, watching him. He threw back his coattails and straddled the stool. His hands went out and struck the keys hard.

I stopped wiping. I stood there, bent over and rigid. Only my ears were alive. Someone had stopped at the batwings, then opened them. Folks were looking in, listening. Somehow I knew Lily had come to the door of the rear room and opened it.

But all that time I was sinking deeper and deeper into a cushion of sound. It was a tune I'd never heard. It wasn't anything like the noisy tunes the bare-shouldered girls in the Silver Dollar pound out every night. It was deep and hungry, and went right through you.

The notes trailed off, a long time later. My right hand was wrapped tight in a cold wet rag. I growled and dumped it under the bar.

The room was filled with townsfolk, and half a dozen cowhands from nearby spreads had come in. There were even a couple of hands from the Flying T, standing on the walk outside the batwings, looking in. They all stared at the ivory-tickler, and I didn't blame them. I stared myself.

Lily Kalere was standing beside him, smiling through the tears in her blue eyes.

"You want a job playing that piano?" she asked.

"You mean—" He broke off, looked at me. I began wiping the big mirror behind the bar. "I certainly do, miss."

"Kalere, Lily Kalere. I sing a few songs here at night. I need an accompanist."

"If I'm taking your job—" he began.

"No," she said, with a laugh. "But we can't pay much. Meals and board. A few dollars for extras."

He nodded, smiling and showing his even white teeth. "That suits me fine, Miss Lily," he said.

He swung around on the stool and began to play again. This time it was a happy tune. My toes were wriggling in my boots, following his fingers, while I began serving out more redeye than I'd got rid of in a coon's age.

The ivory-tickler had come in on the Tuesday afternoon stage. By Friday night I was thinking I was headed toward downright wealth. I'd given Mal Hackley more orders for the stuff he claimed was liquor than he could get in a hurry.

"Do the best you can," I told him. "I'm going to need it, come Saturday night."

I said it with my fingers crossed under the bar overhang, thinking about Ike Tarrant and Black Frank, his two-gun foreman.

News travels like a prairie fire on the sage flats, where everybody is ready and willing to fan it with his tongue. It wasn't long before the ranchers from the valley were dropping in on their trips to town, standing at the bar, necks craned to eye the ivory-tickler where he sat, straight and sombre in his black coat, before the piano.

It was Saturday night before anybody from Tarrant's Flying T came through the batwing doors. Then Ike came himself, his tanned face dark and forbidding under his Stetson. With him walked dour Frank Gordon, his *segundo*.

THERE was a good crowd in the Wagonwheel. A game of poker was going on in the far corner, where old John Sedgewick played with bright eyes and moving lips, hands eager for each new pasteboard. Smoke was in the air, and the soft tinkle of glassware, and the low hum of conversation. Once in a while spurs clinked as a puncher moved along the bar.

I was at the far end of the bar when

Tarrant came in. His bright black eyes moved around the room, carefully. Then he nodded his head and slid aside, into a shadow on the wall.

Lily Kalere was finishing a song. The way Ike's bold eyes were eating her up made me double up my fist. Gordon was eyeing her too, and he turned his head and said something to Tarrant. Both of them showed their white teeth, like hungry wolves.

Lily stepped aside and gestured at Jim Melton, for that was the ivory-tickler's name. His hands moved out and down over the keys. Tarrant stiffened at those first notes. His eyes gleamed as if at a memory. He stood like a statue, listening to that music, hypnotized.

Once Tarrant moved his right hand. It looked as if he placed it on the dark handle of his six-gun. But then a man shifted and I saw his hand was just hooked into his gunbelt, the fingers drumming nervously, as though following the piano keys.

Just before Jim finished his piece, Tarrant slid back through the doors, nudging them with a shoulder. Like a shadow, Black Frank followed him. I sighed and let go of the Colt under the bar. The trouble was over.

I yelled, "All right, folks! Step this way. Drinks on the house."

Lily came over and stood near the bar. She said, "I'm worried, Roy."

"Oh? Has Ike—"

She laughed. "No, not Ike. Or maybe it is Ike, but not the way you think. I've heard things, mixing with the folks. Things that scare me. It seems that Ike is trying to buy out Lem Peters of the Rafter Dot, and Old John Sedgewick's Lazy L."

"That worry you?"

Lily looked at me. "Those two ranches control the water for the whole Basin, Roy. If Ike Tarrant gets control of the river, there's no telling what he might do. Maybe charge money for water."

The Basin is shaped like the eating end of a spoon. In the hollow, there are twenty or more small ranches and farms, owned by good, honest, hard-working folk. They come to town regular, once or twice a week. They keep Linus Smiley's General Store going, and Ed McDonnell's blacksmith shop, and half a dozen other stores that make up Red Gap. At the handle of the spoon there is a small river that forms a half dozen smaller streams down in the Basin. At either side of the handle are the Rafter Dot and Lazy L. Ike Tarrant's Flying T is further up, in among the *malpais* and cactus to the north. If Ike Tarrant bought up those ranches, he'd own both sides of the Sweetwater. And Ike Tarrant wasn't buying land for speculation.

The ivory-tickler came up then, and listened as Lily explained. He said slowly, "He'd have to buy both sides of that river, wouldn't he, to make any kind of play about water rights stick?"

I chuckled dully. "Sure, but Tarrant is the man who has the money 'round these parts. If you're figurin' on getting the small ranchers together to outbid him, forget it. They don't have enough cash between 'em for the job—less they all sell their spreads, an' that ain't likely."

"That's not what I had in mind." He went back to the piano and sat down. Pretty soon his hands were moving over the keys, coaxing out soft, lulling music. He said, without turning around, "I think better this way."

I shrugged. Thinking would never beat Ike Tarrant, once he'd set his mind on a thing.

Two days later, Lem Peters came into the Wagonwheel rigged out like he was going to a dance. He flushed as I stared at him.

He said embarrassedly, "Sold the Rafter Dot to Tarrant, Mike. Goin' back to Tucson and buy me a farm. Never did seem to get nowheres with cattle."

I put a bottle and a glass in front of him. He filled the glass and drank swiftly. He refilled it, and stared down at the whiskey.

"Reckon you got a good price," I said slowly. "Maybe more than thirty pieces of silver?"

Lem jerked his head like I'd slapped him. The flush on his cheeks was a dull red. He said thickly, "You can't say that to me, Roy Bellows! I got a good mind to—"

"How much did Tarrant pay, Peters?"

It was the ivory-tickler who spoke. He was standing in the back door, almost filling it, in his shirtsleeves. There was a funny smile on his lips, and his eyes were oddly bright.

"Well—don't rightly see that it's any of your business. But it was more'n I paid out myself, so I couldn't afford to turn it down. I got over five thousand for it."

"Is that all?" asked the ivory-tickler in surprise. "Seems Tarrant ought to go higher than that. Why, man, think of all the riverbank you sold him!"

Lem Peters scratched his head ruefully. "Reckon you're right, Jim. But I was so tickled to make a profit, I kind of forgot my business sense."

The ivory-tickler tossed some coins on the bar. "Fill up Lem's glass, Roy. I'm going to be in the back room for a couple of hours."

I found him bent over the small table in the back room two hours later, shuffling and dealing a shiny pack of cards. He half-turned as I opened the door. "Come on in, Roy. It's been some time since I've handled the pasteboards. Thought I'd better practice up some for Saturday night."

"Oh? You turnin' gambler? If you need more money, I can spare a raise, I guess."

His face was intent as he dealt. The cards dropped into neat little fans in front of imaginary players. He spoke without

taking his eyes off the moving cards.

"You can't pay big enough, Roy. I'm going after real money. Say, ten or twelve thousand dollars."

I gaped at him, and swallowed hard. "Who's got that kind of money 'round Red Gap?"

"Ike Tarrant. Watch, Roy. That hand there—turn it over and look at the pips. I call it treys and nine, with a queen. Then look at the next. Three deuces. The third hand has a full house."

I turned the hands up and spread them. He had called the turn on every one. A little voice began to whisper in my ears. I remembered my first impressions of him as he had stood in the shadow of the Overland in the dusty street outside my Wagonwheel. I thought then that he was a gambler. Now I knew he was. And I didn't like it.

He must have read my thoughts from my eyes. He laughed shortly, and drew in the cards. "Man gets to know something about poker, after eleven years of traveling the cowtowns and trails. I've had some good teachers. But better than teachers—"

He unrolled his right sleeve and drew it back. Fastened to his forearm was a contraption made of a spring and a tiny metal grip. Gamblers call it a holdout. They use it to better their hands by feeding them with cards the holdout claw held.

"Then there's a little addition that I made myself. Look."

He unstrapped the holdout and put it carefully in his pocket. From another pocket he drew out something similar in shape and design, but this newer one held a different grip, and a larger spring. When he strapped it on and slid a small Derringer into the grip, I grew cold in my belly.

The ivory-tickler buttoned his loose sleeve. He moved his right arm forward with a jerk. The Derringer was in his

palm, his finger curled about the guardless trigger. "It slips me a gun, Ed, instead of a card. Good against gunmen who're proud of their draws. Saved my neck a dozen times, from Hayes City to Deadwood. Wild Bill Hickok had something like this, only he strapped it under a shoulder instead of his arm."

Carefully he unstrapped the gadget and put it away.

I said slowly, "You said something about taking ten thousand iron men from Ike Tarrant. Are you loco?"

He shook his head. "Tarrant will pay. Tarrant wants Sedgewick's Lazy L. Sedgewick will let it go for pin money. I won't."

"How you goin' to buy old John's place?"

"Don't intend to buy it. I'll win it from him at draw poker. Haven't you seen the old gent in here, night after night, humped over that green baize table-top, betting those chips he buys? Gambling's in his blood. He'd bet a dead steer could walk, at the right odds."

I put my palms flat on the table and leaned forward. "Jim, I've liked havin' you here. It's been fun. Folks have enjoyed listenin' to you tickle those ivories. But I draw the line at cheatin' a poor old man out of his ranch. I'm askin' you to take those cards an' that gun—"

"It's no good, Roy. I can play Sedgewick in the Red Gap or the Silver Dollar.

You might as well let me play him here. That way you can keep an eye on me. Tell you what—you catch me cheatin' him an' I'll pack up an' move on. Fair enough?"

The ivory-tickler turned back to the cards. I could tell by the set of his lips he was finished palavering. The only sound in the room was the soft riffing of the cards as he shuffled and dealt, again and again, over and over, monotonously. But the fingers that could perform magic with the piano keys seemed to be just as tricky with the pasteboards. I shrugged my shoulders. I went out and closed the door softly behind me.

THAT Saturday night the ivory-tickler was especially nice to Old John. He played the old man's favorite tunes; things like *The Landlady of France* and *Dixie*. It wasn't long before I heard them arguing about cards. Old Sedgewick claimed that draw poker was a button's game, and that a real man played stud. After a while, half the Wagonwheel was grinning and nagging on both men. It was Lily Kalere who suggested they play it out.

That game began at twenty minutes after ten by the clock on the west wall. By midnight, there was no one at the bar. I was part of the crowd around the green-topped table where John Sedgewick, a frown on his pasty face, sat fac-

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ing the smiling ivory-tickler. Beyond the old man's shoulder I caught a glimpse of Lily Kalere's strained face as her blue eyes remained glued to Jim Melton's long-fingered, adept hands. He was dealing. The cards fell in a soft pat-pat in front of Old John.

The ivory-tickler smiled, "You're down to your last few chips, sir. Shall we call it a night—and admit my game is best?"

"No, damn you!" roared Old John, half rising from his round-backed chair. His fist crashed on the tabletop and upset the carefully piled chips in front of the piano player. "I'll stick to stud an' still break you! Gimme those cards."

"But," reminded the other slowly, with a friendly smile, "you've borrowed on all the ready cash you have. I have your notes for over a thousand dollars."

The light from the kerosene lamps caught the glittering sweatbeads on the old man's forehead. Absently, he wiped them away with a flick of his hand. He looked dazed. He croaked hoarsely, "I—I'll put up the Lazy L. My ranch. It's worth four—five thousand dollars. Must be worth all of that."

"More than that, sir," answered the ivory tickler. "I would value it at seven thousand five. Do you want chips in that amount?"

Men looked at one another in the smoky room. Old John squinted at the ivory tickler unbelievably. "Sev-seven five? Why, that's a right nice price, Jim. But I couldn't think of takin' advantage—"

Jim Melton waved his white hand. "That's the price I'm prepared to advance. Of course, I'll want some sort of proof—a deed, or your writing giving me title to the land and the ranch and all the livestock."

Lily cried out in protest. For the first time, the ivory-tickler acknowledged her presence by looking straight at her. After a moment, he dropped his eyes to the cards he held.

Old John turned to find me in the on-lookers. "Roy," he said, "you must have a pencil and paper somewhere around."

I brought him what he needed and watched him write. Old John turned to a couple of men and asked them to sign as witnesses. Then he folded the paper and passed it across the table. The ivory-tickler weighted it with a pile of chips, carefully counted out seven thousand, five hundred dollars' worth of chips, and pushed them across the baize. Then he picked up his cards.

For an hour, Old John won steadily. Then he began to lose heart-breaking hands: three aces to a low straight, two high pair to three treys, a straight to a flush. He grew whiter by the minute, crowding his luck, talking to himself. The ivory tickler played grimly, in a fog of concentration. I thought, *This man loves money. He fights for each chip as a lover fights for the honor of his sweetheart!* A faint vein of bitterness crept through me as I stood watching Jim Melton's expert hands. Not once had I caught him cheating.

Lily Kalere stumbled from the table at two o'clock. There were dark crescents under her eyes that appeared hollow above her pale cheeks. The ivory-tickler touched her back with his eyes, as she turned away, then dealt himself two cards.

At three o'clock, Old John began to win again, but thirty minutes later he lost two thousand dollars bracing four sevens with four deuces. For a numb moment, as the ivory-tickler exposed his cards and reached for the giant pile of chips in the middle of the table, I thought the old man would faint.

It was dawn when Jim Melton took the old man's last chip. He sat with the chips stacked high on either side and in front of him, and he leaned back and said, "It's all over. I'm sorry, John."

The old man stood up. His gaunt body

swayed slightly as he put up a hand to shield his eyes from the sickly glow of the kerosene lamps. And then the ivory-tickler reached out and caught his elbow to steady him.

"Stay the night with me, sir," he said to the old man. "I've an extra bunk in my room."

The old man looked at him as if he did not see him. But he nodded his head. "Yes. Thank you, Jim. I'd admire that."

They went off together, side by side, into the growing sunlight that came streaming in the window.

The next afternoon Old John Sedgewick took the stage for Cheyenne. There was five hundred dollars in his pockets that the ivory-tickler insisted on his taking, "For luck." The story of that poker game was all over Red Gap. Folks lined the slat walks to give the old man a cheer. That afternoon, Jim Melton never left the piano. He was still sitting, playing softly to himself, when I went around to light the lamps.

Two days later, Black Frank Gordon came into the Wagonwheel and headed toward the ivory-tickler. He didn't beat around the bush. He stood with his heavy legs aspraddle and talked.

"Hear you're the new owner of Sedgewick's Lazy L. But you ain't any ranchman. Ike Tarrant wants to buy that ranch."

The ivory-tickler dropped his hands from the piano keys and swung around on the stool. He was smiling, "Fine," he said. "I'll be glad to sell. What are you prepared to offer?"

"Ike knows what you gave Sedgewick at that game. He'll go better'n that. He'll give you eight thousand, though anybody could tell you it ain't worth that much."

"It's worth twelve-five to me, maybe even more to Tarrant."

Black Frank's face got red as a ripe beet. I could see his neck pulsing as he tried to fight down the edge in his voice.

"Reckon you don't get around much, stranger, hunkered down in back of that piano. You don't know ranch prices. You'd better take that eight. You'll never get a better offer."

"And that's all right with me, too," smiled Jim. "I've never owned very much, always moving from town to town. It's a nice feeling, knowing I own land. If Tarrant won't pay my price, there's no need to talk about it. Good day."

Black Frank sputtered. I deliberately coughed, and felt the foreman's black eyes fastened on mine. Under the bar, my right hand was clenched around the butt of my colt. Even thinking what I did about the ivory-tickler, he wasn't going to get murdered in my saloon if I could help it.

Gordon shrugged and muttered, "I'll be back tomorrow. I got to see Ike about that price."

Black Frank was pushing in the batwing doors a few minutes before noon the next day, taking out a big roll of greenbacks as he walked. Jim was in the shadows near the far wall. He laughed when he saw Gordon.

"Why didn't Tarrant come?" he wanted to know.

Gordon just shrugged and put the money on the bar. He snapped, "Count it, then we'll go across the street to Hal Barclay's law office and make out the deed."

"Oh, I took care of that this morning. He drew up the deed for me. I have it here, in my pocket."

He took out the neatly folded paper and handed it to Gordon. Gordon growled and snatched it. Without a word, he turned on a high heel and moved toward the door, his spurs jingling musically.

Jim Melton pushed the greenbacks toward me. "Put them in your safe, Ed. Hold them for me. I may need some of that money, before long."

"You've done a fine job in town," I

told him. "You're like a leech, you know? You sink your suckers in somebody else's misfortune and ride it for a profit."

His dark eyes stared back at me soberly. I went on, "You know Tarrant wants them ranches to dam up that river. He'll have everybody in this Basin scratchin' dust in the next six months!"

He turned away and went back to the piano. He sat down and began to play. I brooded behind my bar. If it was up to me, I'd kick him out of the Wagonwheel, but Lily was eating her heart out about him, and I was hoping that something would happen to make them the good friends they had been before he played that poker game with Old John Sedgewick.

TARRANT didn't waste any time. He got his hands together and set them to work blasting rock. He dropped the roping and the branding and set them to lugging rocks from back in the breaks. He worked them like slaves for two weeks.

His surveyors came up from Cheyenne on a Saturday. Gordon was there with the Studebaker wagon to meet them and take them out to the Flying T. I saw the ivory-tickler leaning against the corner of the town barber shop, a funny smile on his lips as they drove out in a haze of dust.

When he saw me watching him, he came over. "Did you know that Ike Tarrant played piano?" he asked.

I remembered the way Ike's fingers had drummed on his shellbelt when he was in the Wagonwheel. Somehow, learning that he knew the keyboard of a piano didn't surprise me.

"He never liked to practice. He was always impatient. He took the shortcuts." His voice was dreamy, soft, as he spoke, as if he were remembering forgotten years. "Always in a hurry. Never take the time to do something right. Just

strong-arm his way. If you were in a position to slow him down, he would get rid of you."

"First time I heard you knew him that well."

He smiled. "Some men you meet once, and you know them. Isn't he everything I said?"

I thought about Ike Tarrant bossing the town, keeping other folks out of my Wagonwheel before the ivory-tickler hit Red Gap; I thought of how he dynamited a canyon to give his stock a shorter path to water; I thought about how he grabbed Lily and kissed her the first time he ever saw her. Jim was right. He had Ike Tarrant sized up exactly.

"He'll be in to see me tonight," he added, as an afterthought. "But he'll send Black Frank in ahead of him."

Gordon came at a little after ten. We heard the drumming of his mount's hoofs as they thundered around the gulch and straightened on the slope that led into Red Gap. There were only a few people in the Wagonwheel. Word had gotten out that the Flying T was on the prod, with the Wagonwheel the focal point of the expected explosion. A dour-faced Flying T hand had driven the surveyors into town for the six o'clock stage. They had sat in the wagon looking grim, then climbed out of it and directly into the stage. They did not say a word, and the Flying T man did not get out of the wagon for a drink.

The ivory-tickler was playing the piano when Black Frank came in through the doors. I ducked and shivered unconsciously. I have seen Gordon in a killing rage, but never one like this. His face was ashen, and his black eyes were like holes in some deep pit.

He slid toward the piano, his right thigh scarcely moving from his hanging right hand.

He said, "You run a blazer on us. You didn't copy that description on the deed

right. You kept ten feet all along the river for yourself."

Jim played on, but he watched Black Frank carefully. He said, "You wanted the Lazy L for graze land. You said so yourself. The ten feet along the riverbank is rock. The town lawyer, who happens to own a little ranch in the Basin, was very helpful. I told him what I wanted to do, and he suggested the clause that reserved ownership of the riverbank to me. Of course, I had to give Tarrant a good opportunity to read that clause and accept or reject it. We gave him ten days. The lawyer seemed to think he'd be back that afternoon, but Ike never did like work. He figured to let his surveyors read the description when they came. Any man who blows down a canyon wall for water without first checking on the water, isn't going to be bothered reading a deed. The ten days are up. Looks like Tarrant has bought himself a ranch."

Black Frank snarled and reached for his gun. Jim did not stop playing, but suddenly there was a gun in his right hand and he triggered it twice. Gordon lurched sideways, his body suddenly topheavy, his legs too weak to keep him upright. He hit the dry boards of the floor and lay still.

Jim whispered softly, "Tarrant will follow him in. I don't want anyone blamed for this. I'll see him when he comes."

It was midnight when Ike pushed in the batwings and stood staring at Black Frank's body. I didn't know him at first, the way his face was all twisted up as if there were strings inside him pulling his muscles. His bitter, angry mouth was drawn down until it looked like an overturned bowl. He slid away from the doors and whispered, "Who did it?"

The ivory-tickler touched the keyboard gently, then more strongly. He was playing the same thing he had played when he shot Gordon. But now I watched

him, and saw that he used only his left hand. He smiled, but his dark eyes were cold and bitter above his gaunt cheeks.

"I killed him, Al—the same way you killed my brother and his wife. Remember, Al?"

Ike stared at him, seeing him for the first time. Ike's eyes opened wider and he leaned forward. He cried out harshly, unintelligibly. His face went white, and his body swayed.

"You never really got a good look at me before, Al. I've changed in the eleven years it took to find you. You didn't know me that other night you stepped in to listen to my playing. Did it take you back a long time, Al—my playing?"

"The jury let you go, Al, because you had it all figured out ahead of time. You kept on playing all the time you pumped bullets into them. You never missed a note. That's what the testimony

(Continued on page 125)

FIRST AID

COLD DISCOMFORTS

HEADACHES

ACID INDIGESTION

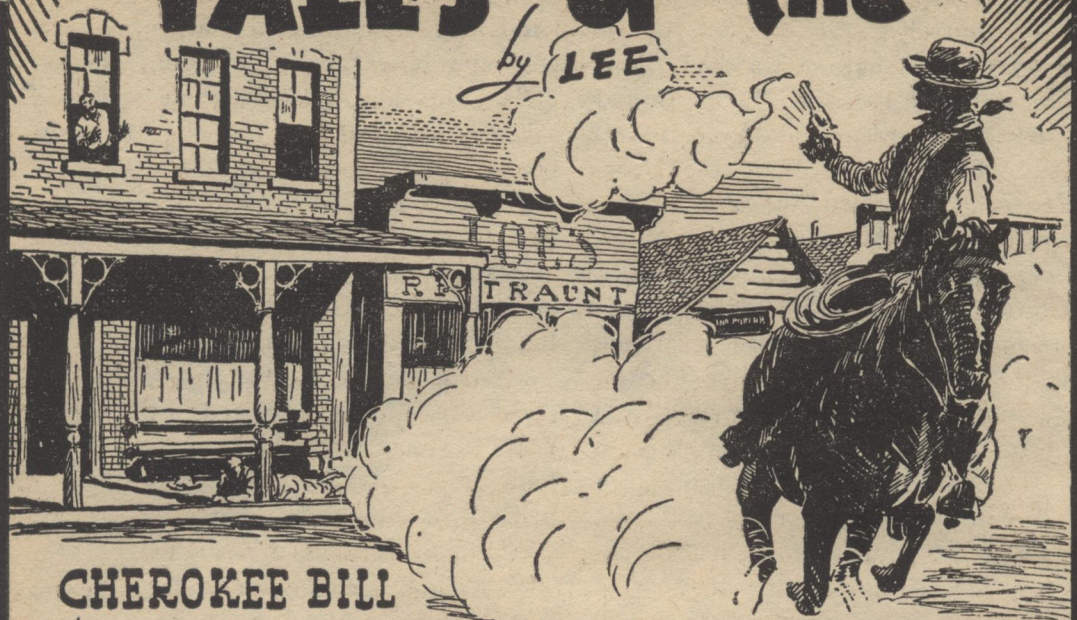
MUSCULAR PAINS

Alka-Seltzer

ALL DRUG STORES
U.S. AND CANADA

TALES of the

by LEE



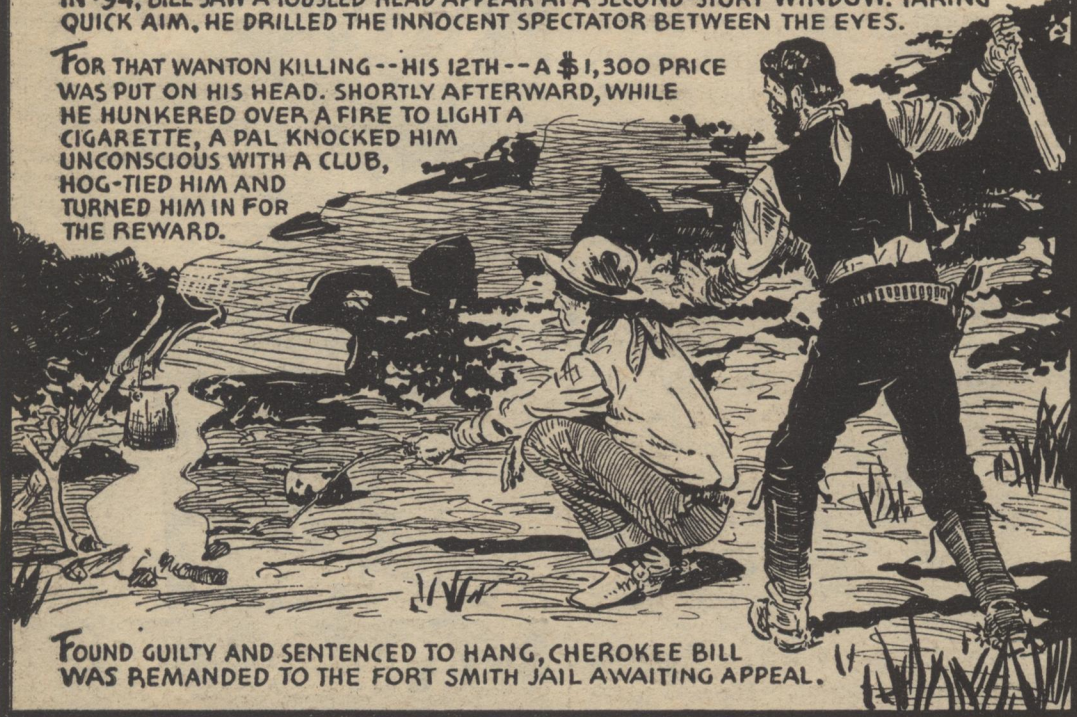
CHEROKEE BILL

AT LEAST AN EIGHTH OF CRAWFORD "CHEROKEE BILL" GOLDSBY WAS CHEROKEE. THE REST WAS A MIXTURE OF ALL THE BAD BLOODS THAT MADE THE TERRITORY THAT LATER BECAME OKLAHOMA A HARDCASE'S PARADISE.

BACK FROM THE FAMOUS CARLISLE INDIAN SCHOOL, BILL THREW IN WITH A ROUGH LOT IN THE EARLY 1890's AND BEFORE HE WAS 19 HAD KILLED HIS FIRST MAN. AFTER THAT, HE ASSEMBLED A GANG OF RUFFIANS AND BEGAN AN ORGY OF BANDITRY DURING WHICH HIS OWN SIX-GUNS SNUFFED OUT 10 MORE LIVES.

GALLOPING DOWN THE MAIN STREET AFTER A STORE ROBBERY AT LENAPAH, KANSAS, IN '94, BILL SAW A TOUSLED HEAD APPEAR AT A SECOND-STORY WINDOW. TAKING QUICK AIM, HE DRILLED THE INNOCENT SPECTATOR BETWEEN THE EYES.

FOR THAT WANTON KILLING -- HIS 12TH -- A \$1,300 PRICE WAS PUT ON HIS HEAD. SHORTLY AFTERWARD, WHILE HE HUNKERED OVER A FIRE TO LIGHT A CIGARETTE, A PAL KNOCKED HIM UNCONSCIOUS WITH A CLUB, HOG-TIED HIM AND TURNED HIM IN FOR THE REWARD.



FOUND GUILTY AND SENTENCED TO HANG, CHEROKEE BILL WAS REMANDED TO THE FORT SMITH JAIL AWAITING APPEAL.

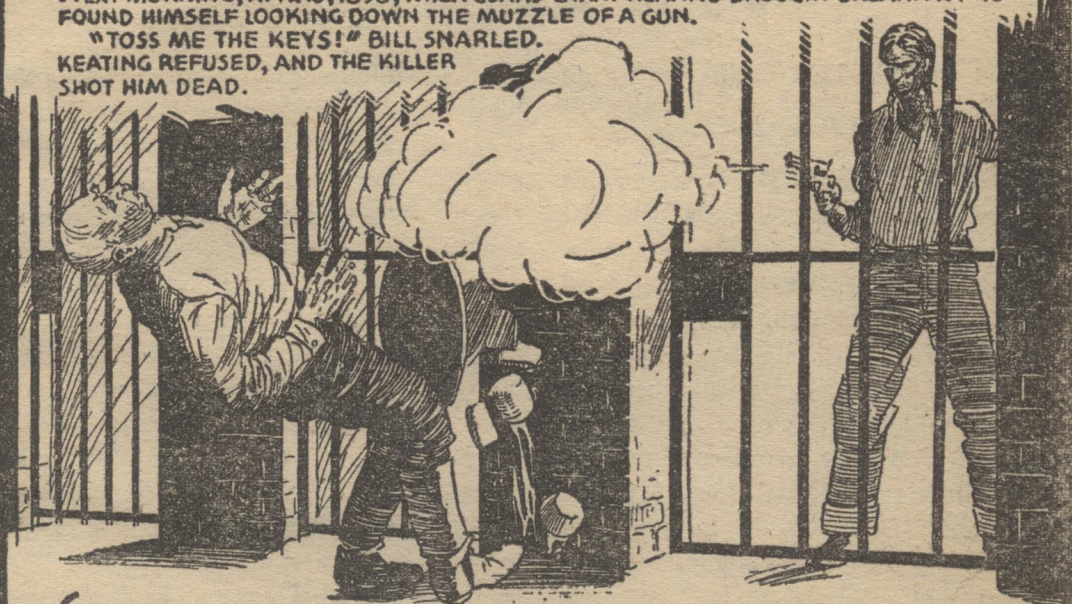
OLD WEST

THERE HE HATCHED AN INGENUOUS PLOT TO FREE HIMSELF AND THE JAIL'S 250 OTHER PRISONERS. IN THE DARKNESS, FRIENDS THRUST A .45 TIED TO THE END OF A LONG POLE BETWEEN THE BARS OF HIS CELL WINDOW.

NEXT MORNING, APR. 13, 1895, WHEN GUARD LARRY KEATING BROUGHT BREAKFAST HE FOUND HIMSELF LOOKING DOWN THE MUZZLE OF A GUN.

"TOSS ME THE KEYS!" BILL SNARLED.

KEATING REFUSED, AND THE KILLER SHOT HIM DEAD.



CHEROKEE BILL'S TRIAL FOR KEATING'S MURDER--HIS 13TH, AND COMMITTED ON THE 13TH--SET SOMETHING OF A RECORD. IT TOOK 13 HOURS, 13 WITNESSES TESTIFIED, AND THE JURY FOUND HIM GUILTY IN JUST 13 MINUTES. THERE ARE 13 STEPS TO THE GALLOWS.



ON THE GALLOWS, ASKED IF HE HAD ANY COMMENT TO MAKE, HE SAID, "I CAME HERE TO DIE, NOT TO MAKE A SPEECH!" HE DID--QUICKLY.

Herd 'Em North

Three men rode with Greenough on that Satan's Cattle Drive—three haunted corpses in search of a grave . . . and a fourth to fill it!

By JOE ARCHIBALD

CHAPTER ONE

Trail Buzzards

BEN GREENOUGH took out his heavy silver-case watch and held it close to the light fanning out from a heap of glowing embers. The long hand was practically covering the smaller one at the hour of midnight. He stepped toward a blanketed figure near a big mesquite clump and nudged him with his boot. The sleeping cowpuncher grunted, lifted his arms over his head and looked up at Greenough. "Yeah, Ben," he said and threw himself free of the sugan. "Seems like I jus' got t' sleep."

"Rusty'll be wantin' his relief, Johnny," Greenough said, and then looked out across the flats, his shoulders thrust forward. The unease had been inside him all the way from the border and tonight it was delaying his rest. Out there a thousand head of cattle were bedded down and he knew a single gunshot or a flash of light could put them to frenzied flight. His ears picked up no unusual sounds, but his other senses were not quite satisfied. He watched Johnny Geer mount a night-horse and ride down the slope to the flats, and waited for Rusty Bell to come in.

The trip from Sonora just across the border had not been as rugged as Greenough had expected, even though he had had to bury one of his crew after a brush with half a dozen border jumpers one starless night. Sad Sam McHale had been a good man, too, and had taken a couple of raiders along with him. There was

almost two hundred miles to go before the herd would reach Mathew Kuhl's Double A, and Greenough abstractedly hummed a tune he'd heard one Sunday he'd gone to church with Gail Collard. It was something about having one more river to cross.

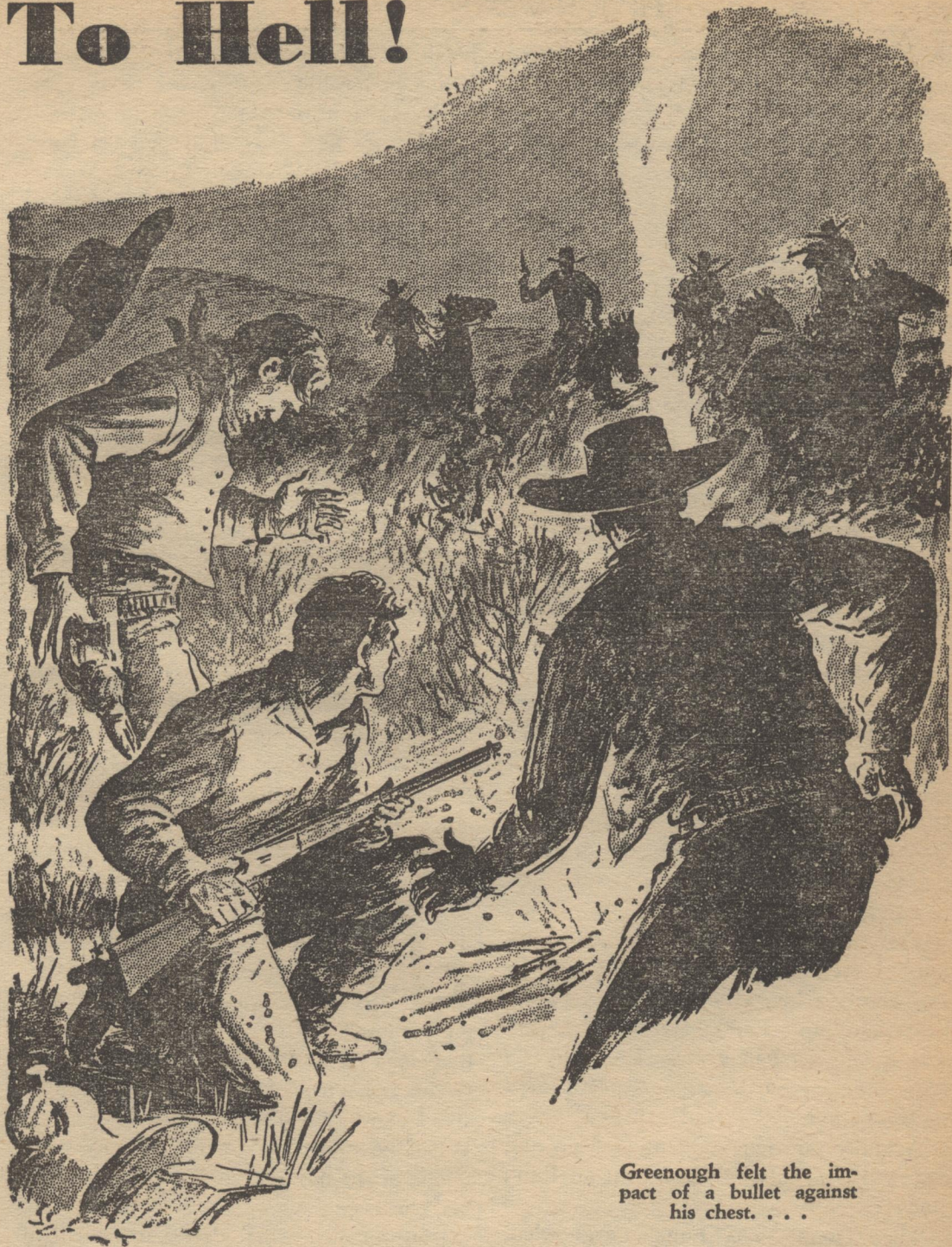
It had been quite a job for five men, even at the start. The remuda furnished by Kuhl had been a slim one, and a good bronc and one packhorse had been buried along with Sad Sam. It seemed years since he had seen Gail and had heard the proposition Ben Kuhl had made to him in the Double A ranchhouse. The big cattleman had called him in one night after he'd been riding with Gail, and he'd expected a loud explosion and the pay that was due him.

"Greenough, you're an ordinary puncher and I pay you sixty dollars a month," Kuhl had ground out. "You've got your gall gettin' ideas about my niece. I sent her East t' educate her right an' learn t' dress like a lady an' give her a lady's manners. It cost me more'n you'll ever save in a lifetime, an' that's why I've been hopin' t' marry her off t' a man like Stace Edwards. Too old, she says. Hell, he's only fifty, an' he owns the Bradded L."

"She told me he was too old," Greenough had said.

"Look, you young squirt!" Kuhl had roared. "Stace drove two thousand head of cattle out of Mexico with only two men t' help him when he was twice your age. I'm goin' to see if you're man enough to bring half that number here. If you can, then maybe I'll let you go on seein' Gail,

To Hell!



Greenough felt the impact of a bullet against his chest. . . .

an' fix you up so's you can support her."

"How many men do I get?" Greenough had asked, and Kuhl had laughed at him. "Three besides yourself, Greenough, an' you'll find 'em yourself. You want me t'

give you punchers you know as well you know yourself, huh? I want t' see if you can judge men an' if you can handle 'em."

A rider came in and dropped wearily out of the saddle and hunkered down by

the low fire for a moment. "Things seem too peaceful, Ben," he said, and then began making his bed. Rusty Bell was a long and lean puncher Greenough had picked up in the town of Rowley one night. He'd been riding the chuck lines and was ripe for any job.

Greenough said, "Keep your fingers crossed," and tried to get some sleep himself. Back there across the border, they'd found a certain Mexican without much trouble. After Pancho Villa had turned things upside down, cattle were spread out all over Sonora, and roving vaqueros had gathered them up and sold them for the best price they could get. Matt Kuhl had learned of one particular bunch of stock that was for sale if any Texas cattleman thought it worth while to send some of his riders after it.

Greenough slept for awhile, then opened his eyes and looked up at the stars. A thin mist had taken some of the brilliance out of them. They reminded him of Gail's eyes the night he'd said goodbye. Bright eyes misted by tears. Words she had spoken still bothered him. "I'm afraid, Ben. I'm afraid. Uncle Matt doesn't need that stock, and it'll be mostly scrubs. Oh, be careful, Ben!"

The cattle weren't much, he had to admit. A lot more of the tallow would be run off their bones before they were delivered to Matt Kuhl. He thought, *If I was Kuhl, and had a niece like Gail, I'd have t' be sure of the jigger that wanted to marry her.*

A bulky puncher suddenly sat up and called to Greenough. "You hear anythin', Ben?"

The Double A puncher growled, "You're dreamin', Yuma," and turned his thoughts behind him again. *But one man is already dead because you had to be shown, Kuhl!*

Sometimes a sleeping man hears more clearly than one who is fully awake. Yuma Smith had been frank when Greenough

had hired him, thirty miles from the border. Yuma had ridden with a wild bunch up in Wyoming at one time, but he'd guessed the sheriffs in Texas didn't give a hoot about catchin' Wyoming's badmen, seeing as how they had plenty of spooks of their own to watch out for. Yuma had that sixth sense a man on the dodge has to have. He sat up straight again and then jumped to his feet. The crack of a rifle broke the stillness and Yuma died in the act of grabbing for his gun.

Greenough heard the sounds now. He could see the moving shapes less than a hundred yards away. The raiders fired again as Greenough kicked at the fire's red embers. His gun was in his hand and he threw three shots. Down on the flats the cattle began bawling. Rusty Bell was on one knee, lifting his Winch, when Ben Greenough felt the impact of a bullet against his chest. He fell over backward and landed heavily and before his senses left him, looked up to see the raiders sweeping in. There was the low-rolling thunder of hoofs in his ears as he went down into the black pit, and his last thought then was that he should yell a warning to Johnny Geer. . . .

HE CAME back slowly. He sat up for fully five minutes before he realized he was still alive. Dawn's pink glow filled the sky and there was the smell of death about. The back of Greenough's head seemed twice its normal size and was filled with a throbbing ache. When he moved his arms, he was conscious of the lump of soreness high up on his chest and all at once he knew the reason for his being alive. A guardian angel must have been looking out for him, he thought. Most of the time he'd kept that big watch in the watch-pocket of his Levis, but the last day or two had carried it in a high pocket of his cowhide vest. Why, he'd never rightfully know. He took out the watch and stared at the forty-five

bullet imbedded deep into the works. It had nearly pierced the back of the case and had slammed against his flesh and knocked him off his feet. He put the timepiece back in his vest pocket, making sure its whang-leather string was fastened through a buttonhole and made tight, then slowly got to his feet.

The nausea dragged at his stomach as he looked down across the flats completely emptied of cattle, then nearly stumbled over the body of Rusty Bell. One of Rusty's hands was in the ashes of the fire, and now he knew the reason for the horrible smell. He looked over at what was left of Yuma Smith after bullets and the hoofs of horses had finished with him, and suddenly he dropped to the ground when the thought occurred to him that a man might have been left behind for awhile to make sure the raid had been complete.

It was difficult for Ben Greenough to realize that a thousand cattle were gone and that the last three of his men were surely dead. He saw no horses anywhere, just a couple of saddles, and some blankets strewn near the fire. The coffee pot was bent out of shape. Yuma's pipe, untouched, lay near it. *An inanimate thing looks almost alive when the person it belonged to dies*, Greenough thought, and he dropped his head in his hands. Sad Sam, Yuma, Rusty Bell were dead. Johnny Geer couldn't be alive. All good men. He'd felt sort of responsible for them all. *Gail, he thought, I might as well be dead.*

The new sun was half born, and he guessed he had been rendered senseless for about two hours. During that time, a trail herd could be far away and it could have taken any one of three directions. The raiders could not have been Mexicans—it was eighty miles back to the border, and now he remembered the silhouettes of the killers and once more heard their cries. He walked down onto the flats, his legs weak under him, and thought of Matt Kuhl. The man had built the Double A,

men said, with a wide loop and a running iron, and a hatful of quitclaim deeds, but he had operated during the days when there was little law west of the Pecos and when there was hardly a sign of barbed wire and cedar posts. His arrogance had kept in step with his successes, and he was a ruthless man when he was crossed or something or somebody got in his way.

Greenough came upon the body of Johnny Geer. The young puncher was prone on the parched grass, fifty yards from where the flats ended, near a curving, willow-lined creek. Johnny's six-gun was close to his right hand. Three bullets had gone through him. The Double A rider cursed the violence he saw, and knew what he'd surely do if he ever came upon a man who'd been a part of it. He broke Johnny's gun and saw that the night guard had fired three shots, and wondered had the kid missed with them all.

Greenough dragged the dead man down to the willows and here he collected rocks and piled them over him. His legs gave way when he'd finished and he staggered to the creek bank and fell forward and let his aching head go under water for almost a minute. Some of the fire went out of his brain and he washed the wound the best he could, then he lay sprawled out on the grass, uncertain as to his next move. Later, coming up onto the flats from the creek, he saw the buzzards in the sky, and wished it were possible to bury Rusty and Yuma. He angled across the flats and walked toward a string of low hills, his mind still fogged and altogether bewildered.

The sun was getting high when he slid down the steep side of a canyon and heard the raucous croaks of buzzards that sluggishly lifted their wings and left what they had been feeding on near a clump of pinons. Greenough stumbled across a graveled wash and suddenly stopped and looked down at a black hat snagged by a

tangle of brier. His eyes lifted slightly and traveled ahead and came to rest on a dead man. Moving closer, he saw that the buzzards had begun their feast, but more cold-blooded scavengers than they had battered the man's face beyond recognition. Two bullets had gone through the man, and now Greenough knew Johnny Geer had not quit without putting up a fight.

Steeling himself to a grisly task, the puncher looked through the man's pockets, but found them empty. His six-gun was gone and his boots were off. "Smart hombres," Greenough ground out, and looked up at the impatiently circling buzzards. Then he looked at the victim's boots and wondered why they had been left there. They were of fine leather and had just about been broken in. He picked one up and examined it, looked at a stockinged foot of the corpse, and knew he had never seen a smaller foot on a grown man. These boots must have been made to order, and so Greenough looked for a bootmaker's name and found it. L. B. Royce. San Antonio, Texas.

Made to order. The puncher smiled thinly. All of it had been made to order. Had it cost Matt Kuhl six thousand dollars to make sure his niece wouldn't marry below her station? Six dollars a head for the stock. When he got around to it, Greenough told himself, he'd find the kind of doctor that could tell what was wrong with his head. Before he left, he piled rocks over the upper part of the man's body, and guessed the buzzards would be watching him the rest of the day.

Ben Greenough walked until noon and picked up a cart road near a limestone outcropping. He lay down beside it and waited for some of the weariness and sickness to drain out of him, and was dropping off to sleep when he heard the grind of wheels against gravel and the slow cadence of heavy hoofs. He sat up and looked down the road and soon a two-horsed wagon hove into sight, and he

got to his feet and waited for it to come up.

CHAPTER TWO

"Ride, killer!"

A HEAVY-SET, bearded man hauled his team in when Greenough lifted a hand. "Climb up, Mister," he said. "What happened t' your bronc?"

"Ain't sure," Greenough said, and leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. "Where you headin' for?"

"St. Cloud. About seven miles from here," the freighter said.

"Seen anythin' of a trail herd any time t' day?" the puncher asked, and the bearded man shook his head. Greenough kept silent for the next two or three miles, despite the leading questions the man put to him. At last he admitted, "Yeah, I was drivin' some Mexican cattle up this way. Outlaws jumped us. That's all I know."

"Got some cold biscuits with meat in'em, friend," the freighter said, and reached under the seat. He put the paper bag next to Greenough. "Help yourself."

The puncher guessed he'd never tasted anything better. The food gave him both a mental and physical lift, and he was thinking clearly now as the wagon rolled down a long slope and into the town of St. Cloud. "Much obliged," he grinned when he dropped to the ground in front of the express office. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"I'm a temperance man," the driver grinned. "But you better have more'n one. You need it."

Greenough walked into the St. Cloud saloon and leaned against the bar. "A bottle of it," he said to the barkeep, and felt the ache in his head once more. "What you waitin' for?" he snapped when a full minute had gone by. "Oh." He reached into the pocket of his Levis and brought out four half-dollars. "I do look like a saddle bum, don't I?"

The barkeep became friendly and slid a bottle toward him. Ben Greenough poured a drink and hurriedly downed it, and his blood quickened with the fire of it. Sure, he could drink this place half dry. Inside his shirt he had the money that had rightfully belonged to Sad Sam McHale, Rusty Bell, Yuma, and Johnny Geer. He had to give them their pay when the cattle had crossed the border, according to the agreement thad had been made. He would throw that poke at Kuhl's feet and tell him he could pay those boys when he got to Tophet. Three drinks later he'd changed his mind. He had to have a horse.

He went to the St. Cloud livery stable and was taken out to a little corral in back and given his pick of three broncs. He chose a black that looked as if it had plenty of bottom in it, and then bickered over a worn saddle. He had very little of Kuhl's money left when he led the bronc to the little, box-like hotel and hitched it to the tie-rail. He went into the lobby and asked a man on duty there for some paper and an envelope, and then sat down and wrote a letter to L. B. Royce, Bootmaker at San Antonio. On the upper left hand corner of the envelope he wrote his own name and under it, General Delivery. Brazo, Texas. He took it to the post office and was told it would go out on the stage in less than an hour, and then went back to the hotel and got himself a room.

With fourteen hours sleep strengthening him, Ben Greenough left St. Cloud at six in the morning and rode until dusk. The next noon hour found him on familiar range, and the sight of Matt Kuhl's cattle grazing on the plateau below him stretched his lips thin and took most of the color out of his greyish-blue eyes. He slid the bronc down a gravelly bank and rode toward a belt of timber and through it and out to the Battle meadows just beyond. Crossing these, he picked up the road that

went by Kuhl's Double A. Riding through the gate at suppertime, he twisted in the saddle and saw half a dozen of Kuhl's punchers coming down off the low butte. Moving toward the corral, he looked toward the ranch house and saw a chestnut bronc standing at the corner of the wide porch. He knew it belonged to Stacey Edwards. Then he saw the owner of the Bradded L sitting on the porch with Matt Kuhl, and he rode that way. Kuhl was on his feet before Greenough had come half the distance, and he came to the edge of the porch and shaded his eyes with his hands.

Ben Greenough got out of the saddle and stared coldly at his boss. "I'm back," he said. "About the way you'd expected. Some hombres'll be kind of surprised, though."

Matt Kuhl seemed genuinely shocked. He shook his head slowly from side to side. "Chew that finer, Ben," he said, and looked at the black horse. Stacey Edwards came up beside Kuhl, his thumbs hooked into his gunbelt. The owner of the Bradded L was a tall and powerfully built man, looking younger than his years. He stood loosely and watched this scene with a kind of relish, and smiled only with his lips.

"You come close t' gettin' rid of me," Greenough snapped. "You had it made t' order, Kuhl. They jumped that trail herd near the Corallones an' gunned down every man I had. Couldn't you've had me drygulched cheaper than what it cost you? You had nothin' against men like Johnny Geer an' Rusty Bell!"

Matt Kuhl's face whitened, and then the blood came rushing back into it until it seemed it would burst out of its veins and through his skin. "Blast your heart, Greenough!" he said, and went for his gun. Greenough threw himself forward and hit Kuhl at the knees and the man went down. Edwards yelled, "Don't, Matt!" as Kuhl tried for a shot while

getting to his feet. Ben Greenough lifted his hands shoulder high and backed away a few steps.

Stacey Edwards, in command of the situation, smiled coldly. "He's accusin' you, Matt, and coverin' himself. This jigger had ambitions far beyond his reach. He wa'n't sure you'd back him, even if he brought that stuff in, and most likely he sold the heard for more'n you paid for it, Matt. The riders he talks about maybe are dead. I figure he ought t' know. Then again maybe they got their cut an' drifted. Why is he the only one alive? Wouldn't a bunch of spooks be sure of the top man?"

Kuhl stared at Ben Greenough and it was apparent he was impressed by the Bradded L owner's grim observations.

"You're a liar, Edwards!" Greenough ground out and yanked out his battered watch. "Look at it, Kuhl! It was all that saved me!"

Ben Kuhl took the heavy watch and examined it quickly and handed it to Edwards. "How about it, Stace?"

"A man could do it himself, Matt. He had t' cover every angle."

"Yeah, he could," Matt Kuhl said. Stacey Edwards threw the battered watch at Greenough's feet, and the raging puncher weighed his chances for a swift moment. "I would've killed you right then, if you hadn't had your gun already trained on me, Edwards!" he said. "The next time—"

"Greenough," Kuhl said, a whiteness still ringing his mouth. "I can't prove nothin' yet. All I know right now is you made one rotten mess of that job I give you t' do. I put six thousand dollars on the line t' see if you was the man for my niece. It was worth it. Climb onto that bronc and ride out of here!"

"I aim t' do that," Greenough said. He heard a door open and shut, the sound of hurrying steps. Gail came out onto the porch and started toward him. Matt

Kuhl caught her by the arm. "Go into the house," he said.

"Kuhl," Ben Greenough said. "Just one question. If you stole a horse and the law was right on your heels, would you shoot that horse and then smash it with rocks to hide all marks of identification?"

"What crazy talk is that?" Stacey Edwards snapped.

"Ben!" The girl wrenched loose from her uncle's grasp, but the puncher turned his back on her and walked to his horse. He knew now that she was utterly beyond his reach and he had to make her realize it. The story would spread, Edwards and Kuhl would improve upon it and inside a few days he would be as good as outlawed. Without as much as a glance her way, he got into the saddle and rode toward the gate, his bronc on the run. Men he had ridden with for months called to him, but he kept staring straight ahead. On a rise nearly a mile away he pulled up and looked at the Double A, where he'd buried his hopes. He knew that if he returned it would be to kill, and when that time came he hoped to have driven all other emotions completely out of him.

It was nearly midnight when Greenough rode into a small outfit a good twenty miles from the Double A. He turned his horse loose in a small corral and walked to the little tacky bunkhouse and stepped inside. A snore broke off and a thick voice yelled, "Who's there?"

"Go back t' sleep," Greenough said. "I'm a friend of Hack's. I need a bunk."

He peeled off his outer clothing and made up an empty bunk and soon drew his blankets around him. Despite the trouble burdening him, he quickly fell asleep. When he got out of the bunk at dawn and reached for his Levis, a little bowlegged man grinned at him from the bunk opposite. "Ben, what brings you t' this cowpen herd? I thought you was on your way from Mexico with a—"

"Ask me about it later, Gus," Green-

ough said. "I got t' go up an' see Hack."

Hack Ballard was in his little shack having his breakfast. His wife, a work-worn, fat and patient little woman, was making hot cakes. "Why, Ben, this is a s'prise," he said.

"Haul up a chair an' line your stomach," Hack grinned. "Say, you git them cows up from Mexico?"

"Outlaws got'em, Hack," Ben said. "Kuhl don't exactly believe me. I'm fired. Maybe the law'll be after me."

"Stay on here, Ben. I'll scrape up your pay somehow," Hack said. "Any idea who the spooks was?"

"Not yet. It was made t' order, Hack," Ben said, and he grinned for the first time in many days when a plate of buckwheat cakes was plunked down in front of him.

BEN GREENOUGH waited for four days before he rode to Brazo. Riding into town, he acknowledged the greetings of punchers he knew, and sensed by their eyes that Edwards and Matt Kuhl had been using their tongues. In the post office, he met Sheriff Ed Daugherty and the lawman eyed him sourly. "You bought in on Hack's Circle Dot, Greenough?" The inference was plain.

"When I do, I'll give it t' the newspaper, Sheriff," he said, and went up to the window and asked for mail. The clerk looked through a batch of general delivery and then came up with a letter and tossed it to him. It was from the San Antonio bootmaker. He leaned against the wall and ripped it open and read it three times. The 'Dear Sir' made him grin. The boots, L. B. Royce had written, had been made for a cowpuncher named Ray H. Benion, and shipped to the Four Links Ranch, Lone Oak, Texas. Ben Greenough pocketed the letter and went over to the saloon. The place was crowded and well represented by punchers from half a dozen outfits in the valley. One of Matt

Kuhl's punchers shouldered his way toward him.

"Ben," Slim McCall said. "They're spreadin' some ugly stories around. Want y' t' know I don't believe—"

Ben Greenough lifted his voice. "Maybe you didn't hear the ugliest story, Slim. If I'd been a close friend or kin t' Shorty Benion, an' heard what they done t' him, I'd never stop lookin' for certain skunks. Sure, my crew was shot up complete, but one of'em reached Shorty with some lead. The spooks didn't want t' leave any marks behind'em an' so they smashed Benion's face with rocks, an' left him so the buzzards could feed easy on him. You know the tidbits they go for first. I've known badmen in my time, but I figure they wouldn't have—"

A redheaded puncher with a homely, lumpy face came away from the bar. His eyes were not friendly as he looked at Greenough, but there was no apparent feeling in his words. "You saw that, friend?"

Greenough nodded. "Yeah, he was a little man, but he could have had some big an' salty friends. Certain jiggers better start runnin' if they're around these parts."

The redhead grinned only with his mouth and walked out of the saloon. A tension built up around Ben Greenough, and it was something he could almost feel like the pressure of hands. He said to Slim McCall, as two other punchers went through the batwings, "Who are those rannies?"

"The tall cuss with the yeller hair is Nat Lineer, Stace Edwards new ramrod," McCall said. "Roundup ain't far off, an' a few outfits are takin' on new men. That big-nosed gent was hired by Matt Kuhl couple of days ago." McCall took out the makings and built himself a smoke. "Guess we'll have about the biggest weddin' ever was held in these parts, Ben. A big barbecue an'—"

"Edwards an' Kuhl, eh?" Greenough turned toward Slim, his eyes stormy.

"Sorry, Ben," Kuhl's rider said. "My spurs dug in accidental."

When he went out with McCall, Greenough saw the redhead talking with two other punchers at the tie-rack. "I looked Shorty over careful, Slim," he said loud enough for most men around to hear. "Don't think he was bad hit, an' might have lived if—"

"You're talkin' too much, Ben," Slim McCall warned.

"Maybe, Slim. Well, you better go along by yourself. I'm not the right kind of company for a man nowadays." Greenough grinned, and left the Double A puncher standing there. *Sure, I can make things t' order, too, and build a story as big as the next man's. I doubt if Matt Kuhl will send his gunnies out to get me now. It would tip his hand.* On his way to Hack Ballard's little outfit, he knew he had left a definite disturbance inside the red-haired puncher.

Three days later, Greenough stabled his horse at a railroad junction eight miles from the Circle Dot and took a train bound westward. *Maybe not the biggest wedding, Slim, but the costliest. In cold cash and the blood of men.* He tried not to think of Gail.

Late the next afternoon, he was sitting in front of the bunkhouse of the big Four Links spread talking to a sheffie, and he learned that Shorty Benion and his brother had left the Four Links only three months ago. Both punchers, the cook revealed, had some wildness in them, and opined that they'd both surely come to a bad end.

"So that little man had a brother," Ben said. "What did he look like?"

"Was a redhead," the sheffie said. "Homely cuss, with a face looked like it had been dragged over rock an' brush. It's funny about brothers. One can be mighty good lookin', an' the other—"

Greenough released pent-up breath. "One has come to a bad end, friend," he said. "Shorty was killed awhile ago down toward the border. Rode with a bunch of owlhoots that rustled a trail herd. Well, that rig I hired t' bring me from town is costin' me money by the minute, so I'll be moseyin' along. Thanks for the talk."

"The boys'll be mighty sorry t' hear about Ray, Greenough," the cook said, shaking his head sadly. "When he was steadied down, you'd of liked the little cuss. You know, he had the smallest feet I ever saw on a man."

"An' it'll be bad maybe for certain hombres," Ben Greenough snapped.

When he arrived back at the Circle Dot, Hack Ballard let him know that certain seed had begun to bear fruit. "Sheriff Daugherty was here lookin' for you, Ben. Seems a dead man was found out near Echo Creek. Bradded L punchers found him. The jigger rode for Matt Kuhl."

"Who was it, Hack?"

"Name of Uram is all I know. Saw him when they dumped him at the undertaker's. Had a big nose."

Ben Greenough grinned coldly at Hack and the two hired hands that moved in close. "It's the only hand I got t' play. That dead man, I figure, didn't treat another corpse with due respect."

"Never liked riddles, Ben," Hack snorted. "They tried t' pin that killin' on you, but maybe you can prove you wa'n't around when it happened. If I was you, I'd keep out of town."

"It's the chance I have to take," Ben Greenough said. "What can I lose more'n I have?"

Ballard said, "I see what you mean, Ben. I'm mighty sorry. The posters are tacked up all around. Guess that big dance Saturday night is an occasion for Stace Edwards t' announce the weddin' plans. Understand he's payin' for it all."

Ben Greenough nodded. "Maybe he'd

better hurry, Hack, or he'll have t'get somebody t'give the bride away."

Brazo filled early that memorable night. Horses and every kind of rig imaginable crowded the walks. Ben Greenough leaned against the side of a darkened store and observed carefully. He singled out certain men; Nat Lineer . . . the Bradded L ranahan with the lumpy face . . . others whose faces were quite strange to him. Lineer, before he went into the Wagon-wheel Saloon, spoke to two of his riders. They left him abruptly and moved along the crowded walk.

Greenough looked toward the big cottonwoods marking the northern boundary of the town when a welcoming cry broke from the planked walks. The Double A buckboard, escorted by a dozen of Matt Kuhl's punchers, rolled up in front of the hotel and stopped, and Stacey Edwards, dressed in dark broadcloth and white shirt and black tie, came off the porch. His white teeth flashed his great pleasure as he stepped up to the Double A rig, and he swept his hat from his gray-ing mane of black hair and bowed gallantly to Gail Collard.

Greenough's breathing nearly stopped, and his heart felt as if it was being squeezed between two great hands. Gail wore a frilly white dress under her cape. There were flowers in her hair. She took Edwards' hand and stepped down, and a great roar went up from the crowd in front of the lodge hall. Gail's eyes seemed restless. Before she went through the entrance with Stacey Edwards she turned her head quickly, and for a moment Greenough thought her eyes looked directly toward him.

In a few minutes the orchestra was playing and most of the crowd had left the wide street. Ben Greenough moved along the walk to the saddlemaker's shop and tried to get a glimpse of Gail through the upper windows of the big frame building across the way. Then he thought,

You fool, that's over, and walked back along the street. He saw Nat Lineer come out of the Wagonwheel and go to the dancehall, and he had to admit that Edwards' ramrod was a compelling figure of a man. Then he crossed the street and entered the smoky saloon. Some of the talk stretched thin as he stepped up to the bar.

The barkeep observed him with some hostility. Tongues had been fanning. "I'll take your six-gun, Greenough," he said.

"I'm not considered a guest t'night, Charlie," Greenough ground out. "The rule don't apply t' me. I'll have a drink."

Music came out of the open windows of the lodge hall, and it was whisked along the street by a fitful breeze and driven in through the door of the Wagonwheel. *The Blue Danube*. Once Ben Greenough had danced the waltz with Gail. . . . His roving eyes picked up the cowpuncher with the lumpy face. He was alone, bent over the bar, a bottle at his elbow. The stub of a cigarette burned close to his lips, but he ignored it.

A man said quietly behind Greenough, "You got your crust, Mister." It was Ed Daugherty, and Greenough turned and blew smoke into the sheriff's face. "Lock me up, friend, if you've got charges against me."

"I can wait, Greenough," Daugherty said and moved on. Suddenly the red-headed man spat out the remains of his smoke, tossed a crumpled bill to the barkeep and strode out. The talk stepped up again and the tension broke. There were certain faces missing here, Greenough thought. Maybe he would find them at the end of the street at a less attractive establishment known as Smiley's. He tried not to think of the dance, of Gail in Edwards' arms. He was glad when the piano in this place began drowning out all other sounds. Many men here had their eyes on him and he knew their thoughts. *There's Ben Greenough, the*

jigger who robbed the Double A of six thousand dollars. Shot at least three men to square up for losing that girl. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man's Trap

GREENOUGH watched the clock behind the bar. At the end of an hour, he told himself that this was not the night. He had turned away to leave when he heard the gunshots. The noise in the Wagonwheel quickly tapered off, and men ran toward the door. A man yelled, "Daugherty!" and then collided with Greenough near the batwings. The Circle Dot puncher shoved the man out of his way and hit the planked walk on the run. He was one of the first to reach the wide areaway a block from Smiley's. A tall man stood braced against the corner of a building, his six-gun still in his hand, and his lips drawn back over his teeth. In the thin lamplight, Ben Greenough could see the blood dripping from the fingers of the man's left hand. "He threw down on me," the puncher ground out. "He told me t' draw."

Several yards away, a man lay prone in the dust. His hat had rolled off and Ben Greenough stared at his mop of brick-red hair. A Colt was a few inches away from his fingers. Daugherty said, "The picture is plain enough. Get the cuss to the undertaker's."

"Who is it?" Greenough asked.

The wounded puncher said, "Called himself Eno Clark."

"Funny they wouldn't brand a gent like that with the name of Red," Greenough said dryly.

"I'll ask all the questions here, Greenough, and make the observations," Daugherty said, and he knelt down beside the corpse. "Looks dead enough, but we'd better get the doc to make sure. Carry him to the undertaker's."

A voice inquired, "You hit bad, Ace?" and Greenough turned to see Nat Lineer standing there. For the first time, he became aware of the brittle hardness of the Bradded L foreman's eyes.

"Just a scratch, Nat," the tall puncher said. "Can fix it up myself."

"What was the fight about?" Daugherty asked.

"A woman," the wounded man said. "Couple of weeks ago—"

"Women!" the lawman said.

Ben Greenough grinned in the dark. He offered to help carry the redhead to the undertaker's. Nat Lineer said, "Come on, Ace, before you run into more trouble."

Killings in Brazo were not exactly a novelty, and in a few minutes the street was nearly normal. Ben Greenough sat in the dingy back room of the undertaking establishment with Sheriff Daugherty and Doc Cantenbine. The medical man pronounced that the redhead was surely dead.

"Certain hombres will be glad to hear that, Doc," Ben Greenough said.

"Look here, Greenough," the sheriff said in a tired voice, "I've been wanting to believe you're what you seem t' be, but certain remarks you—"

The doctor got up and made ready to go. Ben Greenough said, "Wait, Doc. A man could live quite awhile, even if he had been shot through the chest, not too close to the heart, couldn't he?"

"It's possible, Ben."

"All right. If you're shootin' square with me, Sheriff, you could give me some help," Greenough said. "Doc'll stay here with this body. In about a half hour, you'll saunter in to the dancehall and mention the fact around that this jigger called Eno Clark is still breathin' an' might last until mornin'. You see, Sheriff, he had a brother named Shorty Benion, an' Shorty was one of the spooks helped take Kuhl's trail herd. If you're playin' along with a certain crowd and

cross me, Ed, you won't live very long."

Daugherty said, "I'll go along with you, Greenough, for a while."

"My bronc is at the tie-rail in front of the post office, Sheriff. See that it's put out of sight in the livery stable when nobody's watchin' you too close. I'll be in the next room with you, Willett."

The undertaker was a timid man well beyond middle age. "I want no shootin' here, Ben. I'm no shakes with a gun," he protested.

"You stick to your bunk, friend, and you won't get hurt," Ben Greenough said. "Sheriff, what outfit is that hombre called Ace tied in with?"

"The Lazy J," Daugherty said.

"Seems the Bradded L ramrod is mighty concerned over the health of a jigger not on Edwards' payroll, ain't he, Ed? All these ranahans haven't been on this range too long, like the man they found dead out by Echo Creek. Now, this redhead . . ."

"I'll see you later, Greenough," the lawman said, and he went out.

"You can trust him, Ben," Doc Cantenbine said. "What am I t'do if we have unexpected visitors?"

"Do like they say, Doc. They can't afford t' kill you," Greenough said. "Let's go in your room, Willet. First, fan that lamp out over there."

They sat in the dark for almost an hour, listening to the racket in the Brazo slowly fade. The undertaker fell asleep on his bed and began snoring. Doc Cantenbine opened the door slowly and looked into the darkened room. "Ben," he whispered, "town'll be empty in half an hour. Don't you fall asleep."

"No chance, Doc. They won't be here until all the street lamps are out," Ben answered, and he shifted his position in the old horsehair chair. The door closed and he began another hour of waiting. He heard sounds out in front and got to his feet. The door out there opened and a man asked, "How's that jigger, Doc?"

"Hangin' on," Doc said in a small, tight voice. "He's a stubborn cuss. Too ornery t' die an' let me sleep."

There was a small laugh and the sound of the door closing. Horses hoofs beat against the dust and gradually trailed to silence. The undertaker stirred in his bed. "You there, Ben?"

"Be quiet, Willett!"

Nearly an hour later, Ben Greenough heard the dull knock on the door outside. He got up and drew his six-gun. He leaned against the door to Willett's room and shoved it open a few inches. "Open up, Doc!" he whispered.

Cantenbine said, "Wait a second," and crossed the room. He slid a bolt back and then the door swung inward and two men, their neckrags drawn up over the lower part of their faces, shoved the doctor out of the way and off his feet. The tall jigger's six-gun swung toward the still figure on the undertaker's folding cot. Ben Greenough came into the room firing. His first shot broke the thin man in the middle. His second drove the other spook backwards and spilled him against the wall. The sound of a man running down the street broke through the thumping echoes of the Colt, and then there was another gunshot. Greenough roared, "Watch it here, Doc!" and hurried outside.

He saw a man getting to his feet in front

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

SIX FOR HELL

A NOVEL BY GEORGE APPELL

JANUARY FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES—OUT DECEMBER 9th!

of the hardware store, across and down the street. He braced himself and lifted his gun, and then gunfire bloomed in the shadows between the livery stable and a lumberyard fence. A voice called out, "That got him, Ben!" and Ed Daugherty moved out of the areaway.

Greenough made sure everything was all right in the undertaker's office, and then ran over to join the sheriff. The lawman kicked a six-gun fifteen feet away from the prone man's fingers and then reached down and turned him over. Ben Greenough said in a breathless voice, "Not too surprised, Ed. It's Nat Lineer. It's all mighty plain now."

Windows were opening along the street. Lamplight started fanning out from them, and men and women called out anxiously. Ben Greenough saw that Lineer was alive. The man's eyes burned up at him. "That was a smart trick, Greenough," he gasped. "My hat's off t' you. Had it figured out a long way ahead, didn't you? Look, you better hurry. Stace Edwards ain't deaf. He's at the hotel—for t'night—think I want him let off while I'm bein' burned?"

Daugherty swore softly. Ben Greenough turned and ran toward the hotel, and when he slammed his way into the small lobby he heard boots running back up the short flight of stairs. "I'm coming after you, Edwards!" Greenough roared, and he felt an elation that thickened his words in his throat. So it hadn't been Matt Kuhl.

"Blast your eyes, come on, Greenough!" the Bradded L owner fired back. "If I don't get her, you won't!"

Daugherty came in slowly and Greenough said, "Cover the back way, Ed!"

Men were yelling out in the street. They converged on the hotel. Stace Edwards, Greenough knew, must realize that his chances were pitifully slim. He gave the sheriff time enough to move in from the rear, and then cautiously approached the stairway. Edwards poured lead down the risers and the splinters flew close to

Greenough's head. He crouched down, and then there was a single shot followed by the thump of a heavybody. Greenough waited. Then Daugherty's voice came down the stairs. "Ben, come up here."

Ben walked up slowly, his gun alerted. At the top of the stairs, he saw the sheriff looking down at the body of Stace Edwards. "Give it to himself, Ben," Daugherty said. "Couldn't take what was comin'."

Ben Greenough holstered his gun and took off his hat. "A man shouldn't ever want somethin' as much as he did, Ed. Yeah, that redhead was a jigger named Benion. He killed that man you found out by Echo Creek. He tried t' kill another one, but wasn't quite fast enough. When Red heard what certain spooks he'd ridden with had done t' his brother after he was dead—how would you like it, Sheriff, if somebody mutilated the body of somebody mighty close t' you an' left him where the buzzards could pluck out his eyes? I had t' gamble Red never knew that until I told him that night. It preyed on his mind. The picture was always in his head, an' he started thinkin' about his brother. Grown men are like that. Nat Lineer had to be sure the redhead wouldn't talk."

Daugherty looked at Greenough, wholesome respect in his eyes. "So it was Stace Edwards raided that trail herd." He shook his head. "I've learned a lesson I won't soon forget, an' that is never t' let my suspicions be influenced by what a man possesses."

"Yeah, Sheriff. Edwards had it made t' order. But he didn't figure a man would be left back there alive, and he forgot about those little boots Shorty Benion wore. That's how I found out who he was. Stace Edwards saw to it that most of his killers got work in the valley so he could watch 'em close. Sooner or later they'd disappear one by one. Gail might've married him, Ed."

(Continued on page 127)

KING OF THE BORDER

YOU may have heard of Ned Buntline, popular historian of the West and originator of the dime novel—and the man who made an international figure out of a rough frontier character named William F. Cody, whom he nicknamed “Buffalo Bill, the King of the Border Men,” in countless popular stories.

But did you ever hear of Edward Judson? Edward Judson was an extremely lively soul, who identified himself with his country's foremost problems wherever he happened to be.

Out West, he proved his manhood by getting himself arraigned for murder—and his knowledge of the dashing ways of the bad-man by diving out the courtroom window amid a hot hail of lead.

The courtroom emptied in pursuit, and the mob shortly caught our hero and hanged him to a lamppost. And that was when Judson proved himself as tough as any man in the West, tougher than a rawhide reata, in fact. For the rope failed either to break his neck or kill him—and Judson survived for another thirty active years.

The reason you may never have heard of Edward Judson is that he was Ned Buntline—whose active pen and imagination gave America and the world a more glamorous figure to worship, a Prince of the Prairies to dazzle both kings and commoners, and totally eclipse a man of the people—Buffalo Bill.

—Ray P. Shotwell



GOLD and life were cheap, commodities high, in California's Gold Rush days, but even at that, Martha Barclay's glass pitcher came uncommonly dear. It was a pitcher of the type you could buy for fifty cents in Boston, or twenty dollars in San Francisco—but it cost two men their lives.

The big miner who broke it could have paid for it many times over. He had been lucky, and he came to Martha's saloon to celebrate his luck. In a boisterous gesture, after a few toasts, his arm swept Martha's pitcher off the bar.

As a lady, Martha could have demanded an apology, but it didn't occur to her. She started to beat the miner up, an eventuality not covered by the Code of '49. As the miner tried awkwardly to hold her off, Martha's husband, John Barclay, happened on the scene, drew his own conclusions and his pistol, and shot the miner dead.

A life for a pitcher—even in California—seemed too much. A Vigilante Committee was hastily summoned, and before the next darkness fell, Barclay was hanged.

For Martha, there was no reimbursement. And yet, she had nothing left. No customer—no husband—no pitcher.

—Lance Kermit



Tinstar, Get Your

By HOWARD WILLIAMS

"The law isn't for one man, Tom, it's for all—if you make your own law, then make your own grave!"

WHIT Barrett had dragged his rush-bottomed chair out onto the plank sidewalk in front of his office, and he was rolling a brownpaper quirkly between thumb and forefinger when the two horsemen swung out of Laurel street and rode west on Main, toward the feed stable further on.

The late afternoon sun was behind them, and Whit squinted full into the brassy glare, wondering if this new threat of Tom Meeker's held more meaning for the smaller ranchers than the distant, muted rumble of thunder over the high Carnations. He guessed it did, and he sighed heavily, a big, rawboned man with a mature man's patience—that was slowly ravelling to an end.

Still looking after them, he wiped the upraised flap of cigarette paper across the tip of his tongue, afterward pressing the quirkly into shape and sticking it in the corner of his mouth. His hand lifted to the match box in his shirt pocket and then fell away. It was too hot to smoke and he let the cigaret hang there, unlighted.

Ev Hutchinson moved from his position by the swinging doors of the Reliance Bar and tramped toward Whit, his boot-heels rapping against the worn boards with a solid purposefulness. He stopped beside Whit and said truculently, "So Tom Meeker sent for them after all."

"Seems so."

"Who are they?"

"Can't tell yet." The rushes squeaked as Whit let his propped-back chair settle on four legs. He glanced up at Hutchinson, blinking the glare from his eyes.

"Not that it matters," he added. "Meeker'll offer enough to get tophands."

Hutchinson shoved his hat back, revealing damp black hair that was plastered flat to his forehead with sweat. He rubbed his palm over his forehead, pushing the hair up into moist turrets. "First Meeker diverts the Arrowhead into that dry stream-bed, leaving only a trickle of water for the rest of the basin. Then he pulls strings over in Crescent, to keep the county judge from giving us an injunction to get our water back." He jerked his head sharply toward the feed stable. "Now this."

"You'll get the injunction," Whit said patiently. "It's just a matter of time."

"Sure." The rancher's heavy voice was sour with an old anger. "Kretchmar, Plumstead and me have finally thrown our herds together. I got two windmills and Kretchmar's drillin' another. Hell, we're dolin' it out by the bucketful!" He paused, adding thoughtfully, "But the truth is, Whit, we can make it to mid-August, and Judge Buhl can't hold off the injunction any longer than that. Tom Meeker knows it, which is why he's bringin' in the gunslingers."

"You sellin'?" Whit asked.

Ev Hutchinson grunted. "I don't think. There are ten of us in the Reliance now. Plumstead, Kretchmar, Jim Ramey and some of our crews. If Tom Meeker sends them gun-hung rannies down there, we'll be ready for them."

Whit frowned, reaching again for his match box. The two men had stabled their ponies and were now coming down

Gun!



Whit lifted his Colt and fired. . . .

the loose runway of the stable, their boots kicking up tiny whorls of powdered yellow dust as they crossed the street to the Pyramid Saloon.

Up until now, this hadn't been his quarrel. The question of water rights had been Tom Meeker's first stratagem in his fight to control the Arrowhead basin, to force out Ev Hutchinson and the rest of the small ranchers. That was a mat-

ter for the county sheriff, once Judge Buhl issued the injunction against Meeker.

But this—bringing hired gunmen into Omega to provoke an incident—this fell within his jurisdiction as town marshal.

He held the match to his cigarette, tasting the hot, dry smoke, then blew the match out slowly. "You're stayin' clear."

"That mean you're tellin' us to ride out of town?"

"No," Whit said quietly. "You're better off here, in a bunch. But I was hired on as marshal to keep the peace. That goes for you, Ev, as well as Meeker. Neither side's bringin' the fight into the streets of Omega."

The slatted doors of the Pyramid bellied outward and they both turned and watched Tom Meeker step out on the walk. He was a short, choleric man in his late fifties, and he clumped down the wooden steps to the street and angled toward them on a line as straight as a marked path.

That was Tom Meeker's way, Whit reflected, watching him cross the sun-baked wagon ruts of Laurel street. Tom was a man who'd always gotten what he wanted by going after it directly, openly, letting the devil take the hindmost. He'd forged his MM iron back in the days before Omega's ordinances were neatly codified and printed in a bound book, when men wrote their own law with Colt and Winchester.

Vestiges of that time still clung to him. He was his own man, and it showed in the aggressive way he leaned into his stride, pushing toward them almost. Had conditions been reversed, had Ev Hutchinson's crowd bought in the gunmen, Whit knew Tom Meeker still would have walked toward them like this, not expecting any help from the marshal and not wanting any.

There was a lesson for him in this, and Whit fumbled for it, groping in Meeker's background for something the man would understand, skipping hastily over his own childhood memories of Dodge City, then a seething, volcanic, end-of-trail town.

A wall had to be built between the two groups, a solid, impenetrable bulwark that Tom Meeker, for all his short-tempered bullheadedness, would be afraid of and would respect.

King's Hotel was on the near corner of Main and Laurel, and when Tom Meeker came even with it, his daughter

Carol came out of the lobby and joined him in the street. Their low-voiced words were a heated murmur in the warm stillness, and then Carol shook her head and fell in beside her father when he started on again.

Whit thought, *It might be easier if she weren't with him*, but he accepted her presence with the resignation of a man who liked nothing of what was before him. Mostly because of Carol, he had drifted along a carefully neutral pathway, now petering out on stony ground.

HE GOT up, lifting his hat to her and putting his back against an iron post supporting the wooden overhead. His quirk had gone out, and he let it drop in the dust at the edge of the plank walk, knowing that Carol felt as he did about this, that the basin was too big for Tom Meeker, that one-man control of anything so big was wrong.

And yet, as marshal, he had to exert his own one-man control of Omega now, before the two gunmen moved down to the Reliance and the hair-trigger situation exploded into gunplay.

He said bluntly, "I don't like any part of it, Tom. Hutchinson gave you their answer. They're after an injunction to get their water back. The courts will settle it."

Tom Meeker put his hard stare on him. "To hell with the courts. When I first came to the Arrowhead, that was all free graze down there. I let the homesteaders take up along the creek, figurin' a few settlers might be good for the basin. But then this bunch of rag-end, two-bit ranchers comes along with notions of cow-raisin'. The MM runs the cattle in this basin and it's the only outfit that's goin' to!"

"We're not sellin' out, Meeker," Ev Hutchinson said thinly, "and any time you want to bring them gun-toters out, we'll be waitin' for them in the Reliance."

Meeker laughed shortly. "Why, damn you, Ev —"

"Hold on, Tom," Whit straightened and moved between them. "I was a kid back in Dodge when the railroads were pushin' out and the long herds wound up the trail from Texas to meet them. There were two sides to the town. On one side, the townspeople lived and carried on their business, and on the other the hardbitten Texans could drink and gamble and raise all the hell they wanted. But the two sides didn't mix. You know why, Tom?"

"Hell, of course I know why," Tom Meeker said flatly. "They were kept apart by a deadline."

Whit nodded. "And Laurel street's the deadline."

There was a long, pregnant pause and Whit glanced at Carol, and saw a faint humor relax the lines of tension at the corners of her mouth. She ran her hand down along the material of her tan bombazine street dress and it crackled warmly under the pressure. The only other sound was her father's controlled breathing as he strove to contain the mounting wrath in him.

Meeker had turned and was looking back along Main, at the Pyramid Saloon on the other side of Laurel. Laurel bisected Omega on a roughly north-south axis and on this side, perhaps fifty yards down, was the Reliance, where Hutchinson's crowd was waiting.

"You're not makin' it easy for yourself, Whit," Meeker said softly, turning back.

"Nor for you, Tom."

"Trouble has a way of breaking out of itself, and I'm a stubborn man."

"Just how stubborn, Tom?" Meeker had been shaken by this, Whit saw, and for the first time the rancher made a gesture, a loose lifting of his left hand, a token of the indecision that was holding his anger in check.

The sun had fallen behind the jagged

upthrust of the Carnations, leaving the whole heavily-timbered eastern slope in darkly purple shadow. Off to the northwest, a few storm-clouds were dropping their burden of rain — glistening, wet-silver slivers reflecting the last rays of the dying sun-glow.

"Stubborn enough to put a time on it?" Whit prodded the uncertain Meeker. "Say eight o'clock tonight? They cross Laurel at eight or you pay them off and tell them to drift."

Meeker hesitated and then his head moved abruptly, up and down in agreement. "Eight." He turned away from them and then swung back. "You're crowding me, Whit."

"Is there any other way?"

"No. . . . No, I guess there's not."

Carol did not follow her father immediately. She said, "It's his language, Whit, but he won't believe it."

Hutchinson's voice was troubled. "You're doin' this for us, aren't you?" he said to Whit.

"Maybe," Whit said. He looked again at Carol. "He's been sort of hard to live with, hasn't he."

"In some ways," she admitted. "Dad needs to be broken, but—but not by you." She reached out her hand and Whit took it, holding it gently between both of his. Ev Hutchinson mumbled something Whit did not hear, and his footsteps faded off toward the Reliance.

"Talk to him, Carol."

She smiled, nodding slightly. Her feeling for him, never hidden from either of them, put a grave concern in her tone. "I'll try, Whit."

When she was gone, Whit turned into his office. His gunbelt was suspended from a peg on the wall, and he took it down and buckled it around his waist. The weight of it was a solid bulk against his thigh. He reached down and took the Colt from the holster, spinning the cylinder to check the brass-bound loads.

Afterward, he crossed over to Mullen's Cafe for his supper.

By seven-thirty, only a faint refulgence from an early-risen moon lighted Main and the deadline at Laurel. Dusk had invaded Omega and had taken its nightly abode in the alleyways, under the wide wooden awnings fronting the board structures and in the sharp angles where the raised boardwalks fell off to street level. It brought with it a certain reluctant coolness that slowly absorbed the lingering heat of the day, but it did nothing to allay the breathless tension pervading the town, as if everywhere people were counting off the minutes, waiting.

Whit Barrett had had his meal, returned to his office, and came back to Mullen's for another cup of coffee. He dawled over it, idly switching his hand at the flies feeding on the stained counter. No one, as far as he knew, had crossed Laurel since he'd created the deadline.

He'd had no word from Carol and he hadn't expected any. Meeker was too big a man to temporize, yet big enough to admit defeat, providing he came by that admission in his own way. No one, not even Carol, could talk him into it. He had to let his slowly-revolving thought processes plumb the depths of the situation until they reached the conclusion that Whit had reached that afternoon—that a man might control a range, but that the day was past when he could cut down an honest lawman to do it.

It wasn't Tom Meeker against Plumstead and Kretchmar and Hutchinson now. It was Meeker against the constituted law of Omega, signified by the marshal's knob-pointed star pinned to Whit Barrett's vest.

Hutchinson came into the cafe, bringing Kretchmar with him. The Dutchman was big and broad shouldered, with a mild voice and a round, ruddy face.

Kretchmar said, "We're not letting you do it, Whit. Comes eight o'clock, and

Ev and me and the rest are right there on the deadline, siding you."

"Nothin' doin', Kretch."

"Hell, you know who Meeker's got?" Hutchinson demanded tightly. "Ever hear of Ed Shambaugh?"

"Sure, I've heard of him," Whit said. "I've marshaled other towns before, Ev. Tough Texas towns, some of them. Shambaugh's no worse than the others."

"Shambaugh!" Kretchmar spit out the name. "It's the other one, the Texas Kid."

"Who?" Whit Barrett came full around on the stool, looking from one to the other. "Who'd you say?"

"The Texas Kid," Kretchmar repeated.

"He's in jail in El Paso, servin' out a ten-year sentence for manslaughter."

"The hell he is!" Hutchinson said sharply. "They let him out six months ago. A swamper from the Pyramid eased down to the Reliance and tipped us off." He paused, his eyes reflecting a curious glint of satisfaction. "We got you thinkin' now, haven't we?"

"About two things," Whit said slowly, getting up. "And here's one of them. I'm the gent that sent the Texas Kid to jail ten years ago."

HE NOTICED that Main street was empty as he tramped out on the boards and headed for the Pyramid. The yellow light of kerosene lamps glowed from open doors and windows, driving the shadows back into a dark patchwork of interstices along both sides, the rays thinning off as they merged with the silvery gloom that marked the center of the road.

The dried mud of Laurel crunched under his boots, and then he was in front of the Pyramid's half-doors, pushing them back and entering in one motion.

Howie Thrall, the MM ramrod, was at the bar and he turned and grinned at Barrett. "Howdy, Whit. How about sit-

tin' in on a friendly game of stud?"

Whit grinned back at him. "Eight-thirty, Howie."

Thrall's eyebrows raised and he inclined his head. "I'll hold you to that, friend."

Whit's eyes cruised the rear of the room and he found the men he was looking for. Tom Meeker started to rise, but Whit motioned to him that he was coming back. He dismissed Shambaugh, the shorter of the gunmen, as one to be reckoned with later, focusing his attention on the Texas Kid.

The Kid pushed his chair back about a foot and rested both hands on the edge of the deal table. He was some years younger than Whit, just about as tall, but with a slighter build and an odd, graceful manner of movement. His hair matched Whit's tawny chestnut, but the El Paso jail was too close on his back-trail for his cheeks to have attained the same deep tan from long exposure to the sun.

Whit said, "How were things in El Paso, Ernie?"

"Just fine. Nine years and a month. I figured you'd be outside waitin' for me if I stayed full time." The Kid turned his slumbering gaze on Meeker. "You didn't tell me he was marshalin' this burg."

"Didn't see the need to," Meeker said, surprised. "Still don't."

"You're wearin' guns, Ernie," Whit said pointedly. "That's breakin' your parole."

Ed Shambaugh butted in. "This ain't Texas, mister. It's Arizona."

Whit pivoted slightly, facing him. "And we have jails here too, Shambaugh. Watch your step." He swung back to the Kid. "Take them off, Ernie."

Tom Meeker said in soft amazement, "Well, I'll be damned."

The Texas Kid dropped his eyes to his hands, lying motionless in front of

him. He said without looking up, "I been paid for this job already. Spookin' a fool bunch of shoe-string ranchers."

"It's dirty money."

Tom Meeker swore angrily and Whit said sharply, "I said it's dirty money, Tom!"

Ed Shambaugh put both hands flat on the table and pushed himself to his short height. "Who the hell do you think you are, mister?"

"Just Ernie's brother," Whit said quietly, "and I guess sendin' him up didn't do him any good. But I'm not makin' the same mistake again."

He squared off to them, his words low and evenly spaced. "You and Ernie are cut from the same cloth, Tom. You know one thing: your own will, your own way. I know something else; that the law's not what one man wants, it's what the many want. You can buck it and fight it and maybe win a few times. But in the long run, because men are the way they are, you're goin' to lose." He paused and took a deep, pulsing breath. "Well, Laurel street's still the deadline."

"Deadline be damned!" Ed Shambaugh muttered, and Whit wheeled on him savagely, all the pent-in rage surging to the surface.

"Now, Shambaugh? You want it now?"

Shambaugh's hands froze in thick-fingered immobility.

Howie Thrall had drifted over to the table, and now he cut in. "It's five to eight, Tom, he announced. "Time you got yourself a new ramrod. The Double-M can go to hell for all I care." To Whit, he said, "You signin' on any deputies?"

The short gunslinger was staring at a smoking oil lamp beside the back-bar mirror, and Whit shuttled his glance to Howie Thrall. "Beat me at stud tonight and maybe I'll take you on."

A clenched fist smashed down on the

table then, rocking it, tilting the glasses.

"By God, Whit," Meeker exploded, "I can be pushed. But you—"

"You shoved first," Whit reminded him softly. He looked down at his brother. "The guns, Ernie?"

Ernie Barrett shook his head stubbornly. "No, Whit."

"Then don't send them out, Tom. Lead them out."

Howie Thrall accompanied him to the door. "Hell, man—"

Whit let the batwings swing to behind him, chopping off the appeal. Carol Meeker called to him from the porch of King's Hotel and he cut toward her obliquely, reluctant to face her now.

"Tom's thinkin' it over," he said quietly.

He heard her soft sob and he turned her so the light from the lobby fell upon her face. There was no need to explain, and yet the urge to justify himself to her was stronger than his wish to remain silent.

"I had to take a stand, Carol," he said after a moment. "If I hadn't, if Tom had his way, the marshal of Omega would become Tom's law, Tom's son-in-law, bought and paid for by the big augur of the Arrowhead basin."

"I realize that," Carol murmured. "You're a man, too, the first man to stand up against Dad on his own ground. He'll respect you for it."

Whit's glance was directed beyond her, noting Kretchmar's big bulk just out of the direct light from Mullen's front window. There were other shadows, faintly limned by the waxing moonlight.

He hesitated, feeling for the right words and not finding them. "The Texas Kid's my brother," he stated bluntly.

"No, Whit!" Carol's face lifted to his, startled. She shot a glance at the Pyramid and Whit heard the harsh rasp of hinges in the quietness, the tramp of booted feet on the boards.

"Get inside, Carol." He shoved her roughly, reached the edge of the boardwalk and jumped down into the street.

He called, "Keep clear of this, Kretchmar, Hutchinson!"

He moved out into the center of the street, coming to the rim of Laurel and stopping there.

Here the two streets formed an irregular cross, the hardened clay a yellow-brown by day, a soft silver under the moonlight, Howie Thrall's voice floated to him. "Still ready to sign up, Whit."

Whit didn't answer. He watched the three figures pacing toward him. Ed Shambaugh was to the left and Tom Meeker off his right, with the Kid's tall, angular form between them. A wispy cloud drifted over the moon, and Whit prayed that it would hold, that the shifting light would distort distance, impair vision.

They stopped, facing him across the width of the deadline, Tom Meeker thrusting out a hand to halt them. His voice was harsh with exasperation.

"It comes hard, Whit—backing down."

"It's too late for that," Ed Shambaugh broke in. "No lawman's ever talked to me like that, and this one won't again. You comin', Ernie?"

"I'm ahead of you."

The Texas Kid stepped out onto Laurel, Shambaugh following him, and Whit dropped his right hand and pulled his Colt from the holster.

Shambaugh shot first, the flaring muzzle-burst ripping out at Whit, the impact of the heavy slug beating him backward, slamming him into the edge of the raised boardwalk. His left collar-bone was shattered, but he twisted himself upright as Shambaugh's second shot smashed a window-pane above and behind him.

The gunman's squat shape was driving in, and Whit dropped his sight on the man's chest. He triggered and Sham-

(Continued on page 128)

LAST DRAW FOR THE GALLOWS KID

By TALMAGE POWELL

"You're coming with me!"



When you ride the owlhoot trail, there's one thing you've got to remember—it ends where you and a faster man meet!

BRASHOFF had not seen the cowpuncher in over ten years, but he remembered him quite well. He wondered if the cowboy's memory would be as good.

Magee, the cowboy, looked up from his beefsteak meal as Brashoff's presence loomed beside the table. At first there was nothing in the flinty gray depths of Magee's eyes; then came the dawning of recognition.

Magee stood up. The two men re-

garded each other with gazes that measured, that noted the changes ten years had made. Brashoff saw few changes in the cowpuncher. He was the same tall, wind-burned man. His face was the same thing of angles and heavy bone; and he still carried that air of pliant, rangy power, and rawhide strength.

They shook hands. With a motion of his hand, Magee indicated the food before him. "Join me?"

"Thanks, but I've eaten." Brashoff

lighted a cigar. He was quiet a moment, aware that the ten years past had made more noticeable changes in him than in Magee. Brashoff had the strange sensation of being acutely conscious of his body, of the drooping heaviness of his girth, the layers of fat across his sloping shoulders, the broadening of his jowls. He had lost much of his hair, too, and for that reason left his flat-crowned Stetson riding solidly on his head. "I've often wondered where you were, Magee; I saw you that one time—over ten years ago—but you made an impression on me."

"You kind of threw a brand on my feelings, too," Magee said, smiling wryly.

"I'll never forget that first day I saw you, over the sights of my gun. I was quite a buckaroo in those days."

"I figure you was."

"It was a day about like this one, wasn't it?" *A chilly, bleak, gray winter day, with the dull clouds splashed across the sky like dirty dishwater, hiding the sun. And there I was in the silence of the Sierras, waiting for you but not knowing it, coming to a crossing of trails but not realizing it.*

Like a man in thought, Magee sat down. He began eating as if from habit alone, as if he were unconscious of what he was doing. Brashoff lapsed into silence, studying the growing ash of his cigar. Smoke from the cigar writhed torturously—the way that old stage road had writhed through the Sierras.

As clearly as if he had seen it yesterday, Brashoff could remember that stage road. Sitting a black stud horse at the foot of a long, sloping slide of rocks, Brashoff's eyes had fastened on the road as it twisted down the side of the mountain. Like a mirage in the silent, forbidding wilderness of the untamed mountains, a puff of dust moved along the road. The heart of the distant dust-blossom was the rocking San Carlos stage-coach, and Brashoff intended to stop it.

He gave the big black the spur lightly. The stud tossed its head, moved down the wide table of rock. Brashoff guided the animal across a flat expanse, where lava ash stirred sluggishly under the black's hoofs. Beyond, he drew the black up in a maze of huge boulders that were strewn above the stage road. Below Brashoff was a bend where the stage would have to slow. He told himself he couldn't have picked a better spot.

His nerves were cool, loose; and yet Brashoff could not ignore the tight sensation that started at his throat and coiled down into his quivering stomach. He slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard, held it firm in his hand.

The stage swung into view around the bend in the road below, snapping Brashoff's body stiff, his breath short. It was possible to endure the sickening sensation that made him feel as if his intestines were expanding and writhing loosely, because he knew that in a few minutes he would be a rich man.

He inched the black forward. He was limned against the sky. Words came steadily from him, "Pull up there! Just hold 'er steady!"

With a grating of iron tires, the stage halted. As Brashoff guided the black to the trail, the animal's left foreleg slipped on the loose shale. For a single instant, Brashoff's gaze jerked down in automatic reaction. In that second, the stage guard, sitting up high beside the pale driver, whipped up his rifle and fired.

Like a quick echo, the gun in Brashoff's hand crashed. The rifle slug slammed into the quivering flesh of his side, almost jack-knifing him from the saddle. Utter panic blinded him, but it passed as quickly as it had come. He saw that his own shot had pushed the guard back hard against the seat. The rifle had slipped from the guard's hand, and he sat now clutching a bleeding shoulder and glaring at Brashoff.

"I ought to kill you for that!" Brashoff's words made little impression on the thin, hawk-faced guard, but the driver's lips began to quiver.

Brashoff said, "Driver, tell your passengers to get afoot."

"Just two of them," the driver's words shook to the cadence of his shaking lips, "an old lady and a cowpoke."

The old lady came out first, swathed in yards of calico, her withered face shaded by a bonnet. After helping her, the cowpuncher stepped down, the man Brashoff was to know as Magee.

Magee was dressed in patched demin pants, faded shirt, and a wool jacket that was ragged at the elbows. His hat had worn through in the crown where the creases met. He appeared to be a wandering, down-on-his-luck grubline rider, who, while not afraid, intended to mind his own business.

Brashoff ordered the guard, "Heave that box down."

With his good hand, the guard tumbled the box to the ground. And then Brashoff tasted fear. He sat silent a moment, unmoving. He knew he was stymied. The wounded side was sending giddy waves over him. If he dismounted, he might not even be able to lift the strongbox and remount again.

He touched his lips with his tongue, cut his eyes over his captives, knowing he was just as much captive as they. He broke the stillness of the tableau with a gesture of his carbine. "Cut those horses loose—stampede all but one!" he said to the cowpuncher. "Mount that one, with the strongbox. You're coming with me."

He included guard, driver, and the old lady in his next words. "It'll take you a day and a half to walk to town—my apologies, ma'am. You had better tell your sheriff I've got a hostage. I'll release this gent when I'm clear—until that time, the sheriff had better walk on eggshells!"

As the day waned, Brashoff and his hostage crawled further into the deep, silent recesses of the mountains. Until gold had been discovered at Sutter's mill six years ago, there had not been even a stage line inching through these hills. It was wild, empty country, and Brashoff worried only about the fever that mounted in him with the wearing away of the day.

The cowpuncher rode ahead in silence. He had only spoken answers to Brashoff's direct questions as to his name and destination. Magee explained that he had sold his gun and saddle to pay his way to the Calabasas country, where he hankered to have a look-see.

Late in the afternoon, Brashoff and Magee reached the old mine shack. The gray sheets of clouds still hung over the jagged teeth of the mountains, but Brashoff knew it would not rain. The clouds only threatened and passed on.

Brashoff watched Magee draw rein in the scant yard of the old shack. Magee dropped the strongbox and slid off his horse.

BRASHOFF'S wounded side was stiff on the surface with dried blood and beneath the surface with sharp pain. He knew the cowpuncher was watching him. He did his best to ignore the tearing explosion of pain in his side as he dismounted.

"Pick up the box, and walk in the shack. And remember that I'm still in shape to pull a trigger!"

Magee's neck corded from carrying the box. Brashoff moved into the shack behind him. As Magee bent to put the strongbox on the earthen floor of the shack, Brashoff stepped up close behind and hit Magee across the back of the head with the carbine barrel. Magee slumped, unconscious.

"Sorry," Brashoff muttered. "But I'm glad it took only one swing."

Brashoff went outside, fetched his saddle rope with him. His body kept wanting to buckle at the knees, but he pushed himself with the thought that it would take only five or ten minutes of effort to neutralize the hazard of Magee.

He trussed the cowpuncher's hands, snubbing the rope about the heavy bones of Magee's limp wrists. He studied the hand-hewn ceiling beam; then he tossed the free end of the rope over it. Teeth set, he began hauling Magee up toward the beam, snubbing the loose end of the rope about the leg of the bunk, which was built solidly into the wall. He gasped for breath and strength, tugged on the rope again, snubbed it with Magee's limp form pulled a little higher. He continued to repeat the process for perhaps a quarter of an hour, until he had Magee suspended from the wrists between floor and ceiling, Magee's toes barely touching the floor.

Brashoff rested then for half an hour, utterly exhausted.

Later, when Magee finally groaned, Brashoff had dressed his wound as best as he could, eaten a cold can of beans, and had a fire started in the fireplace against the quick chill of the mountain night.

Brashoff turned to find Magee staring at him. Brashoff was feeling much better now, with a little food and rest. He managed a smile. "I guess you're right uncomfortable, but I don't see how it can be helped."

"What are you aiming to do with me?"

"If you don't cause me trouble, I'll leave you here unharmed, with that dun horse from the stage team you rode hobbled outside. You'll figure out some way to get loose before you starve."

Magee looked up at his bound hands. By standing high on tiptoe in his runover boots, he was able to ease some of the pressure from his wrists. He hawked, spat toward the fireplace, and looked at Brashoff. "How'd you manage to get in a mess like this?"

Brashoff, hunkered on the bunk, glanced up quickly to see if his leg were being pulled.

"You're a fool," Magee said, his voice as colorless as his slate-like eyes. "You don't talk or act like a bad sort of gent. What got you into this?"

Brashoff's gaze crawled over the floor, came to rest on the strongbox. "That box'll set me for life," he said.

Magee grunted. "You'll have to go after another strongbox sooner than you think. Ain't no end of strongboxes you'll have to go after. You reckon to be free, but you won't be, because you're cutting yourself off from decent people and the peace of an honest man. You're selling neighbors and friends you might have someday for the gold in that box—and there's no warmth in gold. You almost killed a guard today. Someday you will, and you'll be hunted down then and left to rot where they shoot you. And for what? Your women will be cheap, but their price will come high. You won't be able to turn your back to the kind of men who will claim to be your friends."

"You got it all figured out, ain't you?" Brashoff said. He began laughing; then he swiped the back of his hand across his lips and sobered. His eyes pin-pointed light as he walked across the shack. He had blown the lock of the strongbox while Magee had been unconscious. Now he jerked the strongbox open. His voice rang, "This is my talk!"

The flickering firelight caught the yellow, dull gleam of gold. . . .

Dawn was throwing crimson tiaras about the distant peaks when Brashoff snapped awake in the bunk. He sat up. He had built the fire high in the night, and it still shed light over the old cabin. In the firelight, Brashoff saw Magee. Like an icy shock, Brashoff thought at first the cowpuncher had hanged himself. Then he glimpsed Magee's bloody mouth and chin on a level with Magee's bound wrists.

He realized that Magee had been chewing at the rope that bound him.

With a curse, Brashoff reared up. A burst of pain in his side snapped him back. He gasped against the pain, his eyes rolling. He felt the bunk jerking as Magee threshed like a fish against the rope. Brashoff rolled off the bunk. He saw the rope leading from the bunk-leg across the beam go limp, collapse on the earthy floor.

Brashoff gained his knees as Magee jerked the door of the shack open and vanished outside.

Brashoff scrambled across the cabin, dragging out his six-gun. *The horses!* he thought. He reeled through the door of his cabin, fighting against the stiffness sleep had brought to his wounded side. Running like a gimpy old man to the far side of the cabin, he saw that the horses were still where he had tethered them. But Magee was not in sight.

I hate to do this, Brashoff thought. *I hate it like hell. I kind of liked the fellow.*

Gun ready, Brashoff rounded the shack. He heard the sound of movement, spun in time to catch a glimpse of Magee rearing up behind a close-by boulder—and in time to catch the heavy stone in his forehead. The stone had been flung as Magee's last desperate gamble, with all his strength and accuracy of eye. Brashoff was unconscious before he crashed to the ground.

Now, after ten years, he was face to face with Magee again. He watched Magee eat, looked at the ash on his cigar, saw that it had grown long. Smiling dryly at Magee, he touched the small knot of scar tissue on his forehead. "Here's where you hit me that day, Magee."

"I'm sorry I did it," Magee said.

"I was too, at first—when you delivered me and that strongbox to that sleepy-eyed sheriff. I did two years for that robbery. Two years to think about you.

There were lots of places a man could go to start over again, big as the west is, and in this young, raw country a man has a chance to live down his past."

Brashoff studied the remains of the beefsteak on Magee's plate, and he understood. It was not such a queer breakfast, only the breakfast of a cowpoke. No matter what they said about him, Magee was just a cowpoke at heart.

This was Magee's last breakfast. The Silent Kid, they called him. For nine years now, his infamous name had spread over the Territory, but in less than an hour now he would be hanged.

Magee, the Silent Kid. It was queer and cruel to think of it that way. From the window of the jail cell, Brashoff could see the gallows in the jail yard, new gallows, stark in the early light of gray dawn. He turned back to Magee and saw the shadows of the iron bars that fell across Magee's face.

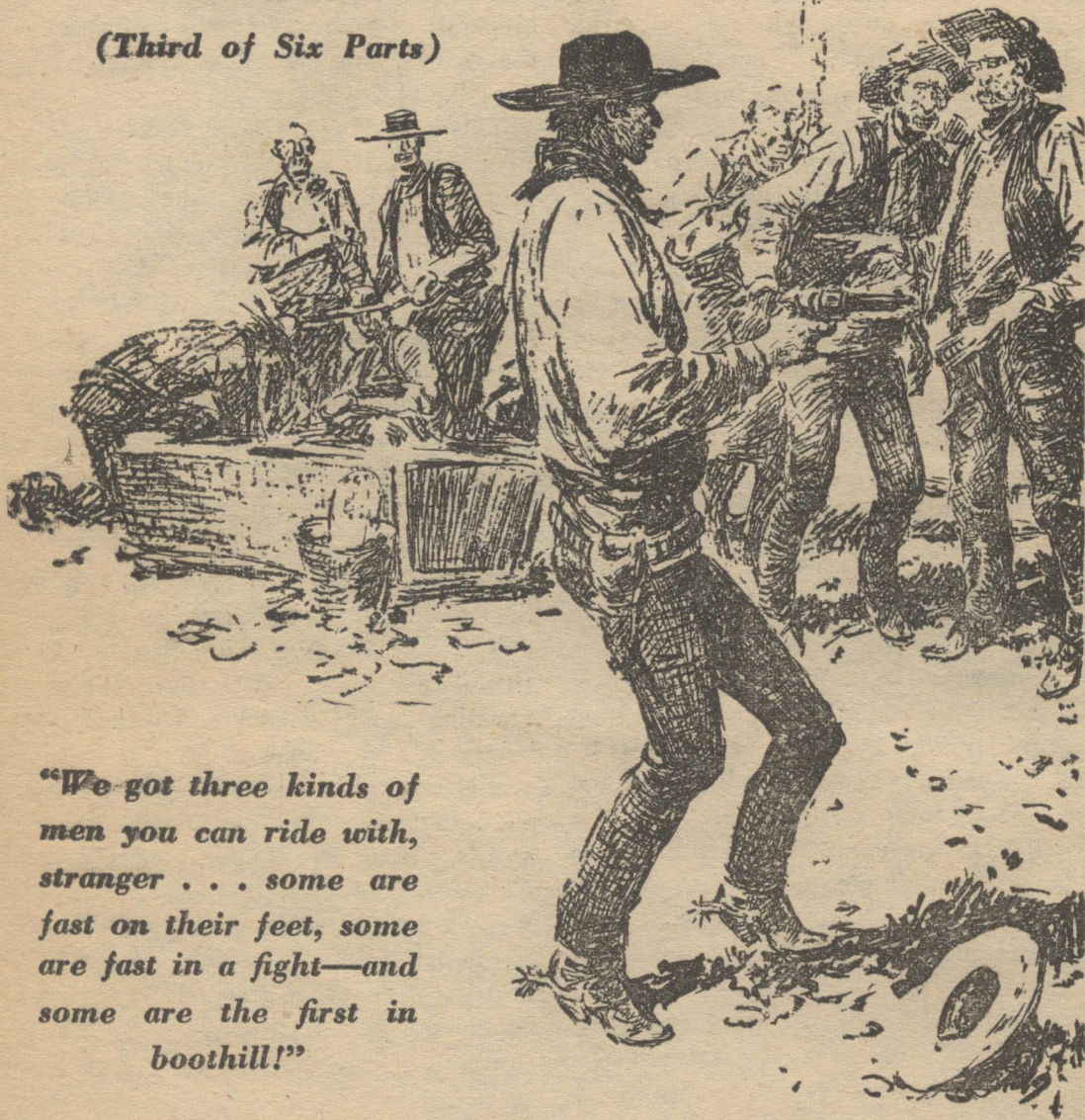
Brashoff's throat was knotted. "How did it—how did you start the trail toward being in this fix?" In a kind of frozen fascination, with bugs of horror crawling along his spine, Brashoff suspected Magee's answer. But something terrible and grim had forced him to voice the question. Then he heard Magee's words. "Bad breaks way yonder in the Calabasas country. The Spanish ranchers weren't hiring gringos, who were roaming in outlaw bands. No job. No money—and the memory of that gold, your gold, haunting me."

Big and hardy, Brashoff stood with tears unashamed in his eyes. Magee knew how the vast west dealt with men, but he hoped Magee wouldn't know everything. Less than thirty minutes from now, hidden in the long, black coat and the high black hood with only slits cut for his eyes, Brashoff would be waiting on the new gallows for Magee. He hoped Magee in that moment would not suspect that he, Brashoff, was the hangman.

Vengeance Valley

By **RALPH ANDERSON**
BENNITT

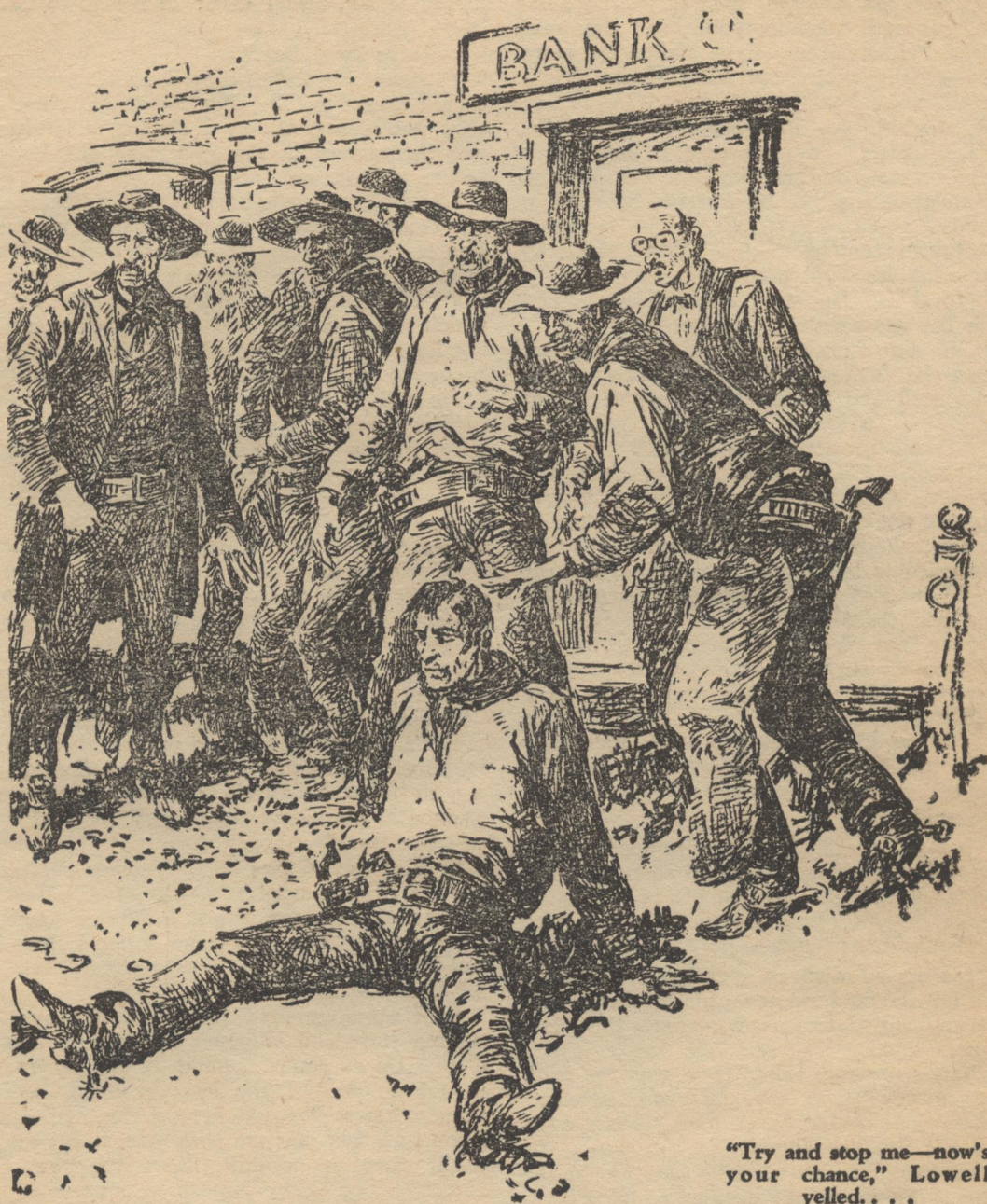
(Third of Six Parts)



"We got three kinds of men you can ride with, stranger . . . some are fast on their feet, some are fast in a fight—and some are the first in boothill!"

WHAT has gone before: Ben Lowell has come from Montana to the Big Masan Valley in Arizona to find Quince Kearney, who killed Ben's mother and crippled his father twenty years before in a quarrel. Riding as Ben Lay with Kearney's henchman, Flick, Ben tries to get the password to Kearney's hideout from Jack Gill, one of the outlaws, but Gill is shot by

Flick before he can finish the code. Coming into the valley, Ben rescues a girl, Jane, from a rattler and her brother, Dick, from lynching at the hands of four punchers who think Dick is a rustler. Discovering that Dick is Kearney's son, Ben turns to question him, but Dick rides away. Ben sets out after him, but loses him. In the town of Dos Ramos, Ben makes friends with Jim



"Try and stop me—now's your chance," Lowell yelled. . . .

Beck, the deputy sheriff, and discovers that someone, probably Flick, has telegraphed a description of Ben Lay, the outlaw, ahead. Ben gets away from Beck and makes contact with Widener, Kearney's contact man, at the hotel. Widener tells him to go to the cellar and wait there, then, gun in hand, Widener demands the rest of the outlaw password.

PART III CHAPTER NINE

Rigamarole

LOWELL stared at him grimly. "Don't do anything you'll regret," he said. "I've met salty *hombres* before, and I'm still on deck." Widener flinched.

"I got you covered, mister."

"I can still outshoot you, Joe," Ben said coldly. "Now tell me—" he stalled for more time—"You heard anything from Flick yet?"

It worked. Joe Widener relaxed a little. "No, I ain't," he admitted, "cept Dick gimme a note saying him and Peewee and a couple more of the boys would be in town tonight."

"Quince coming along?" Ben asked. It was what he wanted to hear.

"Not him. He stays close. Well, c'mon with the passwords!"

"Gill didn't get the rest of the words out before he cashed in his chips. You know damn well I'm not in on the whole layout yet."

"I dunno . . ." Widener said.

"I reckon," Lowell said, "I'm about the only man that's not scared of Flick. Peewee Jones is the only ranny I'd hate to meet in the dark. Without your damn password that jasper would bust my back and laugh while he did it. Let's call it a day, Widener. I'll head back to Montan."

"Stay put, Ben." Widener's brow was suddenly moist. "You know too damn much already to leave like this. I'm gunna have to plug you."

"You can give me the word and everybody will think I got it from Jack Gill with the rest of your mysterious damn' rigamarole," Ben said.

"Judas Priest!" Widener jumped at the out. "Why didn't you say that sooner? Sure. Jack's dead." He paused. "I'm taking a chance on you, Ben, 'cause I think you're regular."

"It's not so much of a chance." Relaxing, Ben felt the cold sweat on his forehead. "I'll tell you why later. Now, what's the password?"

"When a ranny asks, 'How was the trail, wet or dry?' you say, '*Mojado, hombre.*' That's Spanish for, 'Wet, man.' But always give the Spanish—got it?"

Ben realized now that he had Joe in the palm of his hand. He decided to try Flick's nerve, by way of Joe. Coming to his feet, he stretched lazily and then brought both hands down to his sides. "Maybe," he said softly, "you shouldn't have holstered your hog-leg, Joe."

"What do you mean?" Widener's right arm twitched.

"Up to now, I've been playing a lone hand. I can still do it, and I'll tell you why. Flick doesn't like me."

Widener gave an uneasy laugh. "That jasper don't like nobody."

"I've figured why he's coming to town so soon after that job near Gallup. He's

afraid of me, and I think he means to kill me."

"You're loco, Ben."

"I saved his hide," Lowell said, "and in trying to get me, he shot Jack Gill. That's why you're not taking a chance in giving me the password. I'm going to kill Flick before he does me."

Joe Widener's gun hand darted for his hip, but before he could get his .45 half out he was staring into the black bore of Lowell's gun. "Cripes," he got out in a squeak. Stunned by the bewildering speed with which the L-K man had drawn, he wagged his head in mute protest while he stared, bug-eyed and paralyzed, at that yawning black hole.

"I'm going over Flick's head to Quince—over Flick's dead head. Tell Flick that, Joe."

Joe Widener put in some heavy thinking in the next few seconds. "Damn it," he wailed, "I wish I knew you better. Things—"

"Could be a little different, eh? Lowell drove in deeper the wedge which might split the gang even more. "Flick's coming to town tonight—"

"I shouldn't have said that," Widener groaned.

"Your nerve's slipping," Lowell scoffed. "Flick's coming to town to pull another job. He aims to pull this job close and then fog it with Chino and Wade and Steve, and leave Quince in his valley, holding the bag. How you like that?"

"I ain't sayin' nothin'," Widener replied heavily. He glanced at a big silver watch. "Three o'clock, and I got orders to—well, I got orders. You take room Number Seven and lay low."

"And wait for Flick?"

Joe's eyes wavered from Lowell's questioning stare and Widener said after a moment, "Do as you're a mind to, but lay low. Real low. And if you ever let out a peep about what we've said here, I don't give a damn how fast you are with your hardware, you'll sleep in boothill. Let's get out of here."

They passed through a narrow door concealed behind the dumb-waiter, then climbed stone steps to a closet under the back stairs. Widener opened the door, peered about, and then stepped out. "Stay here until I see if the coast is clear," he warned. He started out.

Lowell was close behind the hotel man, but could not see whether there was a spring lock or not. He put out a foot as Widener swung the door.

Widener grinned. "You don't trust nobody, do you, feller? It's all right. I wouldn't myself."

CHAPTER TEN

Desperate Game

IT WAS fifteen minutes to midnight when Lowell entered the Aces Up saloon. A bedlam of sound greeted his quiet entrance. Most of the noise came from the long bar.

As he came into the room, Lowell's dark eyes sought Tumbling T men as well as for Flick and his crew. Along the rear wall he saw Sticks Dow. The beanpole cowpoke was looking straight at Lowell, and in his cold, slate-blue eyes Lowell saw dislike and astonishment. Dow suddenly turned and pushed through the spectators watching a game. He threaded his way across the dance floor with the awkward speed of a crane and left the saloon.

Turning, Lowell saw McCloud at a table where Dow had been standing.

The Tumbling T ramrod was in a poker game with a round-bellied, red-whiskered cowman and two younger punchers of about McCloud's age. The foreman tilted a bottle to his mouth as Lowell came near. "Checked to me, huh?" he said.

"Sure, and don't try a windy," warned the red-bearded man.

"Me," McCloud said, "I'm gunna slice off a chunk of the Tumbling T." He skinned back his cards. "Merry maverick!" he wailed. "I had three aces!"

Tate winked at Lowell. "Somebody switched hands on you, Doug."

"Skullduggery, that's what it is," McCloud moaned. "All I got is four hearts and a spade—hey, you're actually gonna rake in the pot, Tom?"

"Oh, no," Tate chuckled, "I'm just bringing these little chips closer to my pile so they won't get lonesome."

"The man ain't human," McCloud said to the wiry little puncher at his right. "Here we work our fool heads off for a whole month, then he brings us in to this den o' sin and takes all our money back."

"The top card, Doug," Lowell chuckled, "is always a spade."

Doug McCloud froze at the sound of Lowell's voice. In the act of dumping tobacco into a cigarette paper he twisted about. The laughter in his blue eyes died. "Dang, feller," he said softly, "you got nerve showing up around here after pulling that trick on the Little Masan."

"Just curious." Lowell winked at the Tumbling T ramrod. "Being a stranger, as I told you the other day, I wanted a confab with you and Tom Tate. What with losing beef and so forth, I thought maybe you could use a top hand."

Tom Tate studied Lowell with his sharp

blue eyes while he nursed his red beard. "Is this the lead-throwin' gent you boys were talkin' about?" He studied Lowell with interest.

Suddenly, Lowell felt a hard pressure on his back. A harsh voice said, "Elevate, feller!"

Raleigh Welch glided up behind Dow as the skinny puncher plucked Lowell's gun from its holster. The halfbreed was carrying a coil of new rope. He began swinging it back and forth with meaning smirks. Then Spud Haines shouldered through the gathering crowd.

"What's it all about, boys?" Tom Tate demanded.

Haines only held up his bandaged finger, and Dow said, "Tell 'em, Spud. I ain't got the heart."

Haines' peculiar black eyes glinted as his head swung from Lowell to look at the Tumbling T owner. "You wanted top hands, Tom, and you got 'em. You're paying us three fellers fightin' wages to ride around and see what's going on. Well, we're earnin' 'em."

Tom Tate pulled at his beard. "This gent don't look so dang poisonous."

"Maybe," Haines growled, "he just shot off the end of my finger by accident. But it was no accident his stopping us when we meant to string up a Kearney."

"Pshaw!" Tom said. "You admitted you could have been mistaken about that young dude poisoning the creek."

"Correct," Haines grunted, "but we couldn't help wondering afterward what this jasper was doing in that neck of the woods. Could be he's one of the Kearney outlaws that's pestering this range."

"Tate," Lowell put in, "you hired yourself some smart gunslicks when you took on these three gents." He had been edging around so that he now faced Tate. "They're so dang smart, they were about to pin the blame for that poisoned water onto your own ramrod."

"The boys," McCloud explained, "were a mite excited, but we ironed all that out on the way home. Sticks, let's see that educated gun which shot off Spud's finger."

A tense moment of silence followed, then Dow handed over Lowell's gun.

McCloud examined the gun just enough. Lowell thought, to make the act seem real.

"I reckon," McCloud said, "I'd better hang onto this hog-leg. It seems to have been used a lot, stranger. No hard feeling in case you prove you ain't a Kearney outlaw."

"Why accuse me?" Lowell asked.

"Give an account of yourself," McCloud replied testily. "This ain't much of a courtroom, but she'll do. Speak up."

Steeled as he was to the desperate game he was playing, Lowell felt a chill. Rooting out the Kearney gang was the talk on this range. To catch one of that hardy crew was something big. Even so, McCloud's failure to challenge Haines' statement hurt the lone cowboy's case. The crowd could quickly become ugly enough to use Welch's rope.

"The trouble with you sons," Ben said biting, "is this Kearney bunch has put the fear into you. Instead of rooting 'em out, you only grab a lone stranger and tell 'im he's an outlaw."

"We're just starting, mister," McCloud said heavily.

"To hell with all of you! I've never been an outlaw, but I'd a damn sight run with a bunch of *lobos* like this Kearney outfit than the c'yotes I've seen so far on this range."

"That's tol'ble strong medicine, feller," McCloud said.

An angry buzz came from the crowd. "You look reasonably bright, McCloud," Lowell went on, "though maybe not so smart as I figured you were a couple days ago. If I were a Kearney outlaw, d'you suppose I'd be so dumb as to admit it to this pack of c'yotes?"

McCloud winced, Tom Tate scowled, and another angry hum rose from the crowd.

Lowell went on, coldly. "All you jaspers got against me is the fact that I kept you from hanging a young dude I'd never seen before."

"You saved his hide, right enough," McCloud admitted with a scowl.

"Maybe I saved yours too," Lowell grumbled. "When I stepped in, you rannies were about to slap leather. Haines drew first—"

"I wouldn't have shot," Haines said coolly. "I just wanted to have the drop. Doug here had just told us he was the one to poison the creek."

"I was sarcastic when I shouldn't have been," McCloud explained ruefully. "You did us some good by throwing our hardware away. By the time we'd collected our hog-legs and caught our cayuses, we'd cooled off."

"So now," Lowell said, "you figure I poisoned your water."

"What else could we think?" McCloud said almost apologetically. He seemed startled by a sudden idea as he looked at Tate and then back to the L-K cowboy. "Remember you lit out of there like you had ants in your britches when you learned the dude was a Kearney—dang!"

"Go on," Lowell urged.

"Cripes!" McCloud yelled. "Until then, you didn't know the dude was a Kearney!" He looked about as he came to his feet. "Folks, we owe this gent an apology. He

can't belong to the Kearney gang because—"

"Hell, he can't!" Dow burst out. "He's a new member. That's why he didn't know Dick Kearney. Dick's got nothing against him 'cept the family he belongs to, and I ain't so sure about that."

"What you mean by that, Dow?" Tom Tate demanded.

"All we know is there's a lot of stories about a Kearney gang."

"That's right, Sticks," Haines put in. "I ain't holding for any outlaws, but did anybody ever see this Quince Kearney?"

"No," Tate put in sourly, "but my cows and some others didn't hightail it over the Mex border of their own accord."

"That about answers the hull question," Dow said. "I ain't sure about any Kearney outlaws, but everybody here knows there's a gang of rustlers holing up somewhere on this range." He turned to Lowell. "You're Ben Lay, the outlaw, one of the gang what held up a train near Gallup, New Mexico. Jim Beck saw you ride into town on your black gelding just like the telegram described. You were wearin' a black hat, even if you have got a gray one on now."

Rage smoldered in Lowell's eyes. "Is every stranger on a black horse, wearing a black sombrero, a dirty train robber?" he asked.

"Look under his collar!" shrilled an excited voice. It was Jim Beck, who had come in and wormed his way through the crowd. "Below his right ear," Beck went on. "If there's a mole there, he's Ben Lay."

"By mighty!" Dow yelled. Left hand outstretched, he reached for Lowell's shirt collar. For the moment, his gun was lowered.

It was a chance, and Lowell took it. He swung his left fist at Dow's long, bony chin. There was a sharp crack, a grunt of pain. Then, eyes glazing, Dow crashed to the floor.

Split seconds counted then. Before anyone could move, Lowell whirled on McCloud. His left hand chopped savagely against McCloud's wrist, and the .45 fell from McCloud's numbed fingers. Lowell caught the gun in his right hand.

"Reach, you sons!" he barked. "Reach! You'll get me, maybe, but I'll take a bite while you get a chunk! You, Welch—back away from Dow's gun, or I'll shoot off that ear right now."

In a catlike leap, Lowell scooped up the fallen gun. That put him not far from the amazed deputy sheriff.

Like the others, Beck had seen a series of moves made so fast he hardly realized what had happened, until he saw Lowell's two guns menacing the crowd. Ben Lay's reputation had traveled fast, and it had lost nothing from what the awed spectators had just seen.

Lowell sensed he had the crowd cowed, but he knew that only briefly would he hold the whip hand. Once they got their hands on him, he'd never have a chance to explain. In a few seconds, guns would be stealthily poking past the sides of the men in front, and someone would let loose. He had to act fast.

WITH A quick move, Lowell put himself behind the slack-jawed deputy sheriff. His two guns still threatened the crowd. "Stand still, Jim," Lowell whispered, "and nobody will be hurt." Seeing the guns, Beck stood still.

"Listen, you lily-livered sons!" Lowell shouted at the crowd, "it makes no difference who I am. Maybe I belong to Kearney's gang, maybe I don't, but I'm not leaving here with a rope around my neck just because some of you jaspers got ideas!"

"Welch!" McCloud's voice cut the brief silence and it had a steely ring. "That's the second time in a week you've brought your rope out. Give it here!"

Lowell relaxed a trifle at this first sign of support, but he still wanted to get away. "March, Beck," he said. "Backward. We're going places."

"No sech thing!" squawled the deputy. "I'm arresting—"

"Hold on, there," boomed a voice. A black-bearded giant of a man jostled through the crowd like a bull through tall grass. It was Peewee Jones.

Standing spraddle-legged, Peewee roared with laughter as he looked down on the fallen Dow. "What's goin' on, gents?"

A dozen voices began explaining, but the big fellow waved a huge hand and looked at Tom Tate. "From that belly and the red hair all over your phiz," Peewee said, "I figure you must be Tom Tate of the Tumbling T."

Tom Tate's voice was bland. "Readin' sign myself, and judgin' by that bellerin' voice and the black hair on your own ugly phiz, I reckon you must be Peewee Jones."

Lowell shot a glance toward the bar. If Peewee was on deck, then Flick and others of the gang must be in town. Then his eye caught Flick, and though Lowell had been expecting it, he recoiled a little as he saw that bony, death's-head face. With Flick was Chino, the slant-eyed *hombre* who never spoke. The two were alone; at least, Lowell could not see big Wade or the runty Steve.

Flick had just come through the street door, and his pale gray eyes took in the scene in one sweeping glance. He saw Tate facing the giant Peewee. Then his eyes swung to Lowell. Flick's bony face did not change

expression, yet as Lowell challenged the bleak gray eyes, he read in them a withering lust to kill.

The very lack of expression told Lowell that Widener had delivered his message of death. He was sure of it when Flick turned about and pushed through the door followed by his silent companion.

Meanwhile, Peewee was roaring with laughter at Tom Tate's caustic insult, an apparent good humor which deceived everyone but Lowell.

"Bueno!" Peewee bawled. "Pleased to meet you, Tate. I allus enjoy meetin' up with gents who have the guts to talk up to me. Shake!"

"Not me." Tate grinned a little. "My right hand is in pretty good shape, and I aim to keep it that way."

Reading a compliment in that, Peewee chuckled, "All right, just gimme the story. I'm right curious about this gent called Ben Lay."

"There ain't much to tell." Tate stroked his red beard. "He helped young Dick Kearney out of a tight. Some say he's Ben Lay, the train robber; others that he runs with Kearney's gang of cow thieves and murderers. I ain't so dang sure, myself. Be you one o' them desperados, Peewee?"

"Me?" Peewee roared it. "Why would I fool around with a business where I'd only run my head into a loop? Flick and me are making plenty *dinero* up on the Rafter F, and daddblast any mother's son who says different."

"Peewee," Tate grunted, "you'll have us believing Quince Kearney is a sweet li'l angel if you don't quit."

"Tain't neither here nor there, anyhow," Beck suddenly squawked, getting restless with Lowell's arms about him. "This ranny holding me may be a Kearney man, may not, and I don't know who's been running off cows and poisoning water, but I'm sure of one thing—he's Ben Lay." Beck turned his head. "You're under arrest," he said to Lowell. "You comin' peaceable?"

Peewee howled with laughter. Tate and Haines guffawed; McCloud's eyes lighted with mirth, though his face remained serious.

Just then Sticks Dow came to and pulled himself to his feet. He stood swaying and looking about, then his gaze fell upon the man who had caused his downfall, and his thin face twisted with rage. "Step aside, Beck," he said in a choked voice, and he started toward Lowell.

"Don't you start any gunplay, Dow," Beck squeaked. "He's my prisoner and I aim to take him to jail."

"You ain't arresting him, peaceable or any other way," Dow said furiously. "If

he's any kind of a man, he knows what I mean. Come out from behind the law, you yaller-livered tinhorn, and let's see if you got the nerve to draw even with me!"

"Listen, Jim," Lowell said in Beck's ear. "I'm not the man you want. I'm after the same jaspers you are, but I can't explain now. How about tomorrow morning? You have my word I'll tell you the whole story."

Beck twisted about and his eyes met Lowell's. "Dang it," he grumbled, low-voiced, "I believe you'll keep your word. I know you're Ben Lay, yet somehow I think you're square. Watch Dow, Ben, he's greased lightnin'."

"Ah-h," Dow snarled, "what's all the palaver about?"

Lowell faced Dow and looked him over coolly.

"Give Big-mouth his hog-leg, Doug," Lowell said, and he tossed Dow's gun to the Tumbling T foreman. "Examine it and then let 'im put it in his holster."

The crowd surged to both sides, leaving a wide aisle, while Dow was getting his gun back. Lowell spoke again in Beck's ear: "When you step away, go to my left, or you'll cross my line of fire," he whispered.

DOW had dropped to a gunman's crouch. His mouth was a thin, straight line, his arms and shoulders lax. His hawk eyes were alertly watching for the first exposure of his opponent's body.

"Get ready, you two bullet-wrasslers," Beck barked. "This has gotta be accordin' to custom. If either of you jaspers slaps leather before I'm two steps in the clear, I'll do some shooting on my own account."

Before Beck moved, Lowell flashed a look about. McCloud was standing with hands clenched, a little behind Haines and Welch. Tate was bent forward, watching Peewee. The big fellow's dark eyes lighted with an animal interest when Beck took his first step sidewise.

Haines, Tate and McCloud drew their guns, apparently to cover Raleigh Welch, who had his weapon in his hand, looking for trouble.

"Put 'em away, boys," Beck ordered. He scowled at the tow-headed Mex, and unconsciously took a step in that direction. "That means you, Welch!"

With a choking scream, Dow went into action. His hand swept back in a smooth blur of motion—swift, snaky-sudden. He took advantage of the fact that Beck made a second step as he spoke.

Lowell had learned to watch a man's shoulder rather than the face or the gun hand itself, and he saw the first betraying twitch of the upper part of Dow's shirt

sleeve. His gun was in his hand so suddenly that no one actually saw it being drawn. Orange flame seared part way across the space between the two. The roar of Dow's gun came a fraction of a second later. His bullet smashed a splinter from the floor near his feet.

Howling with pain, he crow-hopped about, flirting a bloody hand, and then sprawled into a chair. Lowell dropped his .45 back into its holster, and smiled faintly. "I meant to get only the first joint of that finger," he said. "How about it, Peewee?"

The big man took a single look. "Gawd-amighty!" he breathed. Then, with an unintelligible grunt, he pushed through the crowd and banged out the door.

Lowell leaned against the wall and rolled a smoke. He fumbled for a match, found none.

Doug McCloud scratched a match on his pants. He held it to Lowell's cigarette, his blue eyes brimming with laughter. "Thanks for not takin' me up on that damfool offer I made you a couple of days ago, mister," he said.

Little Wick Wickwire exploded. "Gee-rooz-lem! He gave Sticks a chance to draw out, and I thought it was because he was scared! I'm here to say, mister, I wish you'd come out to the Tumbling T and show us fellers how you did that."

"How about it, Tate?" Ben asked. "Do I get that job?"

"You sure do," Tom said vehemently. "You may be Ben Lay the outlaw, but I don't give a damn, just so you work that educated gun-hand for me and not against me."

"No cowboy and no outlaw," Haines said heavily, "ever worked a six-gun that fast." The big fellow was bandaging Dow's hurt finger, and his black eyes stared straight into Lowell's. A grin widened his heavy face. "I'm betting you're not a puncher, anyhow. I don't see any rope callouses on your hands."

It was a shrewd observation, for only once during the past year had Lowell worked as a cowhand. "And I'm betting," he retorted, "that you rannies can guess from now 'til doomsday without learning from me what my private business is. I'll help catch your cow rustlers and I'm willing to leave it to Doug and Tom whether I can handle any job around a ranch."

"Fair enough." Tom Tate appraised Lowell's lithe body with the care he would use in buying a horse. "You salivate me a couple of rustlers, and I don't give a hang if you never saw a cow or if you look like two train robbers. Hear that, Beck? I'm gunna fight fire with fire."

The deputy nodded. "We'll wait for the

evidence, boys," he grumbled. He turned to Ben. "But who are ye anyhow?" he asked testily.

"That'll have to wait, Beck," Lowell said.

"Well, if you ain't Ben Lay, the outlaw," Beck complained, "what in time will we call you, hereabouts?"

Lowell grinned a little. "Call me—Ben Lay," he said.

Later that night, Ben Lowell awoke with a start. The moon, which had been high when he left the Aces Up saloon, now slanted light nearly horizontally through his window. A sound of some kind, in or near Widener's Hotel, had roused him.

Without raising his head from the pillow, he looked at the window, then at the door. Nothing. The washstand was still tilted back against the door. He had balanced the washbasin on a chair by the open window so the least touch would send it crashing. Those things were as he had left them, but he got the gun under his right leg and set his feet on the floor.

A glance out over the roof of the rear porch revealed nothing to cause alarm, yet he was sure something more than a bad dream had awakened him. He got his watch from under the pillow and looked at it in the light of the setting moon. It was 4:15. Somewhere, a rooster crowed. He glided barefoot to the door, moved the washstand out of the way, and laid his ear to the door. The hall outside was silent.

THEN he noticed a narrow rectangle of white, a piece of paper which had been partly pushed under the door. He stared down at the paper, thinking of cheese put on a mouse trap. Pulling on that paper might set off a gun. He got his gray hat, placed it over the muzzle of his hand gun, then stood aside as he unlocked and opened the door.

Nothing happened. He pushed the hat out beyond the door jamb, and even struck a match to show his decoy, but the rain of lead he was expecting did not materialize. He scowled a little at his unnecessary precautions, picked up the paper and gave a grunt of astonishment. Under the larger piece of cheap scratch paper lay a small envelope.

After lighting his lamp, he looked at the writing—a rounded feminine hand—with a curious mixture of delight and despair. The envelope was blue-gray, and a faint odor of lilacs touched his nostrils. It was from Jane.

"You can bet," he muttered, "it's no love letter."

He first read the scrawl pencilled on the cheap paper. It was signed, "D," and it said:

Ben Lay. Meet me in front of the bank as soon as you read this.

Lowell studied the message, thinking it could have come from Dick. The handwriting was poor, for a dude from the East, yet there were no misspelled words.

With a strong suspicion that Dow or Haines, if not Flick or Peewee, had written the note, Ben ripped open the envelope with unloverlike roughness. It said:

Friend Ben: You helped us twice and I wanted so much to talk with you in the dining room. I am afraid Dick is in more trouble. It is four in the morning and he has not yet come into his room. I am in #12. Please come as soon as you can—Jane.

Ben put the note on the dresser and reached for his clothes. If Jane was worried about Dick, he couldn't stop to wonder how she felt about him. He had to find out what the trouble was.

Dressed, he blew out the light. He put on his gray hat, pulled off his boots, and then went silently down the hall to the front stairway. At the end of the central corridor was a door numbered 12.

He paused, feeling an urge to talk with her and comfort her, then turned and went down the steps. In the lobby below, he put on his boots.

Cool air fanned his cheeks as he stepped into the street. The moon was not yet behind the Gila Mountains, so it was lighter in the west than in the east.

With his bootheels clumping on the board walk, Lowell headed west. In the stillness of early morning, his steps sounded loud. Across the street from Higgins' store, he halted when he heard riders back of him, coming from the livery stable. They came toward him at a gallop, slowing down as they drew near.

"That you, Dick?" It was Haines. With him were Dow and Welch. All three leaned forward to make out the man in the shadows of the building.

"Not this time, Haines." Lowell stepped out to the edge of the walk. "Are you gents figuring on another necktie party?"

Haines only laughed. Dow gave a throaty curse on recognizing the man who had bested him a few hours earlier. He swore again when Welch said something Lowell could not hear.

"Naw," Dow said, "he just came out of Widener's place."

"Did you, Lay?" Haines asked. "We heard a shot about a quarter of an hour ago down this way. We were sleeping in the livery."

"Why do you jaspers think it was Dick

Kearney?" Lowell asked the punchers. Haines hesitated before replying. "I was wondering if it was Dick from something he said last evening. He was in the Aces Up saloon before you showed up. Anyhow, he was a mite sore at me and wouldn't talk much."

"Probably," Lowell suggested, "he doesn't like hanging bees."

"That's what was eating on him, I reckon. We heard he and his sister are riding over to the railroad to catch a train for the East, and figured we ought to apologize to him. So we decided to come to the hotel first and sort of tell 'im goodbye. Friendlylike."

"That's real polite of you boys," Lowell said. "Why would you expect to find a dude out on the street at this hour?"

Haines swore. "We didn't expect to find him. We only saw somebody, you, come out of the hotel as we rode down this way. C'mon, boys, let's go up to his room."

Lowell let them go, though he had half a mind to tell them Dick was not in his room. Or was he? He continued on his way, thinking of that note. There was an urgency about that call for a meeting in front of the bank, and this feeling grew stronger when Lowell could see no one.

He paused at the intersecting street. West and straight across from him was the hardware store and then a vacant lot; the bank was diagonally opposite to him. On the double, Lowell made it over to the hardware store and then past its shuttered windows. He paused before starting across the vacant space. The back of the lot was an alley which paralleled the entire length of the main street.

If any one meant to bushwhack him, this would be the spot. He backed up cautiously until he was in the shadow of the corner of the building. The bank was directly across from him, but nowhere did he see movement.

The last sliver of moon disappeared as he stood there. Objects at least partly visible a few moments earlier became a grayish shroud. A shapeless blob near the far end of the water trough across the street vanished as he looked that way.

Somebody was waiting. He could feel it. The feeling became so strong he was certain it would mean his death to venture out in front of that vacant lot. He resumed his cautious backward move, thinking to circle around and come in from the alley.

Lowell had nearly reached the street corner when he heard a sharp exclamation. It came from the direction of the saloon. He dropped flat.

Two jets of orange flame stabbed the darkness. One was across the street, a second

beyond the far corner of the building. A slug slammed into the wooden store front just above him; another whizzed nearly as close as it flew up the street. More bullets came close as he rolled around the building corner. His hat came off and rolled away. Partly shielded, he came to one knee and fired twice at the vague figure at the end of the water trough.

A shrill scream came in answer, then a thud, as if a man had fallen to the ground. Feet pounded the board walk opposite the saloon, then he heard the sound of hoofbeats dying away toward the Big Mason.

A shout came from up the street; another from the Aces Up saloon. Aroused by the shooting, other Dos Ramos citizens were coming from all directions. Several riders came thundering down from the east end of the street.

Still in a crouch, Lowell reached for his hat. It wasn't where he thought it should be, and in the darkness he couldn't find it. Meanwhile, the mounted men were already galloping past the hotel. He got to his feet and ran. His thought was to make for the hotel, circle back and pick up his hat before some one else did. The importance of getting that hat back grew. He raced diagonally across the street, and up the alley to the hotel.

Unseen, he got back to the main street while a number of men ran by in the direction of the bank. He paused behind a rain-barrel. The deep darkness seemed to lift during the two minutes Lowell waited. He could see two old men moving cautiously toward the bank, and was about to follow when someone yelled at the corner.

"Here's his hat, fellers!"

A minute later, Lowell entered his room, intent on getting his black hat so he could join the group at the bank.

A voice came from the darkness. "Put 'em up, Ben Lay! And no funny business. I heard all that shootin'." It was Beck.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cut and Ride!

"THEY'RE up, Jim," Lowell replied wearily. He felt that his luck had run out. His gray Stetson hat was down there near a dead man—a man he had shot. In this country, from what he had seen, that was enough to hang him.

Deputy Jim Beck did not move. It was plain he had a wholesome respect for the lead-throwing young cowpuncher. Lowell's clothes rustled when he picked up the black sombrero on the washstand.

"Hey!" Beck complained, "What you do-

in'? I'm warnin' you I got you covered."

"Let's have a light," Lowell suggested, "then you can put your hardware away, Jim. I'm not running."

"Dagged if I don't believe you. Dunno why, either." Beck struck a match.

Lowell sat on the edge of the bed and began rolling a cigarette. "What's on your mind, old timer? Do you usually call on your suspects as early as this?"

"I do when I git a warning like this." The deputy straightened out a crumpled note. Lowell read:

Watch Ben Lay tonite and until he's out of town. A friend.

It was neither the same kind of paper nor the same writing as the note signed, "D".

Lowell's mouth drew down as he handed back the message. "He should have signed it, 'A yellow dog,'" he commented gloomily. "It doesn't prove a thing except dirty work. What o'clock did you get it?"

Beck glanced at a big silver watch. "It's ten after five now, and somebody banged on the door of the jail about twenty minutes ago. When I got to the door, there wasn't nobody in sight, but I found this on the doorstep."

"Didn't you hear anybody riding away?"

"Not away. Three gents came galloping up from Higgins' place, but they couldn't of knocked on the door. Wasn't time."

Lowell smiled grimly. If Haines and Dow and Welch had not cooked up this scheme, Flick and his gang had done so. The idea was that the law should find Ben Lay out of his room while that shooting was going on. Or was it only an ambush?

"Those three might have had some one bang on your door so you'd be sure to see them coming instead of going. I saw them, myself. It was Haines and Dow and that towhead Greaser, Welch."

Beck nodded. "I talked to 'em before the shooting started. They rode out of town while I was walking down here to the hotel."

"Haines told me they were coming to the hotel to see if Dick Kearney was in his room."

"Haines mentioned that. They decided not to, account of waking up his sister in the next room."

"It sort of clears them," Lowell admitted, "even if they were around. But somebody knew I'd be down on the street before I knew it myself."

"Wal, what was you up to, prowlin' around in the dark?"

Lowell pulled out the note and let the deputy read it. "I awoke about 4:15 and

found it shoved under my door," he said. "Figuring young Dick was in trouble, I buckled on my gun and went out. I saw Haines and his pals and stopped across from the post office. They came from the livery past your place. I don't know whether they left your note then or not."

"That jibes with what they told me," Beck said.

"Down by the hardware store I ran into a flock of bullets instead of finding Mister "D". Naturally, I shot back. I winged one of the bushwhackers, at least somebody let out a yell and dropped. A couple of others hairpinned their cayuses and fanned. People began coming up, and I figured I'd be in a tight, what with some of 'em thinking I was Ben Lay, the train robber. So I dusted. That's all."

"You are Ben Lay. You told folks you were in the saloon, and the note says so. Gimme that note, and—" Beck broke off when voices came from down the hall. There was the tramp of boots—men coming. Beck drew his gun. "And," he continued, "gimme that hog-leg o' yourn."

"Can't do it, Jim. I'm in a tight and there's no time to explain. I'm asking you to believe something hard to believe. I'm no outlaw; I'm after one. My name's Ben Lowell as I told you, but don't tell that name to anybody. Let me slide out the window. I'll be back in a week or two—or I'll be dead."

"I swan if you ain't the beatin'est jasper for cold nerve!" Beck said. The men out in the hall exclaimed loudly, then some one banged on the door.

Beck's wrinkled face was screwed up in lines of doubt, then he lowered the gun. "Git, dang yuh, before I change what mind I got!" He closed the window after Lowell had scrambled through it and down the porch roof to the eave trough.

The sun was just peeping over the hills, and Lowell was able to see about the neighborhood well enough to be sure no one was watching him. He could hear Beck challenging the men at the door, so he clung there and listened.

Dow's voice came loudly when Beck opened up. "Where's Ben Lay? We want to give 'im his *sombrero*. Where is he?"

"That's what I want to know," Beck answered. "I dang near fell asleep follerin' that advice you wrote me, Dow."

"I wrote you?"

"Shut up, Sticks," Haines rumbled in his deep voice. "You can't write with that bandaged finger any more than I can."

"That's right," Beck sounded crest-fallen. "You must 've wrote it, Welch."

"Naw," Haines said impatiently, "he can't write anything but Spanish, and that not very well. Listen, Beck. The bank's been robbed and fifty thousand in gold and greenbacks taken."

Beck swore. "How you fellers happen to look for me up here?" he asked shrewdly. "Answer me that!"

"Hell," Dow said, "we're looking for Ben Lay, the outlaw. We aim to collect the thousand-dollar reward the bank's offering for him. We didn't know you were here."

"That's not the point," Haines broke in savagely. "Young Dick Kearney got his. He's down by the bank, deader'n a stone."

"A dead outlaw," Beck grunted, "ain't nothin' to git het up about."

"He wasn't an outlaw," Haines barked. "Looks like he was trying to stop the robbery and got killed for it. But we know who did it. In Dick's hand are a couple of pieces of leather off the *chaparejos* of the jasper he was tussling with. Here's Ben Lay's hat, and I'll bet a dollar these leathers fit his *chaparejos*."

Lowell knew very well that those pieces of leather would fit his chaps. It would be part of the scheme. During his absence last night, the leathers could have been torn from his chaps, then placed in the dead man's hand.

A little tight around the lips, Ben slid down the post.

HE HIT the ground at the feet of the Chinese cook, who was standing in the kitchen doorway beating up flap-jack batter. The cook looked at him impassively. Lowell grabbed his arm.

"Listen good," he told the cook. "Send the Mex *muchacho* to the stable. Tell him to get my black horse saddled and ready and bring it to the back of the Aces Up saloon, chop-chop."

"Can do." The Chink bowed gravely, and his face broke into a grin when Lowell flipped him one of his five dollar gold pieces. "Gee-loos-lem! *Mucho dinelo*. Me fixee good. Jose!" A sing-song string of orders in Spanish followed as Lowell turned the corner of the hotel.

The body of Dick Kearney lay near the west end of the trough, where he had fallen, when Lowell came across the street. The dead youth lay face up in the dust. He was not a nice sight. The bullet had smashed between his eyes, and blood stained his face and shirt front. A crowd was staring at him silently.

After one glance, Lowell looked no more. A curious feeling of despair settled upon him, and presently grew into a black rage.

Then an idea came that struck with the force of a blow. Those bits of leather. If they had been taken from his chaps and put into the dead man's hand, somebody else had killed Dick!

Flick had been in the saloon, had gone out as soon as he saw Lowell. He could have entered Ben's room, torn off the leather from the chaps there, then killed Kearney's son with the deliberate intention of throwing the blame onto Ben Lay. Why? And when?

Lowell looked at his watch. It was 5:30. He had awakened an hour and a quarter ago. The fight had occurred at least twenty minutes later, when Dick was already dead. So the man who had fired from the water trough must have been holding the dead body to draw Lowell's fire. But that scheme hadn't worked as planned, because Lowell had arrived late.

A tall, thin man, whose clothes smelled like a horse wrangler's, plucked Lowell's sleeve. "Hey," he said loudly, "ain't you the galoot accused of being Ben Lay, the outlaw, in the Aces Up saloon last night?"

The crowd, already turning toward the open door of the bank, halted. Several men touched their guns hesitatingly, but no one drew. A knot of men burst from the front door of the hotel. Haines, Beck and the others.

That decided Lowell. He reached out and twisted the skinny man's shirt front, his gun pressed hard against the wrangler's stomach. "What did you say, feller," he asked quietly.

"N-nothing. Nothing about you, I mean!"

Contemptuously, Lowell hooked a toe about the other man's heel and gave him a shove. The horse wrangler sat down hard in the dust, bleating apologies, but the damage was done.

Lowell swept his big .45 in a slow arc as he backed across the street toward Moke's saloon.

"Listen, you buzzards," he yelled, in a voice hoarse with anger. "I don't like your damn town! I'm leaving. I didn't have anything to do with this robbery and killing, but if you want to try to stop me from leaving, now's your chance. Go ahead, draw—fill your hand, and I'll shoot off a finger while you're doing it!" The crowd surged back.

Haines, Beck, and the rest were almost to the cross street. By then, Lowell had backed up to the saloon. He kicked open the swinging doors, backed through, and ran for the rear door. Except for a sleepy little Mex sweeping up the night's debris, the place was empty.

If the Chink and the hotel boy had done

their job, Boots should be out in the alley. Bursting through the back door, Lowell cleared the porch in one leap. At the barn, he looked up the alley. The Mex was just riding away from the hotel, coming at a slow trot.

Gun holstered, Lowell began an unhurried walk. He started to cross the vacant lot next to the saloon. A yell came from the street before he was halfway past the open space. He halted and stood with arms akimbo, glaring at the small crowd. The shouting died with comic suddenness. A few threw themselves to the ground.

Lowell went on at the same unhurried walk. Unless someone used a rifle, there was little likelihood of his being hit from that distance. The rear corner of the hardware store would be the worst, after that, the open cross street. Men would be waiting there who would shoot.

Lowell raised his hand, signalling the Mex riding Boots to stop. The *muchacho* drew rein far enough back so that he couldn't be seen by anyone on the main street.

A quick glance off to the south, and Lowell saw that that would be the best way out of town. There were a few scattered houses, then fairly open ground for the mile or so to the trees along the banks of the two streams. A lone rider was galloping away from town, but the distance was too great for Lowell to see who it was.

A hand gun roared from the corner of Moke's barn. The slug winged wide of Lowell, but it roused anew the black rage he had felt out on the street. More men were coming down the cross street to head him off. Snapping a shot back of him, Lowell raced to the street corner. He reached it none too soon. Guns leveled, Haines, Dow and four others were legging it down the cross street to the same corner. But not Raleigh Welch. Lowell found time to wonder what had become of the towhead.

Lowell poked his gun around the corner and the six men came to a skidding halt.

"Reach you sons!" Lowell called. "Drop all that hardware, then come on." In a conversational voice, he said as they came near, "You gents don't know me anyhow. You know damn well I had nothing to do with robbing the bank or shooting young Kearney."

"You can't talk yourself out of this," Dow snarled. "You got the drop on us now, but we'll take you in. We've been sworn in as deputies—"

"Dow," Haines barked, "will you shut your damn trap?" He gave Lowell a crooked grin. "We just want to ask you a few questions. We ain't so durn bloodthirsty as you think."

Haines was being too friendly and plausible. Lowell was not caught off guard. He took another precautionary glance down the alley. Twenty paces away, Welch's darkly handsome face was widened in a grin. He was grinning because he was in the act of throwing a knife. His arm had started its forward sweep. Light glinted off the naked, shining blade.

Lowell threw himself backward. He went to his shoulder blades as the knife sang past him. From there he took a quick shot, but Welch had already darted back inside. Lowell sprang to his feet. The punchers, who had started across the street toward him, stopped quickly.

"Gather 'round, boys," Ben ordered. "Just a half circle. Maybe your friends will shoot the wrong man, but that won't matter a hell of a lot to you jaspers, since you're defending the law. March!"

Half-ringed by the unarmed six, Lowell backed briskly across the street and up the alley to the waiting Boots. He picked up the reins, swung into the saddle and kneed Boots to face east. "Tell your Greaser pal I'll put my brand on him when I see him," he said. "It'll be the right ear." He spurred Boots to a gallop.

The Chink cook stared, goggle-eyed, as the fleet black gelding flashed past.

At the next corner, Lowell turned south. Bullets whizzed around him as he rode, slanted low. A posse would soon be in swift pursuit, but just the feel of that gallant horse under him was enough to raise his spirits.

That wise Chink had tied a sack of food to the back of the saddle, enough to last a week. The thought of food made Lowell hungrier as he rode along. He finally drew rein on a shady bank, at the junction of the two streams, where he could watch his back-trail.

Sitting on a boulder, he could watch the open territory between him and town. He meant to circle the town and head north. He'd go to the Tumbling T, take Tom Tate and Doug McCloud into his confidence, and plan with them how to whip the Kearney gang.

All that would take time, and Lowell wanted to be fresh. He wasn't worn out, but the past ten days had been hard. He needed a good hideout somewhere that would give him a chance to get some sleep and think things out.

A twig snapped and, like a lizard scared off a rock, Lowell slid down from his boulder. Gun in hand, every nerve tense, he waited during three breaths, his heart pounding in his ears. That lone rider he had seen—

"I DIDN'T mean to frighten you, friend Ben," said a laughing voice. It was Jane Kearney.

Red of face, Lowell stuck his head above the rock. "You sure did, Jane," he admitted sheepishly. "What brought you out here? I thought you were asleep at the hotel."

"Then you came?" she asked in her breathless way. As she stood waiting for his answer, her blue eyes wide with question, she seemed to him the loveliest creature in the world. For a moment he did not notice her clothes, then their very incongruity brought them to his attention. She was wearing a dress instead of riding costume, a costly dress of pale rose color. Her face was flushed and streaked with perspiration. Her small boots were scuffed and dusty.

City clothes out on the edge of the desert! "Gal," he exclaimed in amazement, "how did you happen to come out here in those duds?"

"On a horse."

"Sure, of course. But were you thrown?"

"Yes." The girl's chin began to wobble. "Oh, Ben, why didn't you wake up when I knocked on your door?"

"That's what woke me up. I got your note. What's up?"

Jane was almost in tears. "Dick's gone," she gasped. "I'm sure of it. He—he didn't want to go back East. Oh, if only you had given me a chance to talk with you yesterday!"

"Easy now," Ben said, "and tell me all about it." He glanced over his backtrail, saw no one in pursuit, and decided that he had time to listen. "What makes you think Dick has gone for good?" he asked.

"Today we were to start back East together. After supper last night, he said he was going out. He thinks he's such a man and he's only twenty. He can ride, though, and he's gotten the idea lately that he wants to join a gang of outlaws and go galloping over the country with bullets whistling past his ears." Jane was eyeing Lowell with a curiously frank look.

"We must get him to go back to school before it's too late," she said. "You can. You'll have to. It's your fault, Ben."

"How do you figure that?"

"You're his ideal. He couldn't get over the cool way you faced those men when you thought they meant to hang him. After we left you that night, I told him you said you were an outlaw, and he believed it. When he saw you in the dining room, he wanted to ask you to let him join you."

Lowell whistled. "What stopped him?"

"I did. Then you went into the kitchen, and pretty soon Jim Beck, the deputy sheriff came in. He looked around, then went over

to the desk in the lobby. Dick said you were escaping from the law and tried to prove it by asking Joe Widener. Widener laughed and said you were a cowboy named Crowell too broke to pay for a meal, so you were going to earn it by working in the kitchen. We knew you were the man who was supposed to have robbed a train. I almost," she ended, "began to believe it myself."

With her friendly, inquiring gaze upon him, Lowell felt his face reddening. He dug a hole in the sod with a boot heel. "How come you still don't believe I'm Ben Lay, the outlaw?" he asked sourly.

"Oh, Ben, you're so funny! Jim Beck said if you really were Ben Lay, you'd have a mole on your neck below your right ear. I just knew it isn't there. He was so sure you weren't an outlaw he made no great effort to look. But I will."

"It wouldn't do any good, Jane. If you won't take my word I'm an outlaw, why bother?"

"Well, then," she cried unhappily. "I do believe you. And I was depending on you to help!" Her eyes grew round. "I heard that shooting in the street. You were in it. That's why you didn't come. You're escaping from the law!"

"Leave it like that," he returned harshly. "You rode out here alone. Did you expect to find Dick?"

"Ben, I just know I can trust you." Her hands twisted a handkerchief before she went on. "I don't care what you are, but I wish you'd help bring Dick back."

Ben reached out a hand and shook her shoulder gently. "Take a brace, pardner," he said soothingly. "Let's get started on the right trail. Your brother didn't come back to his room, so at four o'clock you wrote that note to me, knocked on my door and left it. Is that right?" Ben was stalling for time so that he would not have to be the one to tell her about Dick.

"Yes," she said, "then I heard shooting down by the bank. The shooting stopped, so I opened my window. I couldn't see anything, but I heard several horses gallop away. Then I realized that they had robbed or tried to rob the bank and had been driven off by someone, perhaps Jim Beck. Ben, I'm sure that Dick rode away with them."

"The bank robbers rode west toward the Big Masan," Ben said, "and you came south."

Jane's lovely face crimsoned, but her blue eyes met his bravely. "I—I haven't been honest, Ben," she said in a low voice. "Dick had already joined a gang of outlaws, I don't know who. Oh, it's terrible. He didn't mention robbing a bank, but he let out they were going to ride south to—to drive a herd

of cows across the Mexican border."

That sounded like Haines, and explained why Spud had wanted to find Dick that morning. Then Flick and Chino had robbed the bank and had shot Dick. "Did your brother mention the name of any place he and his outlaw pals were going to?" Ben asked.

"Yes, but I can't remember the name. It's a Mexican village forty or fifty miles south of the border."

Lowell's eyes narrowed. "Funny he'd let you in on all that," he said. "If the gang heard about it, they'd make it hot for him."

"He wouldn't tell me much more. When I asked where he was going, he said 'To where the cows will get plenty of corn.'"

"Nobody feeds range cows with corn," Lowell said. He thought for a moment. "Corn?" he repeated. "A Mex village. Could that have anything to do with the name of the place? The Spanish word for corn is *maiz*."

"That wasn't it." She wrinkled her smooth brow. "It sounded more like chocolate."

"Chocolate?" He gave it the Spanish pronunciation, but she shook her head. He slapped the side of his leg. "I know!" he snapped. "*Choclos!* That's Spanish for sweet corn."

"That's it, but it doesn't make any difference now," Jane said sadly.

"Jane," Ben said gently, "you had your nerve riding out alone to chase him all the way to Mexico. I didn't realize it was so serious when I read your note."

"It wasn't your fault. I had no right to ask you to help a couple of strangers. You didn't come, and I didn't know where Jim

Beck was. I was dressed and ready to take the stage coach to the railroad this morning, but after the shooting I ran up to the livery stable and saddled my buckskin."

Lowell nodded. He must have missed meeting her at the front of the hotel by only a minute or two. He looked about, wondering if the buckskin had been saddled so badly by this Eastern girl as to have bucked off its rider. "Then you saw me coming and waited."

"Not until afterward. My horse stepped into a hole and I went over his head. His leg was broken, so I shot him. I shot him—with this."

Tears running down her cheeks, she held out a .32 caliber pistol. Then, overcome with grief, she threw herself to the ground. Sobs shook her slender figure.

Helpless to do anything, Lowell stood looking down at her. The ever-present caution of the hunted was with him though, and during all their talk he had been keeping an eye on his backtrail. He looked again.

Three riders were galloping across the uneven ground a bare quarter mile away.

Danger galvanized Lowell into action. He scooped up the sack of food, darted to the waiting Boots, and began tightening the saddle cinches.

Jane saw the pursuers and came up to him. "They're after you, Ben?" she asked in a strained voice.

"Yes. They're enemies, but not just the way you think. Maybe I can tell you about it some day." Lowell mounted, studying the three, who were coming on a dead run. Haines, Dow and Welch.

(To be continued)



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Ride with the owlhoot or the law, but don't cross either, for if you do, you'll have to shoot faster than both, ride farther than hell—or die right sudden!

N OBODY had any idea how long old man Bigelow had been lying there when they found him up on the hill back of the ranch house. A few warm days in February had started the grass to greening on the two turf-covered graves, but the chill March wind still spoke with winter's frosty breath, and it wasn't friendly to the Old Man. Spring hadn't come yet, and it looked now like he wouldn't live to see it.

"Pneumonia," Doc Putney said bluntly, when they got him out from Alliance. He was new out there, fresh from the East and strange to their ways. Already he was trying to build up a reputation for saying what he thought. "It was a fool thing, letting him go up there."

Young Ned Bigelow sat looking at his hands, turning them over as if he'd never seen them before. He'd been expecting the Old Man to go someday, but now it seemed he should have ridden herd on him closer. He was blaming himself for this. It showed on his face.

"It's not your fault, Ned," his wife tried to console him. She glanced at Doc Putney. "The Old Man always was a pretty stubborn cuss. That's the way they made them back in those days. Today's the day his wife died, ten years back. She's buried up there, her and her brother Charlie."

The Old Man coughed. It was a long, racking sound, deep in his chest, bubbly. His eyelids fluttered and then closed again.

"He always liked to go up there," Ned said. "The Old Man lived a lot in the past,

and I guess it was easier up there on the hill, where he could be near Connie and Charlie and where he could look out over the land."

"Thought a lot of the land, did he?"

Ned nodded. "That's something else about the old timers. Guess it was bred into them, the way it's been bred into me. The Old Man never let me forget it. He fought for this place—fought against three gents named Firman and Keeley and Richards—and he told me you don't know what fighting is until you're fighting for something that belongs to you."

Ned fell silent a moment, remembering. "The Old Man said they used to have men that hired out for fighting, gunslingers they called them, making a living by slinging lead for pay. They drew their wages and they wore their guns and they used them when they were told to. Pretty good they were, too. But they're gone now, ain't they? And it was the Old Man there, Jeff Bigelow and others like him, the small ranchers and the homesteaders—it was a man standing on his own land with a gun in his fist that killed the breed off."

"Maybe," Doc Putney said doubtfully, "but if you ask me, I'd say it was the man with the star on his vest that did the trick."

Old Jeff Bigelow coughed again, and the doctor reached over and felt his pulse. "It's only a slim chance, Ned," he said finally, "but I'll see what I can do. I'll stay the night." Doc Putney got up and peeled off his jacket. . . .

Vaguely, very vaguely, Old Jeff Bige-



Keeley slid to the sidewalk. . . .

low heard all this talk. He wanted to sit up and tell the doctor from Alliance that the man with the star hadn't figured in it at all. Buff Richards had worn the lawman's badge, and he was as much Joe Firman's man as Dade Keeley and as Jeff Bigelow himself.

The four of them, with Joe Firman giving the orders and Buff Richards throwing the weight of the law on their side, had pushed all of the small ranchers out of the northern end of Moosehead Basin. Blood had been spilled, but it was Keeley's job and Jeff's job to spill it, and

Firman and Richards thought no more of it than if they'd been butchering beeves.

"I'm payin' you off, Jeff," Joe Firman had said that afternoon in the Moosehead Saloon. Firman was a wide, blocky man with a cleft chin and deceptively candid eyes. He wasn't looking at Jeff now. His eyes were on the table as he counted out Jeff's gun-wages. "You need any say-so on your worth as a gunslinger, just refer 'em to me."

"What about Keeley here?"

The other gunslinger glanced at Jeff, and his cold, flat eyes shifted beyond him

to Matt Thompson at the bar. "I'm stayin' on, Bigelow. Packin' my guns away. Goin' to help Firman run the Bar-Cross."

Jeff Bigelow pocketed the money and shoved his chair back a trifle. The heavy gunbelt with the two holstered Colts was dragging at his hips and he jerked it up a bit. "Tell me about it, Firman."

The owner of the Bar-Cross regarded Jeff blankly. Jeff swung toward Buff Richards. "You got a loose lip, sheriff. What's the deal?"

The Alliance sheriff scrubbed a palm over the sandy bristles on his jaw. "No deal I know of, Bigelow."

Jeff's eyes raked the other two men. "That right, Firman? That right, Keeley?" They both nodded, and Jeff laughed softly and pushed himself to his feet. "I'll take your word for it, now. Firman's got all of the Moosehead north of Tuesday Creek, all he said he wanted. But I'll keep in touch. The minute you move south of the creek, I'll be back."

He started for the slatted half-doors and the street. His chestnut was out there, saddled and waiting. There was enough grub in his saddlebags to take him out of the basin and over to the far slopes of the Monuments. Word was that trouble was building up over there, and wherever there was trouble a gunslinger could find somebody to pay more than his freight.

HE WAS leaving Alliance with no regrets. He'd made his living with his guns too long to think of changing, even for Connie, even if she'd believe he could change. All he needed was a horse and a gun and he was free to drift with the wind. The West was born to strife, and he was one of the men who fattened on it. Maybe Connie understood that and maybe she didn't, but her brother Charlie had made it plain; Jeff Bigelow wasn't welcome around his sister.

Jeff was almost to the door when Joe

Firman called after him. "Hold on, Jeff."

When Jeff tramped back, Firman said, watching him steadily, "If that's the way you feel, I better tell you now. I'm movin' south of the creek."

Jeff smiled faintly. "There are four ranches down there, Joe. Charlie Carlisle's Circle-C is the biggest."

"That's the one I'm after."

"Expect to get it without trouble?"

Dade Keeley grunted. "You're a damn fool, Bigelow. They think you're dirt. Charlie Carlisle'd sooner give the spread away than have you sidin' him. And so would Connie! She—"

Jeff Bigelow took the gunman by the slack of his shirt-front and yanked him to his feet. "Cut it, Keeley!" he growled.

Dade Keeley jerked himself free. His head was lowered and cold fury glittered in his eyes. His voice was harsh, threatening.

"We been pullin' together up to now, Bigelow," he said thinly, "but Firman ain't told you all of it. North of the creek is Firman's, but what we take south of it we're splittin' three ways—Firman, Richards, and me. I'm in this for more than gun-wages, and you'll damn well keep out of my way!"

Buff Richards made a motion to get in between them, but his heart wasn't in it. Dade Keeley was mean and he was dangerous; Jeff Bigelow had his arm crooked near the smooth butt of his six-gun.

It was Joe Firman who pushed them apart. "Sit down, Jeff," he said. He looked at Keeley. "Blow, Dade. Take Richards with you."

Afterward, Firman sat across from Jeff and gazed at him openly. His eyes were guileless, frank. His voice was friendly.

"Jeff, if you want Connie Carlisle to marry you, all you have to do is ask her."

"That so?"

"Hell, it's plain enough to everybody but you. Charlie's got no time for you because you're a gun-tipper, but Connie

don't care how many notches you got on them guns. That's the way a woman is. She'll marry you and you can take her out of the basin."

"What about Charlie and the ranch?" Jeff asked softly.

"I'll buy him out," Firman said. His eyes hooded momentarily. "I won't give him what the Circle-C is worth, but it'll be enough for him to set up somewheres else. Land's land. I heard you say that yourself."

The anger in Jeff Bigelow was draining off, now that Keeley was gone. Maybe it was the way Firman talked, the man's soothing, confidential tone.

"I always did think these ranchers had no sense, fightin' for their shoe-string spreads," Jeff admitted. "With you it's not the land itself, it's the fact you want to grow. Charlie Carlisle's place will never get any bigger."

"What do you think it's worth?"

"Seven thousand?"

"Offer him five," Firman said. "You handle it for me."

"I'll think about it," Jeff said. He got up again and stood looking down at Firman thoughtfully. "I didn't think you'd go that high."

Firman shrugged his wide shoulders. His eyes were hooded again, on the table. "You did a job for me in the basin, Jeff. I want we should part with no hard feelings. . . ."

Somehow, the Old Man's breathing seemed to come easier. The mucus had loosened in his lung passages and there was less wheezing, less labored straining for air. The sweat on his face gleamed in the light cast by the shaded lamp in the corner. His body was covered with it, and, dimly, he could see blurred figures moving around him as they lifted him and changed the sheets time and time again.

Doc Putney, thinking it was the sheriff that brought peace to Moosehead Basin! Ned knew better, but none of them knew

that Jeff had to get back to Alliance, had to get back there before Dade Keeley cut Charlie Carlisle to pieces, slamming slug after slug into Charlie's guts!

The room was thick with steam from the pots and kettles boiling on the borrowed oil-stoves. The constant bubbling sounded in Jeff's ears like the gurgling of blood in a dying man's throat.

Charlie!

He got one elbow under himself and then a hand was on his chest.

Doc Putney's voice came from far off. "He's getting delirious, Ned. You'll have to watch him. . . ."

Jeff rode into the hardpacked Circle-C ranchyard and sat his chestnut, waiting, after the custom, for someone to come out and ask him to light. Beyond the big house, the ramparts of the western range hung high in the cloudless sky, and in between the Carlisle cattle grazed over the thick carpet of blue-joint, lazy in the warm, coppery sunlight.

This was something he'd never been able to understand, the feeling a man could have for his land. Some of the ranchers up north had sold out to Firman right off. Others had been stubborn and the thirsty land had soaked up their blood and forgotten them.

There were other basins, other spreads, as good as this and better. Firman wanted it and he was willing to pay for it—a decent price, considering the type of man he was. Charlie Carlisle was no hand with a gun. Still, he might be stubborn.

It was Connie, coming out on the porch and down into the dust beside his chestnut. Slim and straight-backed, with her brother's narrow cheekbones and pale coloring. She said, hurriedly, "What happened, Jeff?"

"Happened?"

"Matt Thompson from the Moosehead Saloon was out here a while back. He said Joe Firman aimed to take over the Circle-C."

Jeff held her glance, puzzled. "Yes?" he prompted.

"Why, they rode into Alliance together, Matt and Charlie. I though you knew." Connie hesitated, as if trying to read the sudden hardening of his jaw muscles. "Matt said Firman and Keeley and Sheriff Richards were going to make him sell."

Jeff pulled the chestnut away from Connie, lifting the reins. "What did Charlie say?"

"He said he'd—he'd see them in hell first."

"Connie." She looked up, frightened by the urgency in his voice. "I'm going back there, Connie. Maybe Charlie never had a need for a gunslinger before—but he's got one now."

The chestnut was leg-wearied and had fallen into a lumbering gait by the time he reached Alliance. It had all come clear to him on the way back, and he cursed Charlie Carlisle for a hotheaded fool.

Charlie was no hand with a gun, and that's what Joe Firman had worked on. He'd sent Matt Thompson out to the Circle-C with the message, knowing it would get Carlisle's goat.

And Dade Keeley would be waiting for him. Keeley was a man to provoke a quarrel, and without Jeff Bigelow at Charlie's side, the shoot-out would be target practice for Keeley.

Firman had never intended to pay a red cent for the Circle-C. He had planned to cut Carlisle down and then bluff it out, with Buff Richards swearing that Carlisle had made his draw first.

THEY were in front of the Moosehead. A few frightened townspeople hung back against the wall. Firman was there and Buff Richards, and Dade Keeley's six-gun was back in its holster.

Charlie Carlisle was on his face on the plank walk, the blood in his throat choking him.

Jeff flung off his chestnut and Buff Richards bleated, "Take it easy, Bigelow. Carlisle went for his gun first. We all saw it. Ask Matt Thompson."

Jeff strode over to the fat owner of the Moosehead Saloon. He slammed him hard in the face with his open hand.

"You took your orders from Firman, Thompson," Jeff said tightly. "Now take one from me. You're through here. This time tomorrow, if you're still around, you're dead."

He swung toward Dade Keeley. The gunslinger's hands were at his sides, his shoulders hunched slightly. His eyes were on the guns which were hanging ready at Jeff's waist.

Firman glanced at the sheriff.

Richards said, "Keep off Keeley, Jeff. So help me, you draw and I'll get a posse and we'll string you up for buzzard bait."

Firman said quietly, "Drop your guns, Dade."

Dade Keeley grinned faintly, watching Jeff. His hands went to the buckle and gunbelt and his Colts fell heavily to the walk.

Jeff swore softly and threw himself at Keeley. The gunslinger's hands came up as he backtracked, but Jeff drove through them, bouncing Keeley against the wall.

Keeley's elbow caught Jeff under the eye and the man's big fist smashed him back into a porch upright. Jeff came off it, burrowing forward.

He put short, punishing jabs into Keeley's midriff. Keeley grunted, dropping his guard, and Jeff sledged a wide, arcing blow at the gunslinger's jaw. He felt the jarring crash run up his arm to his shoulder. Keeley's head popped up and he settled flat to the saloon wall, sliding in an inert heap to the walk.

Jeff had him with both hands, heaving him up again, when Joe Firman spoke.

"Dade's had enough, Bigelow. We've all had enough."

Jeff let Keeley slump back and wheeled

toward Firman. His breath came in deep, dragging gusts. Blood streaked his lips and cheeks and he wiped it away, pulling his torn shirtsleeve across his mouth. A vicious animal rage was in him and he stumbled toward Firman.

Too late he saw the six-gun in Firman's hand. He swiped at it, missed, and the gun exploded in his face. . . .

He was in this room then, Old Man Bigelow remembered. Only Doc Putney wasn't there and neither was Ned nor Ned's wife. It was Connie bending over him, and he could see her clearly, pressing a cold cloth against the burning bullet-wound on his scalp.

"Joe Firman's just been here," Connie was saying. "He's made me an offer for the place and I've accepted it."

Jeff put his hand on the side of the bed and shoved himself to a sitting position. His head throbbed dully and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to shake away the pain.

"What's—what's he payin' you?"

Connie shook her head. "I'm taking what I can get. They killed Charlie and they'll kill you, too."

"I'm a drifter, Connie. Wherever they need a gun, that's where I'll be."

"We'll both be drifters."

She turned toward the living room and Jeff got unsteadily to his feet and followed her.

There was no life in her movements or in her voice. Jeff said, "You were born here, weren't you, Connie."

"So was Charlie. Tomorrow we'll bury him on that hill back of the house." She turned on him, violently. "No land's worth fighting and dying for, Jeff! I told

Charlie that, but he said this place was ours. As if that makes any difference, now he's dead! Let Firman have it!"

She began to sob, turning from him and sinking on a rawhide chair by the fireplace. Jeff said awkwardly, "Tell me about it, Connie. Talk it out."

Connie went far back, to when her father first came into the basin. Her voice fell into a steady monotone as she recreated the old days, telling about the early troubles with the Indians and then the coming of the troops. She told about Charlie and about herself, and about the third child that died in infancy. Her father's whole life had gone into the ranch, homesteading it first and then buying up the land around it. He'd died here, as had her mother, and now Charlie was dead.

Jeff listened, thinking of Joe Firman and Dade Keeley and Buff Richards. Firman knew him for what he was, fiddle-footed, never owning anything but his guns and his horse. Never giving a damn about winter or summer, dry seasons or wet spells. Living off the troubles of other people, solid, hard-working ranchers like Connie's father and stubborn sons of ranchers like Charlie.

"Land's land, Connie," Jeff said when she'd finished. "I always said one section was as good as another, but I guess maybe I've been wrong. There's a difference— if one of the sections happens to belong to you."

He went over to her and tilted her chin so she was looking up at him. "You figure on marryin' me, Connie?"

She tried to nod but his fingers held her chin firm. "If you want."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

A STAR FOR KID SATAN

BY TALMAGE POWELL

JANUARY FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES—OUT DECEMBER 9th!

"I'll hitch up the buggy. There's a preacher in Alliance."

Dawn was breaking when they returned to the Circle-C, seeming to quicken the sweet scent of the meadow-grasses. They breathed it fully and a faint coloring returned to Connie's face. "I—I hate to leave it, Jeff."

Jeff pointed to the three horses in the corral by the barn. "Firman's moving in for, ain't he?"

He left her in the buggy in front of the house and tramped up on the porch to the open door. The first one he saw was Buff Richards.

The sheriff was in the rawhide chair Connie had occupied earlier. Dade Keeley was leaning against the fireplace. Joe Firman wandered in from the kitchen.

"Connie tell you, Bigelow?" Firman asked.

"She told me."

"I got the money here." Firman indicated Richards with a jerk of his head. "The sheriff's a notary, so he'll attest her signature."

Jeff settled his hands on the buckle of his gunbelt. "According to the law, when a woman marries she shares her property with her husband. You said Connie'd marry me if I asked her, Firman. I did."

Dade Keeley straightened, pushing himself off from the wall.

"Half of the Circle-C belongs to me now," Jeff said, "and somehow I feel the way Charlie did about it. I've got no use for you, Keeley." Jeff wheeled toward him sharply. "This is my land now. Get the hell off it!"

Keeley shot a glance at Firman. They were spread out in a fan, with Jeff in the middle, but already Buff Richards was edging toward the door. There was no blood in the sheriff's veins, not for this.

"You first, Richards!" Jeff snapped. "Move!"

Richards moved quickly and in three steps he was gone.

"Listen, Jeff," Firman began, but Dade Keeley's hand was streaking for his gun.

Jeff drew from his right holster, twisting away from Keeley toward Firman. Keeley's lead seared along his ribs, pitching him back-first into Firman. The big man was knocked off balance, tripping over a table, crashing down with it. Keeley's gun barked again, and the slug channeled a splintered groove in the wooden flooring beside Jeff's leg. Jeff eared back the hammer and let it fall. Keeley was clear over his sight, riding in, and the bullet tilted him sideways.

Jeff fired again as Keeley fell, and then he was rolling over, facing Firman. Firman was on his knees, his blocky body a huge target, the Colt dropping on Jeff. Flame met flame and a whip-lash of pain shook Jeff violently. The gun fell from his nerveless hand, but he held himself up on his elbow, watching Firman sprawl forward, a thin trickle of blood wetting the floor beneath his forehead . . .

It was odd, Jeff thought. Doc Putney was there and so were his grandson Ned and Ned's wife.

Yet Connie was quite plain. Her eyes were dark and luminous and she was the way he first remembered seeing her. Back of her, in the doorway, her brother Charlie was smiling at him. Doc Putney was leaning over the bed, and when Jeff got up, Doc didn't move. He was still bent over, and Jeff moved through him as if he were a shadow. Only Connie stirred. She came forward and held out her hand.

Back of him, Doc Putney said, "I guess that's all, Ned. The Old Man's passed on."

Ned's wife began to cry then, and Ned put his arm around her.

"Don't cry, honey," Ned was saying. "Jeff's happy now. And tomorrow he'll be just where he wants to be—up there on the hill."

That was the last the Old Man heard.



Sheppard's gun blazed. . . .

NIGHT RIDER

By LEE FLOREN

"You bought this valley—and every soul in it—and plenty of room to die in!"

THE rocks were sandstones, big and craggy. The afternoon was without sunshine, and the wind was sharp beyond the rocks. Al Sheppard knew that

spring flowers had not yet sprouted, and he figured that Fern Adams knew it too. Yet she had wanted the owner of the immense A Lazy Z ranch to ride out and

look for crocuses and wild sweet-peas.

Al Sheppard said, "We're out too early for wild flowers. Another week, and they'll be out."

She had taken along a picnic lunch and had a tablecloth on a rock between them, but other things lay between them as well. She was lovely, dark where he was blond, small where he was large.

"I guess we came out too early."

Al took a pickle. His cowpunchers would get a kick out of seeing him on a picnic. "You should be home correcting papers, Fern. You told me last week you were going to be busy grading examination papers."

"They can wait."

He didn't understand why she had wanted him to picnic out in the hills, especially on a raw spring day like this one. He knew that she should have been home catching up on her schoolteaching chores over the weekend.

Below them, running to the east and west and north, lay the broad expanse of Lazy Rock Basin, marked now and then by snow that the Chinooks had not cut from behind the tall sagebrush. Sometimes the valley was referred to as "Al Sheppard's Basin."

That was because he ran cattle the length and breadth of Lazy Rock. He had located cowpunchers on water-holes and then bought their homesteads. He controlled every drop of water on this range. Because he controlled the water, a farmer would never enter. He would hold this basin until he died.

But still, he couldn't understand why Fern Adams had wanted him to ride into the hills.

"I have to get back to town in a little while. I have to talk over some business with my banker."

"That bank won't go broke if you spend an hour here."

Below them, about a mile away, was an abandoned shack, once lived in by a

farmer. Al Sheppard and his cowboys had called one night on the farmer. He had decided suddenly to leave.

Two riders came up to the shack and dismounted, broncs hidden by brush, and went into the frame building.

Fern Adams asked, "Two riders of yours, Al?"

Al Sheppard shook his head. "Looked to me like they were Jack Burdick and Walt Hamilton."

"Jack Burdick and Walt Hamilton? They are the two riders who stay around the Horseshoe Saloon, aren't they? The men you said had no visible means of support."

"Two drifters."

She went to the small fire, sheltered behind a rock, and came back with the coffee-pot. "How do they make a living?"

Why was she interested in two stray riders like Burdick and Hamilton? "I don't know for sure. Maybe they come out ahead by gambling."

He had other suspicions, too. But he did not state them.

Fern looked at the cabin. "Wonder what they are doing there? They have no reason for riding up to that cabin, have they?"

"Not that I know of."

He took his coffee. It was too hot. He let it cool a little and then lifted it.

Another rider came toward the cabin. He rode from the direction of the A Lazy Z ranch house in the center of the basin.

Al Sheppard watched him ride up to the cabin. He too left his bronc hidden by brush.

"I wish I had my glasses," he said.

"That looks like Burt," she said.

His face flushed, a hardness creeping in and pulling in his lips, the thought that his kid-brother would run with Jack Burdick and Walt Hamilton made Al angry—an anger raised by disgust and hurt.

"Now what business has Burt got with them two hellions?"

"I don't know." She was gathering her utensils and tablecloth. "We'd best get back to town."

He helped her put the tin plates and cups into the sack and he tied it behind her saddle. They rode toward Lazy Rock town, a few miles away in the broad spread of a coulee.

"So that's why you got me out in the hills?"

She spread her hands. "Al, I don't want to cause you any trouble. But I've seen this coming up for some time between those two and your brother. I'm not a meddler; you know that. But I had to tell you some way."

"You're the woman I'm going to marry."

She did not answer that. "You're so busy making money, you look upon me—and your brother—only as chattels. You're the big man, the only man, in this basin, and you work night and day. Why?"

"To make money, of course. When you're my wife, I want you to live like a queen. There'll be no work in my basin for you."

"Then I won't marry you."

He was surprised.

"I like to work, and I like my freedom. I want to be an individual, not have people point me out as Al Sheppard's wife. I want to be pointed out as Fern Adams, for my own personality, not referred to as 'Al Sheppard's wife.'"

"You've got spunk, Fern."

"Sure I have spunk, and I intend to keep it. You've met horses and men with spunk, and Al Sheppard has bent them his way. He broke the horses through brute power and bent the men by his money. What chance have you given Burt?"

"He works for me."

"Yes, at forty a month. What is forty dollars to you?" She answered that. "Nothing."

"I worked my way up. I did it in a little over ten years. I came in here broke and

I made up my mind to own this basin and I own it. He can work up too, like I did. He doesn't need to run with men like Burdick and Hamilton."

"You drove him to them." She watched him closely. "He's got pride—immense pride. Your pride. But he's just 'Al Sheppard's brother.' Just like I would only be 'Al Sheppard's wife.'"

"I'm going to talk to Burt."

"Go easy. He's strong-willed."

THE lamplight flickered as the door opened, then steadied as the door closed. Al Sheppard said, "Sit down, Burt. I want to talk to you."

Burt Sheppard remained standing. He was shorter than Al by a few inches, but maturity would give him width and more strength.

"What have we got to talk about?"

There it was, that invisible barrier again.

"Sit down."

"I can talk standing up."

"I was out in the hills today." Al Sheppard did not mention Fern Adams. "By accident I happened to see Jack Burdick and Walt Hamilton ride up to that nester's shack over by Negro Rocks. What struck me odd was that they hid their brones so nobody could see them."

Burt watched him.

"I saw you ride up after a while. You hid your bronc, too."

Burt said, "I didn't know you were a snooper."

Al Sheppard had a pencil in his right hand. The fingers came down on it and the knuckles protruded. "Don't accuse me of that, Burt."

"What's the deal?"

"I don't like it. You've got a job here. I'm paying you top-hand wages. Those two are drifters; they're no good. They lie around town and gamble and there is suspicion about them. Money you make that way is no good."

Burt said, "All you talk about is money. Money and a man's standing in a community. I've heard too damn much of it. Now you try to pick my friends. I don't owe you any money—not a damn cent. You haven't got a debt over me like you have the banker and the grocer down in town."

"Don't run against me, Burt."

Burt pulled his voice down. "You built this spread up. I was a kid going to school and I got out and you sent for me. When I came here this was 'Al Sheppard's' basin. Al Sheppard's town. You gave me a job. Oh, hell, I was suppose to get down on my knees, bow each time I met you, my brother."

"Burt—"

"Let me do the talking. So far, everybody's let you shoot off your mouth. I've got the same blood in me that runs through you. Only mine, by God, is never going to get as cold as yours. I'm ambitious, too. But what chance have I got?"

Al Sheppard looked at the pencil.

"None."

Burt walked into his room. Al Sheppard waited. His brother came out, carrying his war-bag. He stopped and looked at Al.

"You can keep this job you gave me. You can keep your hold over this banker, and this town, and this basin. But you'll never cinch me down and ride me, Al."

"Don't rush, Burt."

"I'm not rushing. I've thought this over for a long time. I'm twenty-two and I'm my own boss. There's a little girl down in Arizona—I went to school with her and she's waiting for me. I thought my big brother would help me with my fight, and I could send for her."

"You've never told me that."

Burt had his hand on the doorknob. "What difference would it have made? All you care for is Al Sheppard. More money, more cattle, more graze—and more people kow-towing to you."

"You've been a good hand. There still will be a place for you."

Burt shook his head. "Not under Al Sheppard, there won't be." He opened the door and stood in it. "I've got my pride. I may be wrong and I may be right, but I'm Burt Sheppard, not only Al Sheppard's brother."

The pencil snapped.

"I'm like Fern Adams in that respect."

The door closed. Al Sheppard sat silent. He heard a horse run across the yard. He did not get up and look out the window.

He wished their father and mother were alive. Maybe, had they been there, they could have helped him. But the dead don't return. So Burt had even noticed it, noticed Fern Adam's fight for her own personality. . . .

The banker was a short man. He said, "Coming over to the bank, Al? The saddle shop wants to buy some new stock and they want a loan. I want you to okay it or shove it back. I want your opinion."

"Do you figure they're strong enough for a loan?"

"Yes, I do. It isn't big."

"Then you grant it."

The banker smiled. "That's good," he said. "That is very good." He went down the street toward the saddlery.

Al Sheppard went into the grocery store and its odor of prunes and drygoods and hardware. The clerk came hurrying to meet him, disregarding two townspeople. "Somethin', Mr. Sheppard?"

Al Sheppard bought six cigars. The clerk brought back the box that held the finest Havanas. Sheppard put the cigars in his vest pocket.

"Is that all, Mr. Sheppard?"

Al Sheppard nodded. He noticed one of the customers, a housewife, was frowning a little. But when he glanced at her the frown left and she smiled and said, "Good day, Mr. Sheppard."

"A fine day, Mrs. Smith."

He went outside and stood on the sidewalk and looked at Lazy Rock town. He looked at the restaurant, the hardware store, the small lumberyard. He owned the land this town sat on and he would not sell a single lot of it. He ran the rents from month to month and did not give any year leases. He could move out any business he wanted inside of thirty days.

That feeling was strong in him.

He heard the schoolbell ring and this made him think of Fern Adams. He could control the businesses of all these establishments, but he could not control her. Nor could he control his only brother.

The town marshal came up and stood beside him. He was a slow, taciturn man, but he knew who buttered his bread. Al Sheppard said, "How are things going?" and the marshal replied, "Fine as frog's hair, Al."

Jack Burdick and Walt Hamilton had just ridden up to the hitchrack in front of the saloon. Hamilton got out of his saddle, but Jack Burdick sat his leather a long moment, and his gaze took in Al Sheppard and the marshal. Then Jack Burdick's boot found the soil and he was off his bronc, following Walt Hamilton into the saloon.

"Those two don't work for a living," Al Sheppard reminded.

The marshal's forehead pulled down.

"You've got to work to make a living," Sheppard continued.

The marshal said, "I'm watching them."

AL SHEPPARD went into the saloon and its darkened coolness. Burdick and Hamilton were at the bar, a whiskey bottle between them, and Burt Sheppard sat at a far table alone, playing solitaire. Al's brother looked up, but did not nod. Al had a sudden wry taste in his mouth.

"Whiskey, Spike."

The bartender put out his own private bottle. He did not let Al Sheppard pour;

he filled the jigger for him. Al drank and tasted the water from the glass. He put four bits on the bar.

The bartender shook his head.

Burdick and Hamilton saw this and Burdick said, apparently to Hamilton, "I reckon some kind of *dinero* must be different than other kinds. We got the wrong kind, Walt. Ours is good here an' his ain't. But he gets a drink anyway."

Hamilton said nothing, but kept turning his glass on the moist mahogany. Al Sheppard noticed that Burt had looked up quickly.

Al Sheppard asked, "Do you know who you're talking to?"

Burdick lifted the bottle and poured his jigger to the exact rim without spilling a drop. "Sure, I'm talkin' to Al Sheppard. The man who owns Lazy Rock town an' Lazy Rock basin."

Hamilton said, "Don't talk so much, Jack."

Jack Burdick's lips pulled back, then apparently he decided otherwise, and he had nothing more to say. Burt Sheppard kept watching his brother, and Al looked at Burt. But Burt looked down at his cards.

Al Sheppard wasn't sure, but he thought he'd seen a small smile on his brother's lips.

Hamilton said, "Forget it, Mr. Sheppard."

"I don't forget," Al Sheppard said. "You men have no business in this town. Any time I say the word, my marshal can run you out."

Jack Burdick's eyes were suddenly small. "Yes, you could tell your trained dog to bite. But how about yourself?"

There it was, open and inviting.

Al Sheppard came up to Jack Burdick. Burdick stood with his back to the bar, left bootheel hooked over the rail, and his right hand was close to the grip of his holstered gun.

Walt Hamilton moved into the breach.

"Jack, for God's sake, close your mouth! Damn it, Sheppard, he's part drunk."

"He knows what he's saying."

Burdick turned to the bar.

Al Sheppard glanced again at his brother, but Burt was seemingly interested in his cards.

Outside, the sun was just as bright, but Al Sheppard did not notice it this time. For the first time in years, he had been called in his own town. Up to now, everybody had kow-towed to him.

Burdick had pulled out of the fight. There was some consolation in this. He hated to admit it, but his pride had been hurt. Word of this would get around town. When a man controlled a bronc's head, he had control of the animal. And figuratively he had let his reins slack.

He turned, thinking about going back into the saloon, but then he changed his mind. He went to his bank and walked through the gate at one end of the counter and sat down in the banker's chair. The banker finished his business at the counter and came back into the cool office.

"There's the paper for that loan to the saddle-shop, Al."

Al Sheppard glanced at the paper, not picking it up. First his eyes picked out the amount of the loan and next he noticed the interest rate. Only ten percent? The banker could have gotten twelve, at least. He started to comment on this point, and then decided against it.

Automatically he reviewed his perusal of the note. First, the sum involved; secondly, the interest rate. That review was not complimentary; it tied back to what Fern had said about him. He pushed the note to one side.

"That's all right," he said.

The banker had noticed he had not read it through, and Al Sheppard knew this puzzled the man. The Lazy Rock owner was glad when a woman entered and the banker had to hurry to the front of his establishment.

The wind pushed against the thick walls and was repelled. Al Sheppard liked to construct buildings the elements could not harm. He found satisfaction in this thought. These buildings—here in this town—were substantial. They were like the rest of his holdings—his cattle, his range, the men he controlled by his pocketbook. They were reliable.

But, ironically, he could not control Burdick and Hamilton. His money could not whip that pair into line. That hadn't happened to him for many years. It had happened, when he had been lining up this basin and building this town, but that had been almost a decade ago.

Gradually his confidence returned. Nor could he control his brother, either. He spread his legs wide and looked down at the clean, scrubbed floor. He found himself remembering Fern. He wanted her, he wanted her for his wife, he wanted her to preside over his ranch house—the giant, sprawling ranch house made of native adobe, with its quietness, its grandeur.

But his money was holding her from him. That in itself was ironical. That was out of the ordinary. Most women wanted to marry a man with money, but Fern didn't.

But, after all, it wasn't his money that held her from him. It was the way he acted, the way his wealth had affected him. It had made him overbearing and egotistical, and that was not at all pleasing to her.

He went to his horse. His marshal came up. "Goin' home, Al?"

"Why ask?"

The marshal was hesitant. Then, "I heard about your run-in with Jack Burdick. I guess the whole town has heard about it by now."

Al Sheppard glanced up and down the street. Something inside told him, *Your empire is starting to slip. Those words in the saloon broke a seam a little.* His glance turned into a hard scrutiny.

"You can't stop gossip, Al."

You can control people, Al Sheppard. You can control their actions, by paying them money, but you cannot control their thoughts or their tongues. They'll talk when you're gone.

Al Sheppard leaned forward. "I pay you one-fifty now, marshal. You run them two—Burdick and Hamilton—out of town, and I'll double your pay this month."

"Do you no good if I ran them out, Al."

A DAY or so passed, and Al Sheppard fought his thoughts and himself, and on the second day a cowpuncher rode in and he said, "Al, somebody held up the Great Western passenger, over around Elbow Rock."

Elbow Rock was about eighty miles to the north. Al Sheppard asked other questions. When? How many men in the holdup crew? The cowpuncher told him the holdup had been yesterday and two men had done the work, but everybody figured a third or fourth man must've been in on it, for it had taken another man to watch horses, hadn't it? And maybe some other man to throw down a gun on the engine crew?

Al said, "Don't affect our pocketbooks."

The puncher told him then that the outfit had made off with some paper money coming out from the Denver mint. The railroad company had disclosed the paper money had been shipped from the Washington, D. C., office to Denver for recount and relay up north into Montana.

"I never lost any money," Al Sheppard repeated.

"Third holdup in a year around here," the puncher reminded.

The man rode into the barn and Al Sheppard stood silent for a few minutes, and then he went for his bronc. He rode toward his town of Lazy Rock, but he did not ride fast. He let his gray seek his own pace.

His marshal sat on the bench in front of his office. Al asked him where Burdick and Hamilton were, and the marshal said they were in the saloon. He stated that he had not seen the pair for a day or so, but they were in the saloon together an hour ago.

"Thought mebbe they might've got scared of you an' left for good, but I guess they didn't scare."

Al Sheppard put his bronc in the livery barn and went to the hotel. He crossed the empty lobby and climbed the stairs. He did not knock at the door, but he twisted the knob, and found out the door was locked.

"Open up," he said.

He heard bedsprings creak. The door opened a little and he pushed his way inside. Burt Sheppard had been sleeping with his clothes on, even to his gunbelt.

"What'd you want, Money-bags?"

Al gave him a shove and Burt sat down on the bed, his eyes wide. Al walked to the window and let the blind rise a little to make it clearer in the stuffy room.

"Look, Burt. Now I know why you met Burdick and Hamilton that day, out in the shack at Negro Rocks. You two were planning the holdup of that Great Western passenger. You didn't want anybody to see you meet."

Burt studied him.

Al said, "Lately you haven't been so friendly with those two. That was because you didn't want the town to see you chumming with them too much. Fern took me out there because she's probably seen you three meet there before. She prowls all around these hills, hunting rock specimens for her display at the school."

"You're talking through your hat."

"Now I know why Walt Hamilton was so set on not letting Jack Burdick tangle with me. Burdick was a little drunk and he was losing his brains. Hamilton didn't want me to turn against them for one reason."

Burt said nothing, just watching him.

"This is my town. If a railroad special agent came in and talked with me and I told him nobody in my town had been in on that holdup, the agent would have said, 'Your word is good with me, Al,' and he'd've ridden out without asking a question or a suspicion. I've been harboring those skunks."

"You sound sure they did it."

"I am sure. They spend money and they never work."

"They're good gamblers."

"They might be. But I sit in the bank, and the local money comes from my bank. I know where every dollar goes in this basin. I know just how big a payroll I put into Lazy Rock. And they make more money, I figure, than I put into the pockets of my riders and these townspeople."

"Money. Always money."

"Don't change the subject on me. What did you do in that holdup?"

Burt was on his feet. Al met him in the middle of the room. He had not guessed his brother had been that strong, but finally he got him on the floor.

"Damn you, you'd turn in your own brother!"

Al got to his feet, face flushed. "You admit, then, you were in on it?"

Burt saw his tongue had tricked him. "No, I don't admit. I just made that statement, that's all. Damn you, keep your paws off me!"

Al Sheppard went to the door. "All right, Burt, I call in the railroad detectives. This is a federal offense. Either Burdick or Hamilton will break. They're both yellow; they'll break—and they'll drag you in."

Burt sat on the bed, rubbing his throat.

"That's the gospel truth," Al reminded.

Burt flared, "And where would that put you, Al? You, the boss, the owner, of Lazy Rock! Your brother, going to the pen. That would break you in this basin. They'd talk and you'd lose your hold.

Money can't keep tongues from wagging."

Al Sheppard considered that. Burt was right. If this information got out, his hold was broken on this range and these people.

"I'm running Burdick and Hamilton out."

"My God, for once you're not thinking of money!"

Al went outside. He went past his bank without glancing at it, past the general store, and into his saloon. He had heard children hollering as they played, the sound coming from the schoolhouse, and he knew it was recess time.

Two old pensioners were drinking their daily allotment of beer—one bottle. He had given orders to the bartender to let them have no more than one bottle. They had been old riders when he had hired them and now, their days in the saddle done, he gave each ten bucks a month and one bottle of beer a day.

"Howdy, Mr. Sheppard."

Al had no answer. He went to where Jack Burdick and Walt Hamilton sat at a table. He pulled his gun around and sat down, the table hiding his hand and the gun under it.

Burdick said, "Well, the great Al Sheppard, in the flesh."

Hamilton said nothing, but watched Sheppard.

Al Sheppard said, "You talked rough to me the other day, Burdick. I'm giving you orders to get out of my town—and leave right now."

"What if we don't go?"

"That's what I want," Al Sheppard said.

Burdick was quick with rage. But Hamilton asked, quietly, "Is there more than that behind that statement, Sheppard?"

Sheppard nodded. "Burt talked to me. He told me about that holdup. You two can leave without a hand against you."

"You lost no money in it," Burdick scoffed. "If you had, you'd holler about your money, but seeing it belonged to

somebody else, you ain't got no kick, eh?"

Hamilton said, "Not so loud, Burdick."

Burdick said, "We've kept our voices down. They haven't heard us at the bar." He got up, quickly, and pulled his gun. He said something else, but the roar of the guns swallowed it.

Burdick's bullet hit the table. Al Sheppard's .45 winked, bore over the table, and Burdick went back out of his boots, falling over his chair. His gun slid away and Burdick did not crawl after it.

Al Sheppard took Hamilton's bullet in his forearm. He brought his gun around and Hamilton ran for the back door. Sheppard couldn't shoot him in the back. Burt Sheppard came into the back door.

"Hamilton!" Burt called.

Hamilton turned his gun around and said, "You dirty traitor," and shot, moving and hurried. Burt Sheppard shot twice and Hamilton stopped. His left leg gave in and he fell heavily to the floor and rolled over.

Al Sheppard got up, blood on his left arm. The pensioners had stampeded. The bartender came around the bar. "What the hell's going on? It happened too damn' fast!" he shouted. Al Sheppard walked past him to Burt, who stood white-faced and trembling. They went into the alley behind the saloon.

"What did you do, Burt, in that hold-up?"

"I held bronzes. They did all the gun-work."

Al Sheppard said, "I should turn you in, but I figure you learned a hell of a lot in a short time. I'll make you a proposition. You ride south, stay there a year, and marry that little girl. Then come back and work with me."

"Once I quit you, I won't come back to your valley."

Al Sheppard stopped, something wry and distasteful in his mouth. "Maybe I've learned something fast too, Burt." He

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

was almost pleading. It wasn't like Al Sheppard to plead.

Burt said, "Your arm?"

"To hell with my arm. The bone isn't broken, I don't think. You turning me down, Burt?"

"I sure am. I thank you for what you did today, but I'm not sittin' in on your money—I'll earn my own." Burt turned away, stopped. "Maybe I'm too much your brother."

Burt walked down the alley for his bronc.

Al Sheppard turned and started for the schoolhouse. The doc came up and said, "Al, them two is dead. Let me look at your arm."

"Get away, Doc."

The doc stopped, puzzled. When Al Sheppard reached the schoolhouse, the last pupil had just marched in from recess, and Fern stood at the door. Al shut the door and locked it, keeping a surprised Fern outside.

"What was that shooting, Al? Your arm—you were in on it?"

Al said, "No, don't look at it. The flesh is ripped, that's all. I bound it with my handkerchief." He told about his talk with Burt, about Hamilton and Burdick. "You knew all the time about that old homesteader shack?"

"I guessed at it," Fern Adams said. She was almost weeping. "I hated to take you out there—the picnic was a pretense—but I knew Burt would get into something terrible. And you—all you thought of—was Al Sheppard."

Then Al told her he was selling the town—the stores, the bank—to their operators. "All I'll keep is the ranch. I wanted the kid to stay with me but he won't. Maybe I learned a big lesson in a terrible hurry, Fern."

"I hope you have, Al."

"For my sake?"

"For our sake," she corrected.

GUN SONG

(Continued from page 65)

said. I read it all, very carefully. That's why they let you walk out free, with the money you stole from my brother.

"The judge said a man couldn't play the piano and kill two people at the same time. People heard you playing, and said so. But the judge was wrong, Al. A man can do just that—if he selects a number that requires only *one hand* to play. It took quite a spell to find that number and then have a couple of witnesses identify it as the one you played so long ago. Bowdine's *Concerto for Left Hand*. I'm playing it now, Al. Like it?"

"Gents, this is Albie Yerkes. He used to play piano, but Al never liked to practice. He always did take shortcuts, Al did. Let somebody else practice. Al was too smart to waste his time. Let somebody else read his deeds, too. Somebody like those surveyors. I figured it would take ten days to two weeks for them to get to the Basin. I had only to gamble on Al Yerkes—or Ike Tarrant. If he'd read the deed, he'd have found that clause, and the changed description. He could have gotten his money back. I left it with Roy for him, in case he came in.

"But the surveyors could read the deed. Why should he strain his eyes? Why should he work for money when he could get it by killing and stealing? It wasn't as much of a gamble as it sounds."

Tarrant was shaking. His hard eyes were bleak and glazed. He opened and closed his mouth again and again, like a fish out of water. Once in a while he wet his lips with his tongue as he listened to Jim.

Jim smile, "Things always came hard to me. I had to practice a lot. Things like piano playing and gambling, and using a Derringer. But they say practice makes perfect. I'm betting you haven't practiced your gunhand as much as I have, these last few years, Al. Shall we find



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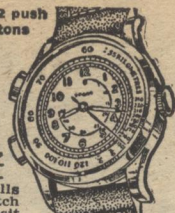
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

out, just the two of us, here and now?"

Jim's left hand never stopped playing. The music came out in a macabre back-
ground to the two men who stared at
each other across the still body of Black
Frank Gordon.

Tarrant did not speak, but his eyes
lighted with the desperate, hunted look
of a man who has reached a point from
which he cannot turn back. He must
plunge on, wildly, knowing he has one
slim chance for life, and that he must
take it, or die. His right hand moved
down, blurred with speed. His Colt lifted
free of the holster. The ivory-tickler
never stopped playing. He simply moved
his right arm forward and the gun came
out from under his sleeve, flaming and
barking. Ike Tarrant took one step after
the little hole appeared in his shirt front,
but he was moving automatically. He was
dead, even as his leg lifted. Without bal-
ance, he fell straight forward to the dusty
floor.

There was a little silence in the room.
The ivory-tickler got up from the piano
stool and went to Lily where she was
framed in the door of the back room.
He said, "I don't want old John Sedge-
wick's money. It's in the safe for him,
when he gets back to his ranch from
Cheyenne."

Lily's eyes were shining as she looked
up at him. He continued, "When the
courts return the money Yerkes stole
from my brother, with eleven years' in-
terest on it, I'll buy a place here in town.
But I won't buy it unless you'll come
with me, Lily."

The way she stepped forward into his
arms right there near the piano was so
fast I didn't have time to turn my back.
I goggled, and wondered how much prac-
tice the ivory-tickler had at kissing. He
could kiss like he played the piano. Some
guys have everything, I reflected, and went
back to swabbing glasses.

HERD 'EM NORTH TO HELL!

(Continued from page 80)

"You've done a good night's work, Ben," Daugherty said. "You look ready t' cave in, so pick yourself the most comfortable bed here an' grab some sleep."

Ben Greenough nodded, feeling the reaction of the past few weeks. "I'll do that, Ed," he said wearily.

He walked out of the Antlers Hotel a few minutes before noon, and was immediately aware of the stir he caused. A man got up from a heavy rocker on the porch and said, "Mornin', Ben."

It was Matt Kuhl. The cattleman was smiling, but the lines in his face seemed to have deepened. "I've seen some salty hombres in my time, Ben, but none bigger'n you. In front of everybody I don't mind admittin' I've been a proud old side-winder, an' nearly married Gail to a worse one. Go ahead an' cuss me out 'fore she gits here."

"Is Gail in town?" Ben asked. Then he looked out across the street and saw her coming out of the dry goods store.

"Sure," Matt Kuhl said. "I could've had you killed for less'n six thousand dollars, Ben. Guess it's a good thing you was jughead enough not t' believe it, though. Here she comes, Ben. I'll be over at the Wagonwheel when you're ready t' go home."

Ben Greenough went down the steps when Gail came up to the walk. She looked thinner than when he last called on her, and her eyes seemed too big for her little oval of a face. He heard Matt Kuhl's loud voice roaring from down the street, "Of course there'll be a big weddin'! And a barbecue, too! Come on, and I'll buy all you menfolk a drink!"

Ben put his arm around Gail, and some of the people stopped to stare until others sent them on their way. Ben drew her closer as they went down the walk. "Fits mighty snug," he told her. "Made t' order."

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 88)

baugh's forward movement ceased. The gunslinger coughed and sat down heavily, tipping over on his side.

The Kid said, "Here, Whit."

Whit raised his gun again. His brother's tall figure was clear in the sight, but he held his fire and the moment ribboned out in the long silence.

Ernie's gun spoke.

The lead sliced into the earth at Whit's feet. Ernie fired again and again and the slugs cut a circle around Whit Barrett, thudding into the wooden framework supporting the boardwalk, into the post above him, working up and down again on his left.

Five shots and Whit said, "Poor goin', Ernie."

"I could have killed you, Whit." Ernie swung toward Tom Meeker, and took two strides. "Damn you!" he shouted. His gun lifted, and Whit heard the solid chunk as the barrel slammed the side of Meeker's head.

They were around him then, Hutchinson, Kretchmar, Howie Thrall and the rest, and Thrall wiped a match alight and tore away Whit's shirt over the wound.

He examined it closely and then said, "With your luck, I'm not settin' against you at stud." He read the question on Whit's face and added, "Meeker's all right. Carol's with him. Maybe your brother knocked some sense into him at last."

"Ernie?"

"He's back in the Pyramid. Said he'd get out the chips and the cards."

"I never could beat him at stud," Whit said. "Maybe I got myself a deputy sheriff."

"Maybe," Ev Hutchinson put in. "But first off, you got a date with the doc."

Whit Barrett took a long breath, saying on the end of it, "Yes, Ev. I guess I have at that."

ON THE TRAIL

(Continued from page 8)

Now here's a letter about a lady who stuck by her guns:

Dear Editor:

Just a word of thanks for the November *Fifteen Western Tales*. I liked particularly Flynn's *Bullets to the Pecos* and *The Bounty Hunters*, by William Hopson.

I thought perhaps your readers would like to be reminded of the lady who brought Sunday to the West.

She died in South Dakota at the age of eighty, a balding stogie-smoking old lady who had put the sabbath back in the week for the Badlands, sixty years before. She was Poker Alice. In her time, she had won the pokes of a thousand miners, kept the crude lights burning in the gambling hells of Deadwood, but she had kept the sabbath. On Sunday, she didn't play.

English-born, in her tenderest twenties, Alice went to bat for her principles for the first time when her faro-dealing job was at stake. In vain, her Deadwood saloon-owner boss ranted and swore—on Sunday, normally the clip-joint's busiest day, Alice wouldn't touch a card or chip. She quit her job, and went to Sturgis, near Fort Meade. Here, her converts—or victims, depending on how you looked at it—tended to be soldiers rather than miners. They crowded the place, exchanging a month's pay gladly for the privilege of being fleeced by so pretty a woman.

She opened her own place as more people came into the territory, partly to make money, partly to spread her own philosophy. Young girls came to work for Poker Alice, and whatever else may have happened to them, one thing was certain—on Sunday mornings, they attended Gospel class conducted by their employer. Nor were any men welcomed that day to gamble or dance, unless, perhaps, they were ministers.

Once, when a group of drunks from the fort started too rough a shindig at her place, she was forced to kill a man to keep the walls in place. She was tried, acquitted, and the sympathetic town declared a holiday in her honor.

The years passed, and so did her English prettiness. South Dakota became a state. A Sunday-keeping woman was not such a rarity any more—and Poker Alice was arrested once again, this time on charges of running a "disorderly establishment."

She was not forced to serve a sentence, but the very nature of the charge was too much for her. It meant her era had ended. She retired to a house and garden and raised flowers, quietly keeping Sunday to the end.

William Dennis,
Pierre, South Dakota.



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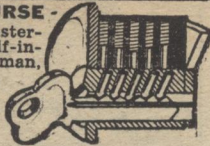
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

And then there was Henry Starr, the popular train robber:

Dear Editor:

The pet train robber of the U. S., pardoned by one president and two governors, was a product of the West's last woolly frontier. Henry Starr of Oklahoma was three-fourths Cherokee Indian, and outlaw through and through. No relation to the famous Belle, he was night-riding a decade after she died. What quality it was that endeared him to the powerful and great, it is hard to say. Sentences were passed on him totalling forty years and a noose—all he ever served was four years and some months in jail.

He began humbly, selling whiskey to reservation Indians, working his way up by horse-stealing and murder to train robbery. Borrowing a leaf from the book of his painted ancestors, who had swooped down on the white man's covered wagons, Henry and his men descended on the Katy Flyer as it choo-chooed through Indian Territory. After overpowering the engineer, the band went through the passenger coaches, outstretched hats in one hand, pistols in the other. The take was six thousand dollars in cash, fair enough for an evening's operations.

Later, Henry found a frightened girl who had jumped from the stalled train in terror. She babbled at him in Cherokee—she too was part Indian—that she was afraid of bandits. He promised to protect her from them, and was as good as his word. He married her, and would have lived happily ever after, except for the vengefulness of white men, who promptly arrested Henry Starr.

He was sentenced to hang for murder. He appealed, won a new trial, and drew a fifteen-year sentence.

At the time, fortunately for the Cherokee outlaw, Theodore Roosevelt, the conservationist, was president of the U. S. He may have felt that Henry, like the buffalo and other vanishing bits of Americana, was too rare to treat lightly. And so the fifteen-year sentence was commuted entirely, not because Henry was innocent. But because he was so authentically, nostalgically guilty.

Elwood Jones,
Baltimore, Md.

And with the story of the train robber who became a landmark, we reach trail's end for this issue. Keep the Western lore coming in, and we'll see you next issue. *Hasta luego!*

—THE EDITORS.

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