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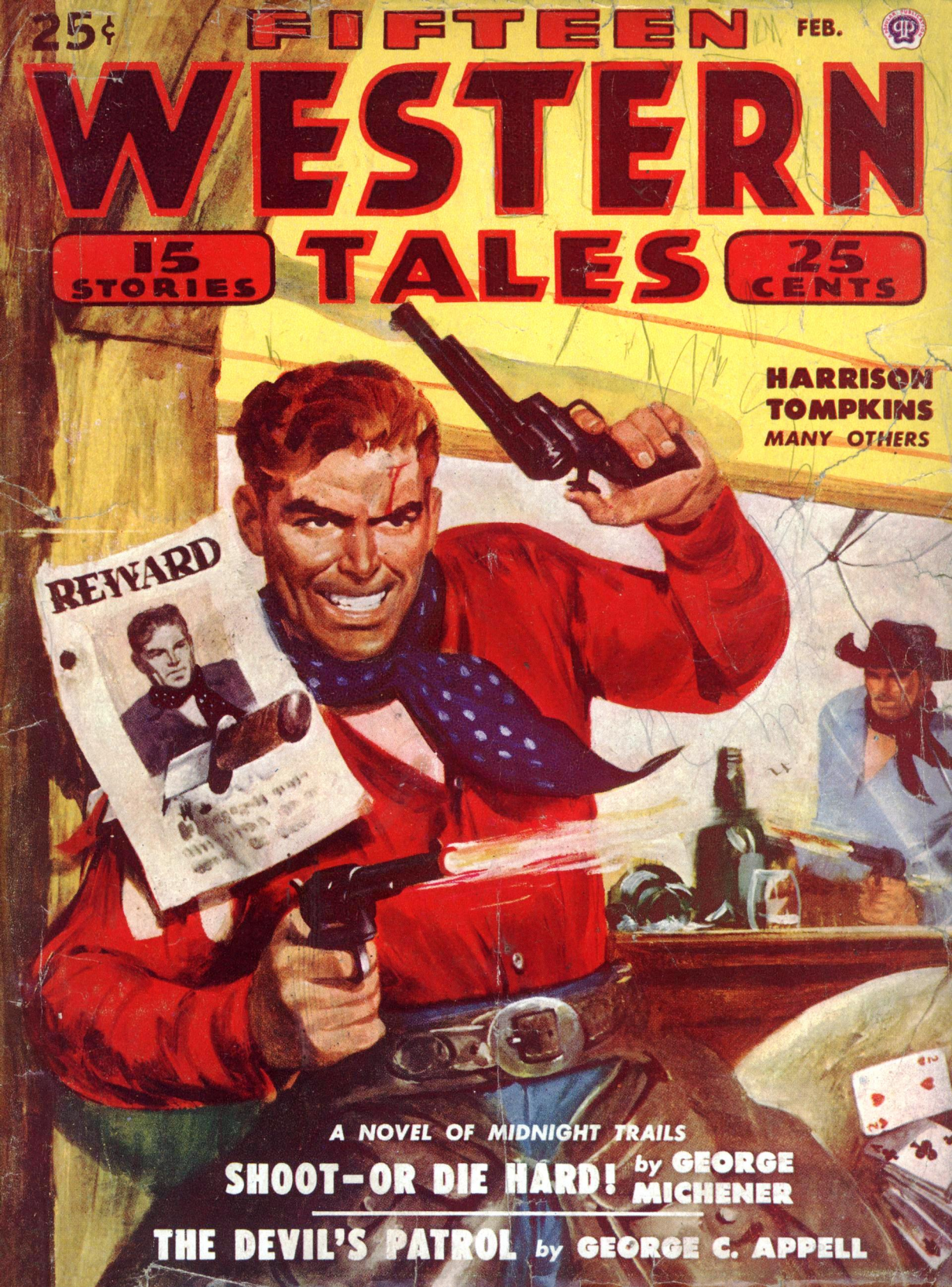

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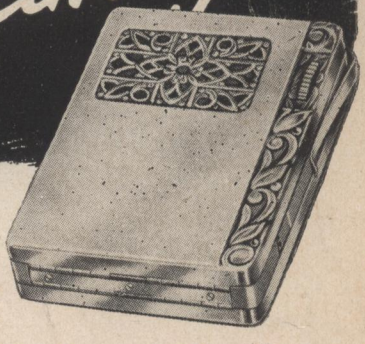

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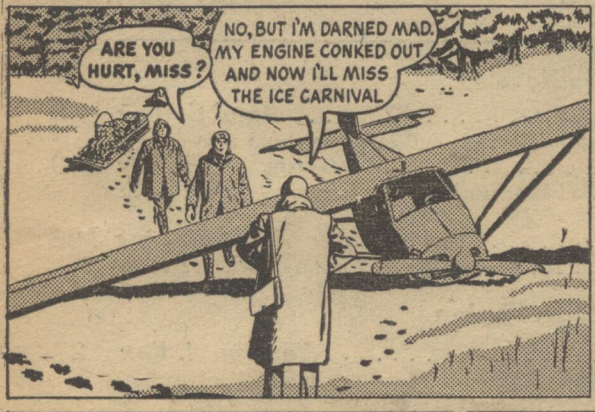

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ON THE TRAIL

AS YOU know, we stop at trailside each month to talk over fiction thrills and even stranger truth out of the Old West—though the New West ain't quite dead yet, either. We ran across something last Saturday right in town that reminded us—a fiction hit that's not too far out of our line. The buckaroos in this story don't ride horses—their mounts are the dangerous, thrill-a-minute racing cars. It's a movie we're talking about. It's called "The Big Wheel," and it stars Mickey Rooney and Thomas Mitchell and is released by United Artists'. When it comes your way, tie up with it. You'll find that its pace and action keep you on the edge of your seat.

More and more of our correspondents have been discovering that the true history of the Old West is often as fascinating as are the stories about it. As a result, we've been corraling an increasing number of fine accounts of the land that made the people and the people who made the land. Here are some of them:

Dear Editor:

I Hope the rest of your issues for 1950 measure up to the January *Fifteen Western Tales*. Give us more like *Six For Hell*.

Your request for true stories of the Old West reminded me of a man who didn't let obstacles stop him.

In frontier times, people didn't pay too much attention to what we call handicaps —couldn't afford to. Klondike Mike Mahoney, the big freighter of the northland in the days when the northland was real wilderness, was like that. Maybe you could call him Alaska's first respectable businessman, but he was no softer than the frozen terrain.

Big Mike didn't go for the dream-diggings, the quick, tawdry saloon splurges that ate up many a miner's profits. He contracted to carry freight over the cold, wolf-infested trails where many a sourdough had died, and carry it he did, without asking questions. Once he brought a piano, of all things, over 3000-foot Chilcoot Pass. A miner up in the Klondike sent for his girl, and as there was no means of transportation except Mahoney, Mahoney brought her in, charging a dollar a pound, live weight. He set a record for the Dawson City-Skagway run, making the 650 miles in ten days on foot, and charging a dollar an ounce for the outgoing mail he took with him. When an ex-mayor of Seattle died suddenly in Fairbanks, Alaska, and the dead man's family in The States sent for the body, there was only one man to turn to, Klondike Mike.

He took a shortcut, that trip, blazing a trail no white man ever had used before, the first through route from Fairbanks to the Pacific Ocean. They named it the Mahoney Trail. They wrote epic poems about him. But all he asked for was his fee.

A decent citizen, he frowned on certain elements in the territory. He once wrecked

the headquarters of Soapy Smith, most feared badman in Alaska, just to teach him a lesson. Mahoney, they say, never smoked or drank in his life.

When he retired at last, middle-aged and wealthy, to a home in Ottawa, he finally got around to overcoming what tenderfeet might have called a handicap in a successful business career. At 53, busy Klondike Mike Mahoney learned one new lesson—how to read and write. He'd always meant to get around to it, he said. Now he had time.

Paul Wells
Yakima, Washington.

Thanks, Paul. We'll try to please you and everyone else the other eleven months of the year and all the time. Here's a story about a lunch at which the main course was—bullets!

Dear Editor:

They said of Clay Allison, one of the most notorious killers that the post-bellum era ever spewed into the Southwest, that he was a friendly fellow when sober and a good companion while getting drunk. It was just the stage after that, they said, that you had to look out for.

And they quoted the farewell luncheon that Clay gave a friend, Bill Chunk, to explain what they meant. Chunk was a character of Clay's own stripe, with fourteen notches to his gun, and they had a sort of measuring way with each other. Either man would have been the prize notch on the other's revolver. After some trifling argument brought the matter to a head, they finally spoke freely of what had really been on their minds for some time—a gun duel to the death.

Clay, the prince of bad fellows, refused to pursue the matter on an empty stomach. Accordingly, he and Chunk repaired to a hotel, where they invited friends to sit down with them, and announced the afternoon's tournament. Lunch was served. Bets were passed among the guests as to which of their hosts would see that night's sunset. There may have been toasts. At one point, Bill Chunk, getting nervous, drew his revolver and grimly stirred his coffee with it. Clay Allison drew too—and performed the same gesture.

Conversation waned a bit. The two opponents kept at their lunch. Entree plates were removed, dessert was served. Chunk reached for his gun again, his eyes never leaving Allison's face. The barrel hit the edge of the table clumsily. Allison drew too, while swallowing a mouthful of food, and shot Chunk, a table's-length away, in the middle of the forehead.

The shot sounded and died into silence. Chunk fell forward, his blood streaming into his plate.

"Please continue, gentlemen," Allison urged his guests, setting them an example by proceding with his luncheon until he had finished it. Though their appetites must have been gone by then, it is said that the diners did as they were told.

Sated finally, Allison took the dinner gong, strode to a hotel window, and rang for attention. Then he announced to the crowd outside that the duel, unfortunately, would have to be called off, as one of the contestants had met with an accident.

But the record does not state whether or not this murderous *bon vivant* picked up the luncheon tab!

Arnold Barnes
San Francisco, California

Now here's one about a royal gold-digger:

Dear Editor:

Title of most aristocratic digger in the Old California goldfields must unquestionably go to King Webster I of the Kingdom of Waiou, off the coast of New Zealand. Maybe you wonder how a Maori king got an American handle like Webster—and why, being a true-enough sovereign monarch, he should have turned up with the Forty-niners, sweating and panning gold.

His incredible story goes back to the mid-1820's, when, as a young man, he was carpenter on a sailing ship that put into Waiou for supplies. During a brief shore leave, young William Webster met and took a liking to King Caromandel, the local Maori leader, and also to Caromandel's pretty young daughter. When Webster's ship took to sea again, it was minus a carpenter—and Waiou had gained an heir apparent to the royal throne. Webster had married the king's daughter.

For many years, the young American remained and prospered in this old locale. Caromandel died, and Webster succeeded him. With true Yankee ingenuity, he brought a hitherto unheard-of prosperity to Waiou and its surrounding Maori territory, establishing trading posts and furthering commerce.

But twenty-five years is a long time—enough time for a man to change completely without knowing it. William Webster, the American sailor boy, became a middle-aged South Seas monarch who still thought of himself as a Yankee. Something happened to the series of trading posts—exactly what, has never been diagnosed, except that Webster probably lost his touch at last. And then, finding the royal treasury in deplorable state, he hit on a typically semi-civilized solution.

Instead of sending an ambassador to float a foreign loan, as he had a perfect right to do, Webster decided to raise the money with his own hands—in the gold dig-

(Continued on page 129)

From the hell of the living to the hell of the dead rode the silent four to their final rendezvous . . . where guns alone asked the questions—which bullets alone could answer!

FOUR MUST DIE

A Novel by SHAD COLLINS

They got Quint's horse and he fell from the saddle. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Ride or Die!

THE two riders met where the trails joined, an hour's ride away from the main stage road. The one on the big roan whirled his horse to the left, his hand going down to the gun on his hip, and then reined in. He sat easy and relaxed in the saddle on the big horse. He was a big man, bronzed and lean, with a square jaw, an acquiline nose and jet-black hair, good looking without being

handsome. He looked tough and competent and sure of himself, but he did not take his hand off his gun, leaving it for the other man to speak or act.

The second horseman was younger. He was fair-haired and slender, but there was nothing boyish about his features, which were as sharply cut as a cameo. He put his hands carefully on the horn of his saddle and smiled.

"You coming or going?" he asked.

"Coming," the first man said. "Seeing there's only one of you." He brought his horse over to the other.

"A little jumpy, aren't you?"

"Just careful, that's all. This part of Wyoming has a bad reputation. The Hole-in-the-Wall gang operates around here."

"I'm not Butch Cassidy. On the other hand, I'm not a John Law either, in case you should be Kid Curry or somebody."

"It happens I'm not, if you got a reason to be interested."

"No reason." The young man tipped his black hat farther back on his head and smiled. "Curiosity," he said. "My name's Quint." He did not put out his hand.

The big man looked across the cigarette he was rolling at the hard, handsome features of the other. "Mine's—Ransome," he said. "Pete Ransome."

"Glad to know you, Ransome. You come a long way?"

"From up the trail a piece," Ransome said blandly.

"Going far?"

"Over the hill and a ways beyond."

"Mind if I ride along?"

"You're sure it won't be too far for you?"

For the first time, Quint smiled with genuine humor, and his face became suddenly boyish. "I'm not going anywhere," he said. "Just a lonesome cowboy heading south for the winter." He put out his hand.

"Fine," Ransome said. He did not offer to shake the hand stretched toward him. He was listening to the sudden *clip-clop* of hoofbeats around the bend of the trail behind him.

Quint gave a sudden, wordless grunt and kicked his horse around behind Ransome's. His hand flashed down and came up with a gun. He held it just across the saddle, trained on Ransome but out of sight of the approaching rider.

"Friend of yours?" he asked, as if addressing the question to himself. He looked suddenly cold and deadly.

The horse came around the bend in the trail; the rider saw the two of them, and pulled in from an easy trot to a walk.

"Howdy," he called. He was a short, chubby, sleepy-looking man. Some of the tension of the two men communicated itself to him. "Glad to meet with some company," he said uncertainly. "Tiresome, riding all alone."

"Howdy," Quint answered. Ransome saw the gun disappear effortlessly into the holster, still out of sight of the new rider. "Ride along, friend, if you're southbound," Quint invited.

"Thanks. Name's Garrodee," the newcomer said.

"Quint. This big fellow is Ransome."

"Mighty pleased to have your company, gentlemen. This riding alone gets troublesome to a man who likes conversation. This is Indian country, too, these Wind River Mountains. Man alone could have a mighty rough time against a band of Cheyennes." He turned his horse into the trail ahead of the others and kicked it into a slow trot again.

"I don't like people to pull guns on me," Ransome said, speaking rapidly in a low voice. "When somebody throws down on me, I'm apt to make him go through with it."

"I'll remember that, friend," Quint said. Then he smiled. "Thought he might be a pal of yours."

"Now you're the one that's jumpy. Why?"

"I thought you disapproved of curiosity," Quint laughed. He called ahead to Garrodee, "Where you bound, friend?"

"Going south a ways," Garrodee answered cheerfully. He didn't offer to elaborate.

"That's three of us who aren't saying anything," Ransome said, jogging along beside the black-garbed rider who called himself Quint.

NILES STRAIGHT came out of the hotel in a big hat, denims and boots. Mrs. Morrison sniffed with disapproval, her husband craned his head for a better look, and the fat, bearded coach driver shifted his tobacco, spat into the dust, and turned a speculative stare.

"I'm all out of clean dresses," Niles told the driver. She was a tall, pretty girl with red-brown hair, a wide, humorous mouth and large, placid gray eyes. "Besides," she said, grinning at him, "this contraption of yours is giving me saddle sores. I may as well dress like a rider if I'm going to have the occupational ailments of one."

Mrs. Morrison turned her scandalized gaze to the worn plush of the seat in front of her. Her husband reluctantly shifted his admiring eyes to the less controversial beauty of the mountains across the valley.

"Can I ride up there with you?" Niles called to the driver.

"Ain't no rule agin it," the driver said. He had a raspy, not unpleasant voice. She climbed up beside him. The shotgun guard, a dwarfish, taciturn man whose revolver rested in brass clips instead of the conventional holster, came out of the stage office across the way and mounted to his place on top of the vehicle. The driver gave a hoarse shout, dust jumped under the feet of the lead horses, and the stage began to pick up speed.

They bounced and groaned along the road, sliding on the curves as they followed hairpin turns on steep slopes, splashing and clattering as they whipped through the fords of high mountain streams.

"When do we reach Mill Creek?" Niles asked, squinting toward the south, to where the valley debouched into the plain.

"Due in at six," the driver said, putting the accent on the first word. "'Course, that's only when we're due there. Generally, though, it's 'long about seven-thirty, eight, before we get there. The people who makes the schedule, they don't do the drivin', so the schedule says six. You stopping over there?"

"Mill Creek? No. I'm going on South. Denver, Pueblo, and farther."

"Neither of them places is good to go to," the driver said. "You got to have a reason to go to them places."

"I got a good reason, Pop," Niles said.

Ransome brought the big horse to a halt and flung out an arm, pointing. To the west, about ten miles, were the mountains. In front of them, moving in the direction of himself and his companions, was a long, feathery streamer of dust. Ransome stood up in the stirrups, as if that would help him see better, and squinted under his hand.

"What do you say?" he asked Quint.

Quint looked out across the level land beneath them. "I reckon so," he said. "Maybe six, eight miles away, wouldn't you say?" His voice was pleasantly conversational.

"What is it?" Garrodee asked. He turned his horse about and rode back to the higher ground where the others were. When he saw the line of dust, he swore.

"About fifteen of them," Quint said. Ahead of the line of dust were a group of black dots. Ant-like, they seemed, from a distance, to move at an incredibly slow pace.

"That's what they're after," Ransome said. He pointed to the middle distance, where another black dot moved on the flat, light-colored surface of the valley. "Think we could get down there in time?"

"They're about as far away as we are," Quint said, judging the relative distance between himself, the cloud of dust, and the dot below.

"Damn it, we're not hired for that kind of work," Garrodee said. "That isn't any problem of ours."

"There won't be more than three, four men down there," Ransome said scornfully. "Maybe women and kids. You going to leave them to the Indians?"

"It isn't our hair they're after."

Ransome hitched his gun around, took it out, spun the cylinder and dropped it back.

"You coming, Quint?"

"Nothing like a little excitement," Quint grinned.

"I'm not going!" Garrodee growled.

"The hell you're not, mister," Quint told him cooly. "Get your nag's tail in the air and get along after the man."

The Indians, a raiding party of Cheyennes, were strung out over a distance of a quarter of a mile, and they were running almost parallel with the road. The passengers on the stage watched the approaching dust cloud.

"Are we going to make it?" Niles asked. Her face was pale and she held on to the seat with both hands, not so much because of the bouncing of the coach as because her fear was in her hands, and she could not keep them steady.

"Don't know," the driver growled. "Road takes a little bend up ahead. That'll favor them a little. No damn cover out here, or we could try to stand 'em off. No rocks out here bigger than pinto beans. If we can get to them hills on the other side, we'd have something to hide behind. First we got to get past that bend."

The shotgun guard was crouching on the swaying top of the coach, shooting mechanically with his rifle. From the coach below, there was the occasional futile sound of Morrison's six-shooter, but the Indians were riding at a hopeless range for a short gun.

The guard gave a sudden grunt of satisfaction. "Got him," he said. A pinto pony which had been among the leaders of the Cheyenne band was running riderless across the valley. The guard jacked the spent cartridge out of the chamber and began reloading the magazine.

"Like a shootin' gallery," he said. "Win a cigar, Jeff."

"That's one shootin' gallery that can shoot back," the driver said. The guard looked over and saw three other horsemen cutting into the road at an angle from the left. His first smothered shout of alarm turned into one of pleased surprise. Niles, turning, saw three riders on the trail a couple of hundred yards behind. Their horses were slowly closing the distance between themselves and the coach.

"We're getting some reinforcements," she said excitedly.

The driver could not turn to look. He was using all the power of his tongue and his whip to get a little more speed out of the horses. They were running evenly and hard, their hides streaming with the lather forming along the lines where the harness straps touched.

There was a scream from below, and then the sound of hysterical weeping.

"What is it?" Niles shouted. She held to the side of the seat with one hand and leaned perilously far over the side of the coach. Through the window, she saw that Morrison was slumped over on the floor. His wife was trying to pull him back onto the seat. There was blood on her hands from where she had touched him.

"Them reinforcements can't get here any too soon," the driver said. He was looking at the trail ahead, which began

a lazy curve to the right, slowly closing the space between the stage coach and the Cheyennes.

"He's dead!" Mrs. Morrison was screaming. "He's dead!"

"We're all apt to be dead before we're old," the driver shouted in his rasping voice. He saw that the curve was narrowing the distance between the coach and the Indians to a perilous degree.

"Hang on!" he shouted and turned the horses off the road to the left. The coach careened out of the turn on two wheels and raced over the rough ground, pitching and bucking and threatening to overturn. The guard was snapped out into space like a stone from a slingshot. Niles began crawling back toward the shotgun that bounced on the rooftop where the guard had been.

THE three riders were strung out on the road behind the coach. Ransome on the big roan was in the lead and Garrodee, who had not wanted to take part in the fight, was in the rear. He was whipping his horse with a heavy quirt, fearful that he would drop far enough behind that the Indians might cut him off. Little puffs of dust jumped in the road ahead of the three riders; the Indians were shooting at them also.

"Turn!" Ransome was yelling. "Why doesn't the fool turn?" He had no hope of being heard over the racket of hoofs and gunfire. Then, almost as if the driver had heard him, the coach left the road, like a railroad engine jumping the rails, and went lurching off across the plain toward the left.

The three riders, by cutting to the left, rapidly began to close the distance between themselves and the stagecoach. The Cheyennes were now directly behind them. The fire of the Indians was increasing. Ransome shifted in the saddle and brought his six-shooter into play. Just behind him, Quint was also firing to the rear. Garrodee rode without looking back, beating his horse.

Quint felt his horse falter under him, breaking the even rhythm of his stride, and knew that the animal had been hit. He put his gun back in the leather and jumped free as the horse went down. The force of his own fall threw him to the ground and as he got up, partly dazed from the fall, he saw Garrodee go by, whipping his horse and looking straight to the front, as if he did not see the other man. Behind him not much over a hundred yards were the Indians. They shouted now, seeing him unhorsed and helpless. His fingers suddenly clumsy with speed, he began to fumble cartridges out of his gunbelt. He heard a shout, turned and saw the big roan charging at him.

"Get on!" Ransome was yelling.

Ransome kicked his foot out of the left stirrup and put his arm out. Quint got his foot in the stirrup and was up behind Ransome on the roan and the horse was racing after the coach again. Quint took Ransome's revolver and began firing to the rear again.

In another couple of hundred yards, the roan caught up with the stagecoach. It was slowing on the uneven ground, and the Indians were gaining. Garrodee was riding on the left-hand side of the moving vehicle. Ransome rode up on the right.

"Jump!" he yelled and Quint snatched at the rail around the stage top and pulled himself up. He found himself lying beside a very pretty girl dressed in man's clothing and clutching a shotgun.

"Glad to meet you, miss," Quint said gallantly, and he began to punch cartridges out of his Colt and reload. The girl did not say anything.

"You've got to pull up!" Ransome was yelling at the driver. "They'll be on us in a few minutes. Pull up!"

"No cover!" the driver shouted in a hoarse voice.

"The next dry wash, anything!" Ransome shouted.

The two riders galloped away ahead of the stage coach. Ransome found the place he wanted. It was a dry stream channel, very shallow and offering only small cover, but it was their only chance. He pulled the roan in and leaped off, ripping the rifle out of the boot alongside the saddle.

"Get down!" he called to Garrodee. "We've got to give them cover until they can fight." He rested the rifle against the side of the bank, sighted carefully, fired and saw one of the Indian ponies go down, spilling its rider.

"Nice view of the country up here," Quint was saying to the girl. "But it's apt to make a man seasick to ride this contraption." He clung to the top of the lurching coach.

"Wait until another time to try to be funny," Niles said.

The driver yelled, "Watch it!" and the stage smashed down the low banks of the dried stream bed. It came to a halt, wheels splintering and collapsing in a cloud of dust and a snarl of plunging horses. The driver set the brake firmly, got the rifle out of the boot beside his seat, stood up on the footboard, took deliberate aim and shot one of the lead horses in the head. The weight of the dead horse would act as an anchor for the rest of the team. Then the driver jumped to the ground and began to fire from the cover of the bank.

Niles had got down from the top of the stage. She was still carrying the shotgun, but she moved like a sleepwalker. Through the cloud of settling dust she saw the four men firing steadily from the cover of the bank. Beyond them, the Indians had broken their charge and fanned out in a ragged circle. The sound of gunfire was deafening, and it was punctuated by the wild shouting of the Indians and the piercing, inhuman shrieks of wounded horses. Niles pulled open the door of the stage and spoke to Mrs. Morrison. The woman was lying across the body of her husband as if to protect him.

"We'll be all right," Niles tried to assure her. "We got help from some men that rode up. They'll beat off the Indians." She tried to speak as calmly and confidently as possible. It was some time before she realized that she was talking to a corpse. Both the Morrisons were dead.

The noise and confusion, the plunging horses, the wild, deafening gunfire were making her dizzy. She began a slow circumambulation of the stage coach. Lead whistled around her. She found herself trying to explain to a big, black-haired man what had happened to the Morrisons and the driver. He seemed not to want to listen. At last he put down his rifle and went in a running crouch to where the driver lay. He came back carrying the man in his arms.

"He's hit pretty bad," he said. "Take his shirt and try to make a compress on the wound. Get some water for him, if there's a canteen in the stage." He looked at the girl closely for the first time, noting the terrified eyes, the appearance approaching shock. He slapped her face resoundingly. "Get that water!" he said. "You understand?"

"Yes," Niles said. She started stolidly for the stage. Already she was beginning to feel more natural, as if the performance of a simple act somehow made livable the nightmare of the fight. She got the canteen and dressed the driver's wound. Then she went back to Ransome.

"You get back under cover," Ransome said.

"I'm all right now."

He gave her a careful look, his face streaked with sweat and dust and gunsmoke.

"All right," he said. "Take a hand if you want to."

CHAPTER TWO

A Gun for a Gun

IT WAS four o'clock before the Indians gave up the attack and rode off, leaving a half dozen dead behind them. Dull silence settled over the landscape. The monotonous sound of flies and insects began, sounding unnatural to the men whose ears still rang with the sound of rifle fire.

"Let's get out of here as fast as we can," Garrodee said. "Just in case they come back with friends."

"They're not coming back," Quint said. He lounged against the gravelly bank of the dried-up river and rolled a cigarette.

"There's still some work to be done," Ransome said. He went to the rear of the stage and unfastened a short spade that hung there. "There's some graves to be dug," he said.

"That stage is too smashed up to roll," Ransome told Niles later. "But we can put you on one of the horses." Evening shadows were filling the dry wash with violet light, and they were sitting around a small fire eating their supper. The wounded driver, in a bed of blankets, breathed heavily. "I got one picked out for you. No saddle, but you'll be able to make it as far as Mill Creek anyway."

"I can ride," Niles said. She had gotten over her shock fully now.

"That wounded driver won't be such pleasant company," Quint said. Then, to Ransome, "I owe you one for that lift you gave me back there."

"Forget it."

"I won't forget it," Quint said with finality.

"Where are you traveling, Miss Straight?" Garrodee was asking Niles politely.

"Mill Creek first. Then south—Denver, Pueblo, on into Arizona. I'm looking for my brother."

"So?"

"We used to live in Minnesota. John went West several years ago. He worked at a number of things, ranching and mining. He drifted around a lot. In the last year, Mother and Father both died. John is the only member of the family I have left. I haven't had a letter from him for a long time, but I know where he is in Northern Arizona. I'm going there now, but he doesn't know I'm coming."

"Well, that's certainly a difficult trip for a young lady," Garrodee said. "Such towns as Mill Creek, even Denver, are not pleasant places for young, unattached females." Garrodee's tone, the pattern of his speech, which had been rough and coarse when he was talking to the men, had changed. His fatherly, unctious style made Niles uneasy.

"And what are your plans, Mister Garrodee?" she asked him.

"I am a cattleman," Garrodee said. "A rather successful one, as a matter of fact. I have a large ranch in Montana. You may have heard of the Rocking M."

"That's Bill Morningside's ranch," Ransome said.

"Yes. But I am the silent partner, have been for several years. Recently Morningside and I have not always seen eye to eye. Consequently, it's good ranch land that I'm hunting for right now."

"Plenty of good land in Montana."

"True, but at what price? No, I think I may do better here in Wyoming, or perhaps even farther south. So you see, Miss Niles, I am looking for a man too. A man who will sell me a piece of good grazing land at a bargain."

"You got a hope," Ransome said. "And that's about all."

"I never found a place yet that I wanted to stay," Quint said. "Keep moving around all the time, looking for a good place to light. I'm heading south too."

"No question of sheriffs involved. Just the desire to see the country, eh?" Garrodee asked.

"If there was, that would be a pretty bad question to ask."

"No offense. You have a destination in mind?"

"That's right. I got sent up North on an errand. Now I'm going back." He did not offer to elaborate.

"And where are you going?" Niles asked Ransome.

"Oh—south," Ransome said, gesturing vaguely. "You might say I'm looking for a job."

"Plenty of jobs around here," Quint said challengingly. "Don't the climate suit you? Or is it the people?"

"Little of both, maybe."

"It must be a special kind of job," Niles said. Quint's veiled suggestion that Ransome was running from something disturbed her.

"It is," Ransome said serenely. "A very special job." He did not say that the job was to find and kill a man.

The driver's wound was not serious, but it was painful. They could travel only in short stages of an hour or so at a time, and they were three slow days on the trail before riding into Mill Creek one day at noon.

The town followed the line of a narrow valley and there were mines in the hills behind it. The main street was several blocks long, lined with saloons and stores. Along the steep slopes of the valley on either side were the homes of the miners, square, jerry-built shacks that looked as if at any moment they might collapse into the roaring mountain creek below.

The three-day ride after the Indian attack had been pleasant, in spite of the pained and profane baggage of the wounded driver. During the ride, Niles found her interest in the two men—Quint

with his mocking, restless energy; Ransome with his hardness and reserve—growing as the slow miles passed. She felt a warmth toward Ransome, a curiosity toward Quint, which made her sorry to part with them.

Ransome pulled his horse to a stop at the head of the street.

"I guess we split up here," he said. "I'll go around to the stage office with the driver. If you want, Miss Niles, I'll find you a place to stay."

"I've got to give this horse back to the stage people. I'll ride along with you." She turned to the other two. "Good-by," she said.

"I'll see you around," Quint said. "The town's not so big we'll get lost in it." He watched the other two ride down the street.

"You have plans?" Garrodee asked.

"I got plans to get about a gallon of cold beer," Quint told him. He spoke curtly and did not look at the other man. "I'll be moving along," he said.

"Most probably I'll see you," Garrodee answered. He watched the other man turn down the street toward the nearest saloon. There was something about the man that Garrodee felt he should know, but he was unable to decide what it was. He went to look for the sheriff.

The sheriff's office was a small cubbyhole at one end of the town jail. There was a gun rack and a scarred desk on which the sheriff's feet now rested. Around the walls were tacked old reward notices, some of them yellowing with age. Garrodee regarded them with interest, his eyes, which normally appeared sleepy and disinterested, sharp and curious.

"Find one you like?" the sheriff asked. He was a thin, unhappy-looking man in his middle forties with a drooping mustache.

"No," Garrodee said. "You recognize this?"

He took a sheet of paper out of his pocket and placed it on the desk. The sheriff reluctantly removed his feet and bent forward. It was a rough sketch of a man with a detailed physical description appended to it.

"Alec Barton," he said. "That what you want to know?"

"The name on the picture isn't Barton," Garrodee said. "He's got plenty of names. He around here?"

"Passed on the fly once," the sheriff said. "He seemed on the square. Cattleman or something."

"He can afford to be square now," Garrodee said. "Whatever his name is. He's picked up a lot of loose change."

The sheriff shrugged. "You got a reason to be interested?"

"You've heard of the Pinkertons?"

"Private detective agency. Sure."

"I used to be with them. That's where I got the line on Barton."

"Used to be with them? If you're not connected with them any longer, how come you're hunting this maverick?"

"You've heard of reward money?"

"A nice clean way of making a living," the sheriff sneered. He hoisted his feet up on the desk again. "Well, look somewhere else, mister. You won't find him around here."

RANSOME came out of the stage office and stood at the corner of Main Street. It stretched ahead for a hundred yards or so—saloons, restaurant, dancehalls, gambling houses, stores and hotels.

He would have to begin by trying the bars. They were the most likely place to pick up information. He considered the number of them on the stretch of the street and turned abruptly in at the nearest. Since he would probably have to go to all of them, there was no point in making a special choice as to where to begin.

It was dark and cool in the bar, and the first beer tasted good. The bartender lounged behind the mahogany chewing a toothpick. At the rear, four men were playing a slow game of poker.

"Just rode in?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah."

"Heard tell the stage got into some trouble. You hear anything?"

"I heard about it," Ransome said.

"Got to be getting after them Indians. Won't be safe while there's one alive. Never stop raiding, them Cheyennes don't."

"They're usually pretty peaceful—until they get starved off the agencies. Anyway, it's their country."

"Their what? Mister," the bartender said earnestly, "you just don't have the right attitude."

"Maybe another beer will fix it," Ransome said. When the bartender brought it, Ransome asked, "You ever know a man named Summerkill around here?"

"Summerkill? Summerkill? Seems like I should remember a name like that."

"Do you?"

"Nah," the bartender sighed. "Faces—I always remember faces, but I forget the names."

"Try this one. The man is six feet tall, weighs about one-eighty; sort of roan hair; good looking; nose broken once, but not badly; hazel eyes—"

"Hazel eyes? Seems like I should remember that. What's the real color of hazel anyway?"

"Kind of a bunged-up blue. You remember this guy?"

The bartender shook his head.

"Look," Ransome said in a hard voice. "Maybe this'll help. He would have had a wad of jack the size of a blanket roll. He'd have two, three guys with him, and they'd have from six to eight guns among them. They'd maybe have rings under their eyes from working late, a running iron under their saddle flaps, and a tendency to keep their backs against a wall. Get it?"

"I reckon so," the bartender said. He moved back from where he had been lounging against the bar. "You're a John Law."

"Wrong the first guess."

"What's your interest, then?" The bartender leaned forward confidentially. "I might be able to get some information for you. You buying?"

"Not with money."

"That's tough then, partner. What you can't buy with money, you sure can't buy with nothing else." He took the toothpick out of his mouth and spat into the sawdust. Ransome was suddenly angry. He leaned over the bar, smiling.

"You ever been hit over the head with a forty-five?" he asked. He took hold of the slack of the bartender's shirt and pulled him up against the bar.

"I never saw nor heard of the guy," the bartender said. He was full of nervous volubility. "Guys come and go. Half the time I never know their names. This one I would remember, the way you describe him, but I never saw him. Honest, mister, I don't know nothing about this man you're after!"

"You should have said so in the first place," Ransome told him. "I don't like it when people get gay with me."

He left his beer on the bar and went out into the shadow of the overhanging roof.

Quint, standing in front of the first bar on the Main Street, saw Garrodee come out of the sheriff's office and cross the street to where the post office was located in a wing of the general store. Garrodee was walking rapidly and purposefully, and he did not look like the sleepy, rotund little man who had met them on the trail.

Quint saw Ransome come out of the Miners' Bar a half block down the street and stand indecisively in the shadow for a moment, as if not knowing where he was going next. The girl Niles Straight came

out of a nearby store and went up to him. They talked for a moment, and then turned away down the street, walking close together in conversation, to the Mill Creek Hotel.

"What have you been doing?" Niles was asking.

"Hunting," Ransome answered noncommittally.

"You didn't find this special job you want?"

"Not yet."

"It must be a hard job to get."

"Yes, it is."

"Ransome, tell me the truth. Are you running from something?"

"Where'd you get that idea? Quint?"

She shook her head impatiently. "I'm not a fool. I can tell by the way you act that something is riding you."

"Suppose I am on the dodge?" It was easier than explaining that, without the benefit of a law badge, he was hunting a man to kill him.

"You like me, don't you?" Niles asked gravely.

Ransome said warily, "I don't see how that comes in."

"Would you tell me about it—this trouble you're in?"

"No," he said.

"It must be pretty bad."

"It's bad enough," he said woodenly, thinking that when the "job" was complete he would probably be dead or in prison. "There's no way to change it."

"You could settle somewhere—start over again."

"No," he said in a hard voice, and they walked in silence for several minutes, Ransome feeling his determination, for the first time in more than two years, weak and unsure.

"Somebody must have given you an awfully bad deal," Niles said at last.

"It wasn't just me that got it." He thought of the man he was after with cold hatred. They were silent again.

"I suppose I'll take the stage south," Niles said when they reached the hotel. "Of course, we could ride south together, if we had Mr. Quint for chaperone." She gave him an amused sidelong look. Ransome was aware of a momentary twinge of jealousy.

"You have some remarkable ideas," he said dryly, pushing the door of the Mill Creek Hotel open for her.

TOMORROW you take the stage south, I suppose," Quint said. His reckless, handsome face gleamed in the light from the window. He was sitting on the hotel porch in the evening darkness with Niles Straight.

"Yes, I suppose so. What will you do?"

"Oh," he said vaguely, "drift, I guess."

"You're not very purposeful about anything."

"No. Not like Brother Ransome." They watched Ransome's big figure come out through the swinging door of a saloon, shoulder through a knot of men on the street and enter the next bar. "Now there's a man with a purpose," Quint said with an edge of derision in his voice. "Whatever it is," he added ironically.

"Ransome—" Niles began with a touch of anger in her voice which Quint was quick to understand.

"Ransome isn't a good bet for you," he said brutally.

"Why—what do you mean?" She could feel the blood pounding in her cheeks.

"You know what I mean," Quint said levelly. "I'm sorry, Niles," he went on in a gentle voice. "I don't like to see you get hurt. Anyway, after tonight—"

"Probably none of the four of us will see the others again. I know that."

"I might ride around to see you," Quint said. His tone was cool and half mocking again, but he was serious. "San Isidro. That where you're going?"

"How did you know?" Niles asked in astonishment.

"It's a fair-sized town in northern Arizona. It would be the likely place."

"Yes, that's it."

"You're taking a big chance. Your brother might have moved on, since he doesn't know you're coming."

"I know it. I guess I was crazy to start out, but when the folks died—oh, he's got to be there."

"Well, you'll know when you get to Sidrow. Maybe I'll side you on the trip down."

Niles said nothing, watching Ransome come out of the saloon and go down the plank walk across the street. Quint, too, was watching, but he was watching the man behind Ransome. Quint's face was hard and intense now. He said, "Excuse me, honey," in an abstracted voice, breaking into a remark that Niles was making.

"What is it?" she asked, noting his tension.

Quint did not hear her as he stepped out onto the street and hurried after the two men.

Quint found them in an alley, between a saloon on one side and a store on the other. The two were part of a tableau which Quint had seen many times—Ransome against the wall of the saloon with his hands half raised, his body tensed as if ready to spring, and the other man in deeper shadow, the gun in his hand giving off dull glints.

"If it's money," Ransome was saying, "you're out of luck, friend."

"It ain't money," the stranger said reasonably, "though I'll take what you got."

"What'd you stake me out for?"

"You been ridin' too long on one trail, Ransome. You're pushin' too hard on the reins."

"I've never seen you. We got nothing to fight about."

"This isn't for me. I'm just doing it for a friend."

Quint saw the gun lifting. Ransome, framed in weak light from the window, shifted his feet. He was going to make a break, Quint knew, and it would be his last. He drew his own gun and stepped softly along the wall on the opposite side of the alley from Ransome.

"Don't you move now, Wheeler," he said in a careful, deadly voice.

"Quint!" the man said in a startled whisper. He turned away from Ransome, peering at Quint. "How come you're here?" he whispered wonderingly.

"You've got a gun, Wheeler. Better use it."

"For God's sake, Quint, what's he to you?"

"Go on," Quint said remorselessly.

"No!" Wheeler said in the same passionate whisper. "Let me explain this. Give me a chance, Quint!"

"You never gave anyone a chance," Quint said with finality in his voice. Then he dropped the hand with the gun in it to his side, slapping idly at his leg with the gun barrel. "I won't wait, Wheeler."

Wheeler whipped his gun across at Quint, and Quint shot him carefully just to the left of the second button on his shirt.

Quint looked down at the dead man in the dust. Wheeler had been a short man, and dead he looked shrunken and tiny. A stubble of beard covered his nondescript face.

"I wanted to have a talk with him," Ransome said. "I had some questions for him."

"If I hadn't turned up, you'd be asking them of the angels. You can't talk with a man like that. Shoot him or get shot."

"You knew him?"

"I knew him once." Quint snapped the cylinder out of his gun and blew smoke from the barrel. His young, handsome face looked almost cruel in the half light.

"I want to thank you," Ransome said. His voice sounded almost formal.

"I owed you one. Now we're even,

Ransome. You'll have to watch out for yourself after this."

He turned away abruptly, toward the knot of men that was collecting at the mouth of the alley.

CHAPTER THREE

Four on the Trail

RANSOME rode out of Mill Creek the next day at mid-morning. He had gotten nothing definite on the man he had been hunting—a few guarded words suggesting that the man he knew as Summerkill had headed south somewhere. It was not much to go on, but Ransome was content. He was prepared to spend a long time hunting the man, if that were necessary. His strongest feeling on leaving the town was that he would not see Niles Straight again, but he rode out without going around to her hotel to say goodby. Feeling this sadnesss weighing on him, he chirruped the roan into a lope and dropped down the curving trail along the valley side. Around the bend, he saw two riders sitting their horses on the trail ahead, and knew with a brief flash of elation who they were.

"You don't get on the trail very early," Quint said mockingly.

"I take my own time about things," Ransome said.

Niles pulled her horse to a walk and Quint rode ahead of them a little way.

"There won't be a stage south from Mill Creek for several days," Niles said. "I thought I would get a horse and ride with you. And Quint—"

"I guess you wouldn't have any trouble convincing Quint that he should ride along with you."

"I wanted to come, Ransome," Quint said coldly. "Do you understand that?"

"Maybe I do. Niles, you're a fool," he said sadly.

"I can't help it," she said.

"My—troubles—aren't something that can just be talked away."

"Maybe I can get you to stop running."

"Nothing is going to change."

"You're the one that's a fool. But there's a long ride ahead of us."

"You can't help me, Niles. You can't change anything."

"That's what you think now, my friend." She put the spurs into her horse and rode away from him, on past Quint. The latter dropped back beside Ransome.

"I take it you didn't say the right words," Quint said.

"You can make your own speculations. I'm not helping you."

"All right. I told her she was crazy to get excited about you. You shouldn't string the kid along, Ransome. She's no bar-room tramp."

"Take it easy on that, Quint."

"You should be honest with her. I don't care if you're on the dodge. You don't say anything about that, but you're sure not just a simple puncher riding south. You got something hanging over you. Ball the jack out of here. It's not fair to let her get interested in you."

"What's your interest?"

"My hat's in the ring too. I like Niles."

"That's a great piece of luck for her," Ransome said ironically. "What would you call yourself anyway—a gunfighter?"

"We'll let that stand. At least I'm not running from something. I don't have free-lance killers like Wheeler on my trail."

Niles dropped back and joined them. "It's a nice morning," she said. "Isn't it good to be riding together again?" Ransome gave Quint a bitter smile and said nothing, but the laughter and talk of the girl thawed the two men, and after a while it did seem to them that it was pleasant to be on the trail together, and when, in mid-afternoon, they met Garrodee, who had gone on ahead of them and had stopped for an hour at a crossroads store, it seemed natural that they should all travel together.

"Regular family outing," Garrodee said, smiling. "Makes it pleasanter all around. And safer in case of Indians."

"Pleasanter and safer for you," Quint was thinking. He remembered that Garrodee had not wanted to go to the assistance of the stage when the Indians had attacked it, and he had decided quite definitely that he did not like Garrodee at all.

They rode south through the good weather. They passed Cheyenne and Denver, riding along the great shelf to the east of the mountains, and so into Pueblo, a white town shining in the steep sunlight.

On the long ride, the days, each one like the one before it, became harder for Ransome to bear. In spite of himself, he felt his resolution wearing away under the steady pressure of the girl.

As the two of them drifted closer together, another development was taking place within Quint. Where he had begun with a casual desire for the girl, he was now deeply in love with her; and where he had formerly looked on Ransome as he looked on all other people, with tolerant disdain, he now felt toward the big man who rode with him a powerful jealousy which upset his judgment of the world and himself. In other conditions, if he had hated any man as much as he sometimes hated Ransome, he would have killed him. Now, because of his own feeling for the girl, Quint felt helpless. There had grown up in him, too, a feeling for Ransome which, at times when he was not ridden by jealousy, Quint recognized with something approaching amazement as being friendship.

Only Garrodee, the man who claimed to be looking for ranch land, seemed unaffected by association with the others. From the time he had met them on the trail until the day, almost two months later, when they camped along Rope Creek in the high, wooded tableland of Arizona, nothing about Garrodee seemed to have changed.

On that last day, it seemed to Ransome that Quint was more silent and surly than at any time on the trip. They picked out a place to camp and picketed the horses. Niles went down along the creek to swim and Quint turned abruptly to the big man.

"You and me have got to have a talk, Ransome," he said. "This is just about the end of the line for Niles. And for me too. I want to know what you're going to do."

"I'll tell you when we get to San Isidro," Ransome said.

"I want to know now."

"Quint, I don't like to be crowded."

"It isn't a matter of what you like or what I like," Quint said. All the rancor had gone out of his voice. "It's a question of Niles."

"It doesn't have to be decided now."

"We hit San Isidro tomorrow night."

"What's that?" Garrodee asked, coming up. "We getting to San Isidro?"

"That's right."

"I better get shaved," Garrodee said, running his hand over his stubble of beard. "Can't go into a real civilized town looking like a saddle bum."

QUINT and Ransome went about the chores of the camp without speaking, and Garrodee heated some water, got out his shaving apparatus and went to work. The other men sat silently beside the fire watching him.

"You getting off at Sidrow?" Quint asked him.

"I reckon I will."

"You seen enough rangeland, now you've decided to buy some here sight unseen?"

"San Isidro is the end of the line for me." Garrodee stooped over the saddlebags, stuffing his razor inside it, and a scrap of paper blew away in the wind.

"Here," Ransome said, retrieving it for him, and then stopped in frozen astonishment, his eyes glued to the paper. For a moment he was unable to speak. Then he said, "Summerkill!" in a hard, marveling voice. The face of the man he was hunting looked back at him from the paper.

"Wrong," Garrodee said. "The name is Barton." Garrodee seemed amused. "Don't tell me that you're after him too."

"That's right."

"You'll have to get in line then," Garrodee said. "I want him."

"You a Law?"

"I'm just after the reward."

Ransome said, "You're going to lose it. I'm going to kill him when I find him."

"So that's what was riding you!" Quint said. He looked at Ransome as if seeing him for the first time.

"I've found him already," Garrodee said.

Quint took the paper and looked at it briefly. Suddenly he threw his head and rocked with laughter.

"What's so amusing, friend?" Garrodee asked.

"Both of you. Both of you after this one man, and neither of you have his name right."

"Oh, I can put the right name to him," Garrodee said. "It took me a while to see it, but why do you think I was waiting for the three of you that day when you left Mill Creek? When did you know it?"

"As soon as I saw her," Quint said scornfully.

"What the devil is this?" Ransome asked.

"You know who this is?" Quint shoved the reward picture at him again.

"I know he's a murdering rat, whatever name he uses. He and a gang of rustlers burned out my brother's place in Montana. Killed his wife—"

"All right," Quint said. There was almost pity in his voice. "Look at it again. Don't you see the resemblance? This is a picture of Niles' brother."

Ransome stared at him, speechless. "That's what Garrodee meant," Quint went on. "He recognized the resemblance between Niles and the picture. Niles was going to meet her brother, so Garrodee just tagged along."

"How did you make the connection between the two of them?" Garrodee asked. "You never saw the picture."

"I saw the original," Quint said. "You see, I work for Straight."

He tossed the poster into the fire and turned to Ransome.

"Straight sent me after you," he said quietly. "I didn't recognize you at all, Ransome. Joke on me, eh? Even after Wheeler tried to gun you, I never dreamed you were the man who had been hunting for the Duke. You don't fit the description he gave me at all. And you don't have the right name."

"My brother," Ransome said shortly. "He's hunting Summerkill— Straight— also. We don't look much alike. And I took a phony name when I started out."

"That's a good one, Quint," Garrodee said. He seemed vastly amused. "You ride right along with him for a thousand miles."

"You still working for Straight?" Ransome asked quietly. "You still want me, Quint?" He straightened up, letting his right hand drift slowly to his side, and stood waiting, highstrung and ready.

"No," Quint said abruptly. "I can't gun you now, if for no other reason than because of Niles. And because of Niles, you can't go after him either."

"Maybe he can't, but I can," Garrodee said.

Quint did not even look at him. "I don't think I'll have much trouble stopping you," he said in a hard voice. "Maybe for good. What about it, Ransome? You going to forget about Straight?"

"I got to get him," Ransome said stonily.

"Ransome, I'm asking you. For her sake."

"No!" Ransome said as if the word were wrung from him with great pain. He dropped his eyes from Quint.

A gun jumped into Quint's hand. "Don't either of you get gay with me," he said coldly. He turned a steady gaze on Ransome. "I'm the one that's over a barrel," he said bitterly. "Because I'm in love with her, you got me backed into a corner."

"What's coming off here?" Garrodee asked uncertainly. Quint did not take his eyes off Ransome.

"I'm going to help you take Straight," Quint said. "It wouldn't do any good for me to chase him out of the country, even if I could. Ransome would go after him. I'm thinking of the girl. You get the Duke, Garrodee, so that Ransome can stop hunting him. Ransome gets the girl. A nice deal all the way around, except for me. Take his gun, Garrodee."

Garrodee went around behind Ransome and lifted the gun out of the holster. Then he brought Quint's horse and his own.

"I'll leave your gun up the road a piece. Tell Niles we rode ahead into Sidrow," Quint said. He got into the saddle and motioned Garrodee on ahead.

Quint's face looked washed-out and old. "I don't understand it," he said in tones of tired wonderment. "Some stiffs just have all the luck, I guess."

It was nearly midnight when Quint and Garrodee rode in to a small ranchyard.

"Where are we?" Garrodee asked.

"This is Straight's place, kind of a hideout ranch," Quint said. "That's what you wanted, isn't it? I'm going to turn him over to you. But just in case you got any ideas about taking me along too, I'll take your gun."

Garrodee felt the cold of the gun muzzle against his back and raised his hands without a word. "All right," Quint said, lifting Garrodee's gun. "Let's go."

They went up to the house and Quint rapped lightly at the door.

"Yes?" a voice asked. "Who is it?"

"It's Quint, Straight. Let me in."

THE door opened and John Straight stood framed in the light. He was a big man with red hair going gray. His mouth was big like that of his sister, but it had none of the lurking humor about it which Niles' had. Straight saw the pudgy body of Garrodee first and then the glint of the gun in Quint's hand.

"What's the trouble, Quint?" Straight asked in a calm voice. "Why are you throwing down on me?"

"Things change," Quint said with a flash of hard gaiety. "Let's get inside. You got any riders here now?"

"No," Straight said and saw by the satisfaction on Quint's face that he should have lied.

They went into the big, square room and Quint pulled the door shut behind him. He waved Straight to a chair at the rear of the room.

"Well, I did your job, Straight," he said. "I found that guy Blaine—only he calls himself Ransome now."

"What's the play?" Straight seemed more puzzled than frightened.

"I also met your sister," Quint said carefully. "She was coming down to see you. Surprised? We all rode down from Wyoming together. You can form quite an attachment for a person in a few weeks on the trail."

"I don't understand you."

"The fellow Ransome and Niles are in love," Quint said. "Ransome will kill you if he locates you. That'd be a bad thing for Niles. So you've got to go. Now."

"Why didn't you shoot Ransome then?" Straight asked.

"You don't understand. That'd break up Niles, too, wouldn't it?" Quint spoke as if he were explaining a difficult problem to a child.

"You're in love with her yourself," John Straight said. He laughed. "That's the answer. But I'm not running out, Quint."

"Yes," Quint said. "I thought you'd be like that. That's why I brought Garrodee along. He wants you too, Straight. You're money in the bank to him. Reward money. I'm going to let him take you back up North to prison. That's the best solution all the way around."

"I'll do better," Garrodee said, speaking for the first time. "I'll take both of you."

He had been standing behind Quint and now he pulled a small short-barreled gun out of his shirt and pressed it against Quint's side. "Drop the gun, Quint."

Quint said carefully, "You don't want me, Garrodee."

"You're money too."

"You won't be able to handle us over a long stretch of trail," Straight said. "We can make some kind of a deal—"

"I can take you both in to San Isidro, have you identified, and collect on you."

"I'll help you take him up the trail," Quint said. "And turn myself in at the end of it. But we can't have him in Sidro. Niles—"

"She's not my sister," Garrodee said. "You're too soft, Quint."

"I guess so," Quint said and dropped to the floor, flipping his gun up and shooting out the light.

Two shots flashed at the end of the room to Quint's right, the smear of orange flame half lighting up the room. They were answered by the lighter report of Garrodee's pistol. The sound seemed to rock the closed room. Quint shifted himself backward, trying to get behind a chair. Straight fired again and Quint, shooting

at the flash, heard a grunt of surprise and knew that he had at least wounded the man. The satisfaction was lost in a stunning pain. He had not even heard the sound of Garrodee's shot, which had ripped a great, painful wound along his side. He shifted his position, grinding his teeth together to keep from blacking out, and when Garrodee fired again, Quint shot carefully to the right of the flash. He heard a choked cough, the clatter of a gun and the meaty thump of Garrodee's body striking the floor.

"Quint!" Straight called. "I'll give you a chance. Get out or I'll kill you!"

Quint's answer was to fire at the sound. Straight's gunflash burned almost in his face and he felt the heavy blow of the bullet, low down in his stomach, like the kick of a horse. Quint knew that he could not hold on to consciousness much longer. With his last strength he bracketed the flash of Straight's gun, firing to the right and the left and smashing his last bullet into the center of the pattern. . . .

To Ransome, riding in the next morning on the trail of Garrodee and Quint, it seemed that the small ranchyard was dead and deserted. He went to the shuttered house and knocked. When there was no answer, he pushed the door open and went in.

The living room looked like a slaughterhouse. Blood streaked the floors, mingling with smashed glass and lamp oil. With his last strength, Garrodee had tried to crawl to the door and he had left a dirty red trail after him. Behind a table at the end of the room was the man he had been hunting. Straight had been hit twice, once lightly on the arm and again squarely through the chest.

Quint was lying on his back, his shirt crusted with dried, dark blood. He had his gun clenched tightly in his hand and he was still alive. Ransome brought water from the well and washed his face, and Quint came slowly back to consciousness.

"Quite a party we had last night," he said weakly.

"Take it easy until I get you patched up. Don't talk."

"There's nothing left to patch, friend. Where's Niles?"

"I sent her on to San Isidro. I said you and Garrodee had decided to ride on ahead."

"That's good. She'll wait in Sidrow for a while. When her brother doesn't show up, but you're still around—you're a pretty lucky man."

"I guess I am," Ransome said. "I—thanks, Quint. It could be me lying here."

"It wasn't in the cards." Quint's voice was only a whisper. "You might even take over this ranch, later on. Hardly anybody knew the Duke was here. There aren't any neighbors in miles, and he was here only a little while. You find a quiet place for the bodies and the place is yours."

"This isn't the time to be making jokes."

"I haven't got much time left."

His voice failed and he lost consciousness again. Ransome went on with the futile task of bandaging the wounds. Then Quint revived again.

"Garrodee has finally found that rangeland he wanted," he said in a clear voice. "Six by three. Pretty small ranch." His head dropped back against the floor.

"It's funny they'd just ride on through San Isidro," Niles said once, a long time later. "You'd think they'd at least have said good-by."

Ransome replied with a noncommittal grunt.

"I didn't like Garrodee, but Quint was nice."

"Yes. He was fine."

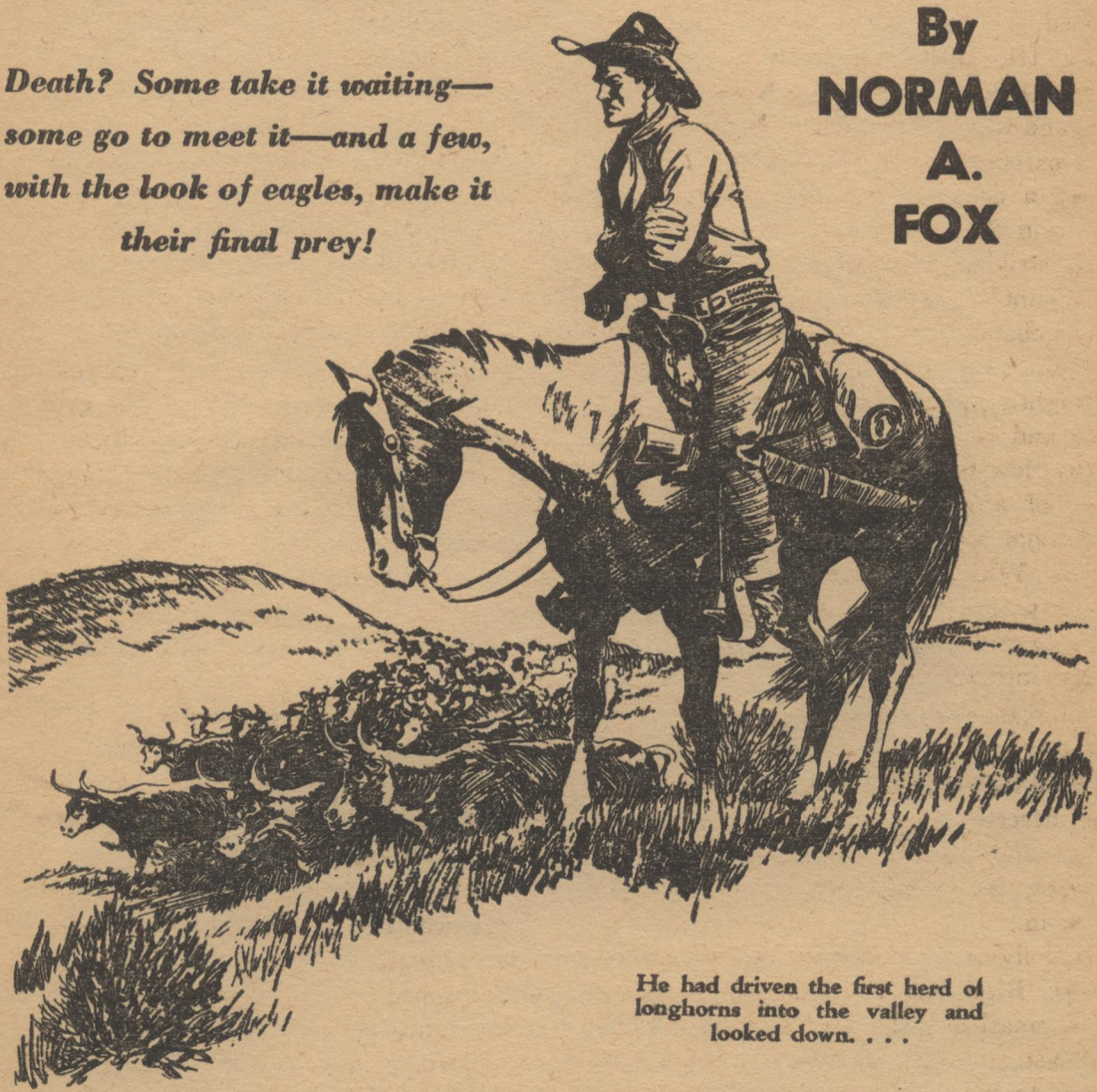
"But I thought you didn't like him."

"He was my friend," Ransome said softly. "I didn't find out until too late." He rode in silence for a while. "Yeah," he said finally. "He was my friend."

THE LOOK OF EAGLES

Death? Some take it waiting—some go to meet it—and a few, with the look of eagles, make it their final prey!

By NORMAN A. FOX



He had driven the first herd of longhorns into the valley and looked down. . . .

AFTER the doctor got done with him, Ben Pierce put his shirt back on and at once reached into his pocket for tobacco, but the doctor's eyes said no, and Pierce let his hand drop. He picked his old brush jumper from the chair, while the doctor was fiddling at putting the stethescope away, and took two silver dollars and put them on the desk. He asked, "How long, Doc?"

The doctor frowned. This Raddison was one of those new ones, come out of the East to Montana, and he didn't smell of liniment and he didn't smell of horses and there was no patience in him for neighborly talking. Pierce could see that.

Raddison said, "Your natural span, perhaps. You're only in your sixties. Just ease up on working hard and lay off coffee and tobacco, and your heart won't trouble

you. But if you go on exerting yourself, I won't be responsible."

Pierce had ceased listening to him, his washed-out blue eyes far away and dreaming. He didn't look sick. His was not an epic stature; he was short and stocky, with a rock's sturdiness. His body had been hammered upon the anvil of cattledom, and his face appeared to be of leather, and his mustache had gray in it. He was small and misshapen and bowed of leg, but he had the look of eagles. It was in his eyes.

He said, "Thanks, Doc," and took up his floppy old sombrero and went out into the street of Grass Valley.

Around him the town hummed, having an Election Day look, for there were many buckboards and buggies and horses lining the river of dust that lay between the two rows of false fronts, and there were a number of automobiles, too, and a slew of people. He stood in the last strong sunshine of summer and gave his greeting to those who greeted him, but he was a man empty of mind until the full realization of the black shadow came upon him and he knew that this shadow would always be with him, graying the things that he saw and the things that he did; Grass Valley would never look the same to him again.

Still, he did as he had planned to do. He had come to town to see the doctor and to see the fair. There was too much to do around the place to make two trips, but that shortness of breath had bothered him; it had hit him real hard last week when he'd been putting up fence posts. Now he unhitched his saddler and led the horse toward the fairgrounds, walking easily, the reins lax in his hands. Old horse—old man.

At the town's edge, beyond the red railroad depot and the towering grain elevator, canvas billowed upon the prairie's flatness, and there the people were gravitating, and the steady roar of the fair rose to the vaulted sky. Another time the stock pavilion would have drawn Pierce first, and after that the carnival midway; he loved horses and he loved excitement, in that order, but Grass Valley's fair had a special attraction this year, and he had listened to the talk and looked forward to it with a boy's delight. He was tied to the old days by the tether of the years, but new things entranced him too, and he had never seen a balloon ascension.

The globular bulk of the balloon loomed above everything, and he had to make his way through all the children of the valley to reach it. They clambered around him; sometimes he had lemon drops for them, but he had no sweets today. The children called out to him, and he called back, not always remembering their names, for he was getting so he got the generations mixed.

At last he came to an iron flue mounted upon brick supports, a great fire roaring beneath it. The heated air had inflated the balloon until now it had risen a few feet above the ground and was held down by many supporting ropes in the willing hands of the crowd. Pierce looked it over with eager eyes, his fingers straying to his shirt pocket. He had a cigarette half-spun before he remembered. He frowned at the twisted paper, then finished shaping it and put it to his lips and lighted it.

He gazed at the balloon again; from the net of cordage enclosing the inflated bag, a thick rope ran to the biggest windlass Pierce had ever seen. He understood about this; he had talked with Marty, and Marty had seen a balloon back in Iowa. Pierce knew this was a captive balloon, held to the earth by the rope and the windlass.

He looked around to see if Midge and Marty were in the crowd; he had seen their Model T on the street, and he'd told them to stay the evening and that he'd get back to the place in time to do the chores. Young folks could get a lot out of the fair,

and they'd been mighty pleased, he could tell. He didn't see his daughter or his son-in-law now, but he spied Con Justice, and Con came over to him and grinned a whiskered grin and said, "They'll take folks up for a ride. Five dollars for five minutes. Going to give it a try, Ben?"

Pierce said, "That thing's for the kids, Con."

"I'm taking my young one up just to give myself an excuse," Justice said. "Come along, Ben."

Pierce said gruffly, "Got chores to do."

For he realized that this was not for him, this ascension balloon; Raddison had said something about altitude when he'd talked of Pierce's heart condition, and that great thing against the sky might be the death of a man. Here was his first real bitterness, and it smote him hard; he'd looked forward to making an ascension. A man had a right to the small thrills existence could give him.

And so he turned away and headed out of the fair grounds, sick of the fair, with the one great thing he'd wanted denied him.

A mile out of Grass Valley, jogging along the rutted road between the barbed wire fences, he told himself he was being childish. After that he quit his looking back. He came homeward in the last daylight, no part of him at the task of riding, for riding was natural to him, and the country was natural to him, and he could have found his way blindfolded. He'd known the valley before other white men had settled here; he had seen the changes and grown accustomed to them. He could remember when longhorn cattle had dotted the brown hills and the tawny levels, when the first homesteaders had yet to come creaking along in their tattered wagons—homesteaders like Con Justice, who had brought the barbed wire and that perambulating pestilence, the tumbleweed. Time's changes had not saddened Pierce as they had some of his breed; he knew that the world moved onward.

He came up on the place in the gathering dusk. The house stood upon the coulee's rim and was big—too big for three people—and the barn was bigger. Marty had put the place into wheat, though they still ran a few cattle. Pierce was thinking that the work stock, given a day's holiday too, would have to be turned out of the pasture and watered from the well in the coulee, and that meant tugging at the well rope and hoisting innumerable buckets, and Raddison had said, "No hard work." But Pierce guessed that if he took his time, resting between buckets, he'd do himself no real harm.

Then he looked down into the coulee, and the work stock was there, filling the bottom with darkness, drinking from the filled trough. He looked across at the yard and saw the Model T standing in the shadow of the granary, and the first lamplight sprang from the windows of the house.

He unsaddled his horse, put it into the corral, forked hay to it and went into the house. Midge was putting supper on the table.

"Why didn't you stay for the fair?" Pierce asked.

"It got tiresome," Midge said. She was tall and thin and bony, and Pierce never looked at her without seeing his wife.

He washed up. Marty came in and put the milk pails down by the separator and waited his turn at the washbasin. Marty too was tall and thin and bony, and he was out of Iowa, one of that blue-eyed breed drawn to Montana to homestead. Marty sat at the table and said grace, and Pierce saw the glass of milk beside his plate, and he saw that Marty and Midge had milk too.

"No coffee?" Pierce asked and frowned.

"We all drink too much of it," Midge said briskly. "Milk won't hurt us."

Pierce looked at Marty, who was making a great business of eating, keeping his eyes on his plate. After a while Marty said, "I'll finish that fencing tomorrow, Ben. You ought to stay around the house more. Midge gets lonesome. You could give her a hand with the work."

Midge said, "There's enough peas to shell, land knows."

"And weeding in the garden," Ben said, making an experiment of it.

"I can handle the weeding," Midge said quickly. "But you might use the twenty-two on some of the gophers." She fiddled with her fork, and then she said, "No need for you to sweat yourself, Dad. You've always been wanting time to do reading and such."

Pierce pushed back his plate and reached for the makings, and their eyes said no, just as Raddison's had, and he knew then that they knew—that they had talked to the doctor today.

LATER he went outside and sat on a bench and listened to the hum of the separator as Midge worked, and he watched a full moon rise over the eastern rim of the valley. A harvest moon, they called it, but his mind had gone back to Texas and his long-gone boyhood, and he was remembering that when the moon was full and the waterholes brimmed, the Comanches always came raiding. He turned alive with these memories, but they didn't shake the black shadow away.

He stayed around the house the next day and the day after, and he felt like a man chained, and that was because of Midge and her constant watching and seeing that he did nothing strenuous. She made him feel altogether futile, and he found a wrongness in his being able-bodied and not permitted to do any real working.

Midge went in to the fair the third day, which was to be the last, and Marty did the heavier chores. Pierce knew that Marty would have gone too, but for him. Here was kindness, and he could understand that and appreciate it, but still it nettled him, and he wanted to say, "If I'm no use, what am I staying here for?" He wanted to shout it.

Midge came home by suppertime, making much talk of the fair, but Pierce didn't listen to her. Not with his ears. He found himself thinking of the ascension balloon, and he knew he'd been thinking about it all along, with a corner of his mind. That balloon symbolized all his wanting. From the garden, where he'd potted away at the gophers, he'd been able to see the balloon whenever it rose to the length of the anchoring rope, but he'd put his back to it, and he'd shot a lot of gophers with the .22.

Once, long ago, he'd shot a grizzly bear.

When the dishes were done, he went to his bench and again the moon was big and round and smiling, and he went out to the barn like a man sleepwalking and saddled his horse and rode out, his every action aimless until the thought came to him that he could just ride on, he need never come back. When a man had outlived his usefulness, there was no place for him.

He found the road toward town, the prairie lying chalky around him, moonlight glinting from the barbed wire strands. He walked the horse as though he were trying to spare it for some great need ahead, but he knew that it was himself he was trying to spare; all his living had been like this since the hour he'd stood in Raddison's office. Old man—old horse.

Then he was angry. He made up a cigarette and smoked it.

He put the horse at one of Grass Valley's hitchrails and went walking to the fairgrounds, but now the fair was dying. Already the lights had faded in some of the carnival shows, and canvas was coming down. The balloon was still here; stout arms on the windlass had brought it to the ground, but the people were begin-

ning to drift away. He went toward the balloon and stood watching it; the man in charge of the windlass was brawny and had tattooing upon his arms.

Pierce said, "I think I'll take a ride in that thing."

The man said, "We're all done here this season, Pop. Come around next year."

Pierce said, "I'll pay. Just name it." For now he was frantically eager to be up in that balloon, and he knew that what had driven him toward town was the wanting of this experience, this grasp at living.

The man said, "Ten dollars? Seeing as it will just be you?"

"Ten dollars," Pierce said.

The man grasped at the wicker basket suspended below the balloon and steadied it and said, "Climb in, Pop," and Pierce got laboriously into the basket. The man went to the windlass and began to play out the rope. At first Pierce had no sensation of rising, and then his eyes were at a level with the canvas tops of nearby tents. Soon he was looking down upon the carnival midway, and the lights of the Ferris wheel hurt his eyes. The balloon rose until it reached the end of the tethering rope, and the fairgrounds were spread below, while up here there was only moonlight and silence and vastness.

Pierce's heart was hammering, but he refused to care; he told himself it was only the excitement, and he was glad he'd surrendered to temptation, because where was the assurance that another season would find him here? And then, suddenly, he was a daft man in the moonlight, and he got his ponderous old jack-knife from his pocket and leaned far out over the basket and sawed at the anchoring rope running down to the windlass. He felt the balloon lurch and shoot up with startling speed.

He had scant understanding of what happened to him. He supposed, in his last moments of consciousness, that here was the black shadow enfolding him, and he clung desperately to the edge of the basket, feeling not that he was rising but that the earth was dropping away. Marty had told him that any man who'd watched smoke rise had seen the principle of a hot air balloon. He'd explained that the hot air, being lighter than the cold air around it, lifted upward, hoisting the balloon. When Pierce had cut the rope, he'd converted a captive balloon into a free balloon, prey to every vagrant breeze. And now the balloon would shoot upward to the level at which the rarified air it displaced was equal to the weight of the balloon, but the quickness of the ascent took the breath out of a man.

He had no remembrance of collapsing to the bottom of the wicker basket, and he came back to consciousness with his heart hammering and his breath coming hard, and he merely lay for a long while, gazing upward at the great underbelly of the balloon and the dangling appendix into which the hot air had been forced.

He got to his feet finally, taking a firm hold on one of the suspension lines that held the basket slung beneath the balloon, and he peered down from the great height he had attained and saw the fairgrounds and the people running from it across the prairie; they looked small and frantic and inconsequential. He had no feeling of movement, yet he realized the balloon was drifting northward, and soon the lights of the fair were at the far rim of his perception, and the valley spread below him, lighted like day beneath the moon.

But at first he was bitter and thus blind to all this glory.

He knew now what had prompted him to cut the anchoring rope. He had wanted at first to ride this balloon for the thrill of it, and that had been denied him by Dr. Raddison's pronouncement, but he had bargained for a ride anyway, telling himself this would be no different from a forbidden cigarette. Yet he had known it

would be different. His heart had been pounding while the balloon was still anchored by the windlass, but he had stood free in that moment, free and alone and remote, and he had wanted to waft outward on a wave of that freedom. There had been that mad moment of choice—a slow way that meant monotonous years of being underfoot and having Midge and Marty watching him and coming to hate him, possibly, because of the burden he would become—or a quick way. He had used the knife.

But he was alive.

Still, he knew peace such as he had not known these last three days, and he felt detached from humanity; he felt as though he were made of air himself and adrift between the worlds.

He would die up here, either with the altitude choking off his tired old heart or in making a landing, but he did not care. He had made his choice.

HE FELL to peering at the country below, and he was surprised that it was like a great checkerboard and altogether foreign to the land he had ridden for over forty years. He'd supposed he'd known the valley, but he'd never seen it from above. Then he made out roads and creeks, familiar things, and he was able to give names to the landmarks.

He saw the Little Powder, which twined down Grass Valley to empty into the Milk, and he remembered that he'd named the creek himself the day he'd headed three thousand Texas longhorns into the valley, for he'd been reminded of Powder River to the southeast. He could see the notch in the hills where he'd first spilled his cattle into the valley. He could see the range upon which they had grazed, and that was a wondrous thing, seeing both places at once, for it had taken his crew three days to drive the herd from the hills to the valley's floor.

He was lost in reverie for a long while, remembering those first seasons in Montana. He recalled the sod shanty he'd built, the first habitation in the valley. He began looking for the shanty's site and found it. The boy had been born down there, and the boy had lived to see the frame house Pierce had later built on the coulee's rim, and it was in the Little Powder that the boy had drowned. Pierce had walked the creek bank afterwards, a crazy man, wondering if it were true that a man who cursed God died; he'd been almighty tempted to try it. He'd sworn there would be no more children, but ten years later Midge had come.

He could see the road along which he'd driven furiously to fetch Doc Summers; a car moved down there tonight, its headlights penciling the road. There'd been no cars in Doc's time.

There hadn't been much of a town in Doc Summers' day, but Grass Valley had grown as more cattle poured northward and more Texans moved to this virgin graze. But not all of them had come to sink their roots into the land; yonder was Bald Butte, looking queer from the air; in the shadow of that butte, Pierce had caught three rustlers and hanged them from a cottonwood. Cottonwoods had served him before; they had made firewood the hard winter that wiped out the longhorn. But he was remembering the night when the three had stood beneath the tree and the ropes had been tossed over the branch and there had been the necessary thing to do. That had come hard.

Buildings sprawled below, and Pierce looked down, trying to fathom whose place this was; and then he realized it must be Con Justice's. Con had been one of the first sodbusters, and their coming had been the kiss of death to cattledom, though Pierce hadn't realized it then. The longhorn had given way to blooded stock, and it behooved a man to raise fewer and

better cattle. When the farmers began homesteading the land, there'd been some gunsmoke, though at last the cattlemen had bowed to the inevitable. Pierce had led the way. It was in that little old schoolhouse down there to the north of Justice's place that Pierce had talked to his neighbors. "You start pulling down farmer fences, boys," he'd said, "and you'll have to pull me down first."

He could see other dwellings, and he made a game out of naming them. Calhoun's, which had been a cattle ranch when Sam Calhoun had run it, before young Sam had turned it into wheat. Thorkelson's. Old Gus had come out of the Dakotas, where the grasshoppers had got him. Wallinsky's. Anton had served time in a European army, and you could still see it in the stiff-backed way he walked.

They were Pierce's neighbors, and they had come upon his heels, but he was the one who'd made the valley safe for them; he was the one who had brought his bride out of Texas and built a sod shanty and braved the winters and braved the loneliness. And now he realized that he was being granted a privilege this night that came to few men; now indeed did he have the look of eagles, for he was getting a bird's-eye view of forty years of his existence, and the sight was good.

And so it came about that he saw more than the spreading, map-like, moon-bathed country; he saw all the work of all his years, and he was proud of that work, and he saw now that the work was done and that he had earned the right to sit in the sun.

And now he fiercely wanted that right; he wanted to read all the newspapers that piled up beneath his bunk and mend the old *reata* he'd brought from Texas and write some letters to men he'd nearly forgotten. He wanted to loaf out his last years, taking care of his ticker and making it last him. But he had forfeited that right of a lifetime when he had cut a rope.

He knew dimly that the balloon was provided with a valve at its top that could be controlled from the basket, thus allowing air to escape, but he didn't know how to work the valve and he was afraid to try. And because he wanted so desperately to live, he was prey to fear.

Then he became conscious that the balloon was slowly settling. The rim of the hills was rising, and a great hope grew in him. Then the balloon, moving into a different current of air, lifted. He grew frantic when that happened, wanting his feet on the ground again, and his heart began hammering till he fought his panic, knowing it might be his undoing. Soon he realized that the balloon was settling again. His next fear was that it might land in a treetop, and he peered over the basket's edge. The ground was so near he could make out fences, and then the basket was gently scraping the ground and tilting over, and he felt smothered beneath the collapsing bag. For a minute he went berserk, fighting at tangled lines and netting, and then he came crawling out from beneath all this impedimenta, a free man.

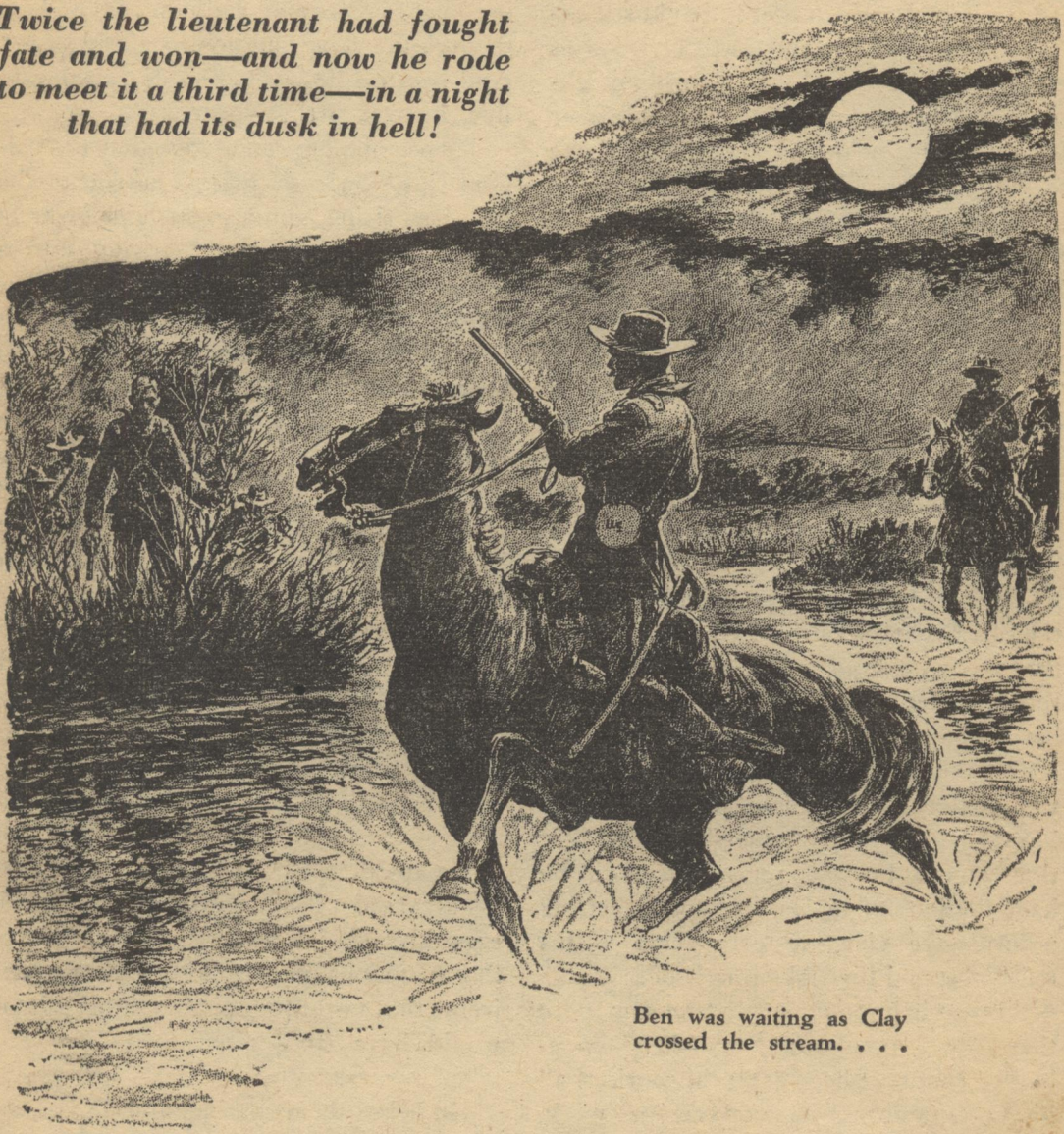
He stood still in the moonlight, letting his heart calm itself. He stood waiting, his ears keened for sounds, knowing that those anxious people who had scurried from the fairgrounds after the balloon would have since risen to saddles and taken to cars.

He heard them coming, and he guessed they would curse him out roundly, but beneath their abuse would be their concern for him. The concern would be the genuine thing. He thought of Midge and Marty waiting at the place; he thought of all the people of the valley, and of all the years, the ones gone, the ones to come. And as he waited, he plucked a blade of grass and put it between his teeth, liking the taste of it, liking it because it was rooted.

The Devil's Patrol

By GEORGE C. APPELL

Twice the lieutenant had fought fate and won—and now he rode to meet it a third time—in a night that had its dusk in hell!



Ben was waiting as Clay crossed the stream. . . .

CLAY Kendall reached through the lamplight of his one-room mud-brick quarters and struck the cork with the heel of his hand. The cork squeaked into the bottle's neck, and almost immediately from across the parade the music started again, as if taking its cue from the sound of the cork. It wasn't very good music and there wasn't much of it—Doc Ritter's squeezebox and the sutler's fiddle—but it helped the lonely people on the isolated post to forget the dreaded loneliness of the thousand plains miles beyond the stockade. Miles of sullen darkness now, as the music played. You could hear the sibilance of threat, if you listened at all, but these people did not care to listen.

Kendall arose, and by the act of pulling on a service shirt changed from a lean-bellied, heavy-shouldered man in a singlet to a first lieutenant of Cavalry with fern-green shoulder straps. A first lieutenant of Cavalry a bit drunk, albeit; but then, in the empty monotony of the frontier silence, when you see the scorn in others' eyes and you feel that same scorn for yourself, your hand seeks a bottle and your mouth and your brain welcome it.

Lieutenant Kendall put on his hat, knowing what he was going to do and fearing it; he put on his hat with its weather-rancid cord, tugged tight his neckerchief, and stepped out onto the parade. The music was clearer to his ears there, and he winced once.

"Doc, you should stick to pills." He trudged through the moon-purple dust toward the music in the officers' mess. Unsteadily, he tried to walk in time to the urgent beat of the polka they were playing. He tried to identify the tune in his mind, and couldn't, and gave it up. He wondered if she would be dancing, and with whom. She had almost no choice, out here on a two-troop post, and that made him feel somewhat better. She wouldn't be dancing with Ben Hugheston, that was a fact, because Ben Hugheston was two-three, maybe four days west with A Troop. And B Troop was commanded by Clay Kendall, since its captain, portly Elwood Styers, was East on leave. That left Doc Ritter, whose wife Marcia was visiting, and who would be no problem; and it left Captain Brevet-Major Nathaniel Hugheston, whose only offer of a dance would come from an impulse to be polite to the surgeon's sweet guest.

Ben Hugheston, who would proffer his class ring to Marcia when he got back. Everyone knew that, but none spoke it. They winked it—said it behind raised hands, from mouth-sides. Ben Hugheston, still soft of jaw, commissioned six months and riding on a soft patrol to accustom himself to terrain. His father had ordered that.

Clay Kendall, commissioned eleven years, paused at the mess verandah and peered inside. He fished in a trouser pocket and found the coin and hauled it into the light. It was his talisman, the good luck piece of his kind, and in his own way he valued it. It gave him masochistic pleasure to use it, for he had won it during a period of financial pain in a keno room back in Bismarck, when he had reported there to claim remounts a month before. He flipped the coin without looking at it, returned it to his pocket, and entered the mess.

Captain Hugheston was dancing with Mrs. Ritter, and they were the only couple on the floor. The captain was observing the amenities which a post commander is constrained to observe; he was smiling woodenly and—in Clay's opinion—dancing somewhat the same. Side-stepping hoppingly, knees crooking and falling, shoulders dipping. The music ended on a harsh, high note, and the captain bowed to his partner, palms patting each other in applause, and she curtsied to him and accepted his arm.

Marcia, sitting near the two perspiring musicians, saw Clay Kendall's eyes on her, and she lowered her gloved hands to her lap and crossed them there. Presently, after a moment of inner deliberation, she smiled at him.

He peeled off his hat and clapped it under one arm and bowed. Bowed too low, for he had trouble rising again, and when he did, he lurched slightly. He was facing Nathaniel Hugheston's judging eyes, and those eyes did not like what they saw.

"Mr. Kendall?" Hugheston's eyes dropped to Clay's waist. "Your sidearms?"

Of course, of course. My sidearms. Officer of the Guard. Twenty-four hour tour. But who gives a holy damn? "Beg-

ging the major's pardon," he said slowly, using the brevet rank, "but I thought perhaps a turn with one of the ladies might—" *That bottle back on the table in quarters is doing this, not me. I'm never afraid of that bottle until it's too late, and now it's too late. It always seems to be too late—* "For one turn only, of course." *Don't be afraid, Clay. Buck up.*

You come to be able to read a man's eyes, after a few years on the frontier. It comes as second sense, and Clay Kendall sensed Nathaniel Hugheston's message: *Your career is on its knees, you are derelict in your duties. You've pulled more corks than you have carbines. I don't want you any more, and I'll benzine you the moment I see a replacement.* "Mr. Kendall, I—"

Knuckles cracked the door post and the sergeant of the guard stood tense on boot-toes just outside the light. "Sir? At the gates, sir. Courier comin', I believe, sir."

Alarm leapt across Hugheston's eyes; his flat jaw tightened downward. Alarm for Ben, out there in the black vastness of the barren hills. "Await me here, Mr. Kendall. Lead on, sergeant."

CLAY stepped past the surgeon and the sutler, walking wide to keep his balance. He risked another bow, this time directly over her, and showed his teeth. "Miss Marcia?" She was pale with the paleness of anxiety. Of two-three, maybe four days of anxiety. "May I have the next turn?"

Mrs. Ritter was sitting with her husband, so the sutler took fiddle and bow and swung into his rendition of a Viennese waltz. It was slow and scrapeful, but it was music.

She faced full up to him, not smiling but not resentful. She was wearing something lavender that night, and it held a scent of verbena.

"Clay, perhaps you should...." She touched her hair and looked away, then faced him again. "I mean...."

You mean you think this music might be Ben's death dirge? No, that's impossible. His father picked a soft ride for him. Routine to Lodge Pole Creek and return. All the new ones get it.

"Tell you what, Marcia." He found his coin and weighed it in a palm. "I'll gamble you for the dance."

"What are the odds?" Quick amusement fired her blue eyes.

"Only the devil could know that—in my case...well?"

The waltz was a high-stringed sigh, thin in the sudden silence.

"Call," she told him.

He spun. "Heads." He caught the coin, opened his fingers, and held it out to her. "The devil's with me tonight."

Rising, arranging her skirts, she came to his arms and glided off with him.

"Clay—that was a new coin, wasn't it?" Her breath was close to his ear and he pulled her in an inch closer to him. The image of Ben Hugheston faded from his mind and he permitted himself a hopeful moment of introspection, a moment in which there was no Ben Hugheston, only Clay Kendall and Marcia.

"A brand-new Andy Jackson nickel. I always did like the head of Andy Jackson."

He stumbled on a wheeling turn and braced for balance; he felt the four eyes of Dr. and Mrs. Ritter drilling into him.

She recovered the timing and they three-quartered around the room. "Does he help you to win, Clay?"

"I always win." The lie died in front of his teeth, and he hoped she hadn't heard it.

Nathaniel Hugheston stamped in from the verandah and the sutler lowered his fiddle and the Ritters rose as if pulled on the same string. "Dr. Ritter! The gates, please. And hurry. Man wounded. Mr. Kendall!"

Clay came away from Marcia, recalled himself, wheeled easily and bowed. Then he left her and approached Hugheston and closed his heels without clicking them. "Sir?"

Nathaniel Hugheston's anger-packed eyes needed no reading. "Mr. Kendall, had you been alert to your duty, much time could have been saved. You will mount the whole of your troop minus one platoon for guard. You will meet me at the gates in fifteen minutes. Sutler! Break out rations for six days for B Troop, minus one platoon. Mr. Kendall!" But Clay was already sprinting across the parade toward quarters, and Nathaniel Hugheston found himself staring at Marcia, alone in the middle of the room, and the horrid anxiety of the past few days had resolved into a question in her eyes.

All he could say was, "We don't know yet. He was all right when he sent the messenger."

The messenger lay where they'd dragged him off his saddle between the gateposts. He lay spread-armed in the kerosene glow from the sentry-box, hatless, blue-faced, inert.

Dr. Ritter rose quickly and fanned dust from his hands. "Dead. Died this evening, my guess."

Hugheston kneeled by the body and pried at the sticky lips. "Might have a message. I told Ben to have any messenger he might send place the note between his upper teeth and upper lip. That way he can't swallow it, and no one'll ever find it."

"Died of wounds," Ritter mumbled. "What's wrong with sending a verbal message?"

Hugheston looked up strangely. "He's dead, isn't he?" Then his probing finger struck soggy paper, and he yanked the note free.

"McPhail, he was," the surgeon intoned with clinical objectivity. "Young Ben's guidon, as I remember."

Hugheston came straight in the sallow lamp-shine and flattened the wad of paper. He held it sideways to the light, cringing over it. "On Lodge Pole Creek. On an island—" he glanced at Ritter— "that'll be Long Sandy. Brashier and fourteen... dead." He clamped a fist on the paper and squeezed it. "Brashier's the only noncom in the Department who knows anything about fighting. Cheyenne, it'll be. Black Buffalo, if I know my terrain. He hunts the Lodge Pole country. Where in hell is B Troop? Mr. Kendall!"

Clay was reining past the mess verandah, leaning into the light, speaking quietly to her. His hat brim was low over his face and his neckerchief knot was slung high to his left ear, very non-reg. But he didn't give a damn for that. Not any longer.

"Marcia? I'll toss for the next date. Heads, it's me. Tails—" He shrugged. There was still a chance that young Ben would not return with that ring. Clay did not own a class ring.

"At times, Clay, I believe you are in league with the devil, to think the things you do." She stepped back from the light. "But—good luck, Clay. And thank you for the waltz."

"Mr. Kendall!"

THEY rode fast, rode at a smart trot that Hugheston kept them to until the horses were curded with foam. The moon was low on their left when he brought them to a walk, and it was lower still when he allowed them to unsaddle and lead. At dawn they had dry rations, and Clay Kendall ate greedily. He was fully sober now, and the bottle was miles behind him. He wondered what Hugheston would do to him for the night before. He wondered if it would make any great difference, no matter what it would be. Eleven years in grade, watching preferment pass over him. Eleven years of monotony interrupted only by an occa-

sional ranch alarm or a post fire. Poker in the evenings. Poker and keno and barley and sharp rye. Youth and chance withering behind him, and the future narrowing to a small, barely-discernible question mark.

Young Ben Hugheston out ahead on Long Sandy, locked off and surrounded, swapping off his future for whatever odds he could hit. But always with a class ring, of course. That increased your chances of advancement.

Clay Kendall was bare-fingered, a dog-ticket officer up from the ranks. He followed Nathaniel Hugheston's shoulder-blades through the hot morning miles, riding with his bitterness bone-deep in him.

He followed those dusty shoulderblades into the twilight, and when they stopped and swung around, he hand-signaled a halt. "Mr. Kendall." Ahead, the prairie sloped away to the broad browns and greens of lower country. "We should raise Lodge Pole Creek by midnight," the major said. "We will feed ourselves onto the island one at a time."

"I'll ride point, it the Major wishes."

"The Major does."

The moon was a small white balloon over the eastern hills at his back when Clay Kendall reined down hard and turned and reached skyward with a fist. Dim on the blue prairie behind him was the command, coming at a walk. Dim through the silvering grasses ahead was the damp trace of Lodge Pole Creek. He counted the minutes of the command's coming up, counted their hoof falls, counted the slugging of his heart.

Then Hugheston was large on his flank. "Major, less than a mile now."

"Take the first file forward." Hugheston's voice was brittle and scolding.

Clay Kendall rode out, holster flap open, carbine loose. The moon raised its cold eye higher, and Clay made out the scrub-studded sandspit up-right of him. He kept course, not wanting to surprise untrained Ben Hugheston into opening fire on an unidentified moving object. He led the first file to a point south of Long Sandy, then swung right, north, and reached the creek bank. "Dismount and lead. Twenty-four pace intervals."

Opposite the southern tip of the island, he placed his boots in the sluggish current, cupped his hands and called, "Keno!"

In an instant it came back. Figures crawled through the scrub, wormlike in the semi-darkness. A horse whickered startlingly.

Clay Kendall mounted, touched rowels to flanks, and went into the stream.

Ben Hugheston stood clutching a bush, wavering weakly on tallow legs. His hair was over his eyes and the hand holding his revolver hung long and limp. "McPhail got through, I see." His voice was a whisper, and though there was relief in it, there was little welcome. "Is my—is the major with you?"

"He's tail-rider tonight. What's your situation now?"

Ben studied him a moment in the moonlight. "I'll report to the major. Picket line's in that depression near the south end."

The major heard his son's words in silence. He heard that seventeen lay dead but not yet buried, victims of six rushes for the island. He heard that twelve more lay wounded. "That leaves thirteen for duty, B—hm—Mr. Hugheston. Correct?"

"Correct, sir." Ben swallowed thickly. "We cut their trail and followed 'em this far, to make sure they were hunting. Then they turned on us."

"You should have anticipated that, Mr. Hugheston." The major's words came like the bolt smacks of a Spencer. He watched the last file come out of the current and melt into the scrub growth. "How many attacking?"

Ben shook his head helplessly. "Hard

to say. Eighty or ninety. Brashier said sixty, but it looked like more to me." He threw out an arm. "At night, they camp north, up the creek. Up in the hills. But—" he pleaded to his father—"we couldn't run for it. The wounded—we couldn't leave 'em, and they can't ride."

The major agreed with that. "If Black Buffalo discovered you'd run for it and left no one for the killing, he'd chase you down and murder you inside ten miles."

Clay Kendall coughed for attention. "We can still slip the wounded out, sir. Tonight. Leave a holding force to contain 'em when they hit again in the morning."

"I realize that, Mr. Kendall."

Ben Hugheston lifted his hand gun to its holster and dropped it in. He said to Clay Kendall, "And who commands this holding force?"

Clay shrugged. "It'll be his last command, whoever it is."

The immense white lamp of the moon was making daylight in the creek bottom. Clay clearly saw Ben's young-old face and slack-lipped mouth and sagging shoulders. He faced the major, and the major's features were sharp white-blue. The major's eyes were saying, *You can't have her! You're at the bottom of the house, near the cellar door. She doesn't want you. You can't pull her down after you. You're through, mister.*

And suddenly Clay Kendall knew it, as he had known it all along. It was there for him to see, no longer fogged but etched clean for full realization.

Ben Hugheston said, "I'm in command here, and I guess I'll stay in command."

"I'm senior lieutenant of the relief." Clay put one hand in his side pocket.

The major sniffed. He had to issue an order, but it was sticking in his throat.

Clay Kendall saved him the trouble. "I'll flip you, Ben. Call it."

Ben took in a slow breath and let it out slowly. Then, "Since I'm on the tail-end of seniority—I'll take tails."

The coin shot up straight and flashed silver and dropped back to Clay Kendall's palm. He thrust it forward. "Heads. Mount your wounded, Ben. Major, half a platoon should be enough to fool 'em into thinking Ben's still here."

The major knuckled his chin. "Do you by any chance consider that you've won?"

"I always win." And that, now, was the truth, and Clay was glad that the major and Ben had heard it.

It was still well before dawn when the sandspit became empty of the living except for Clay Kendall, who had ceased to care, and the half-platoon that was ceasing to care with him.

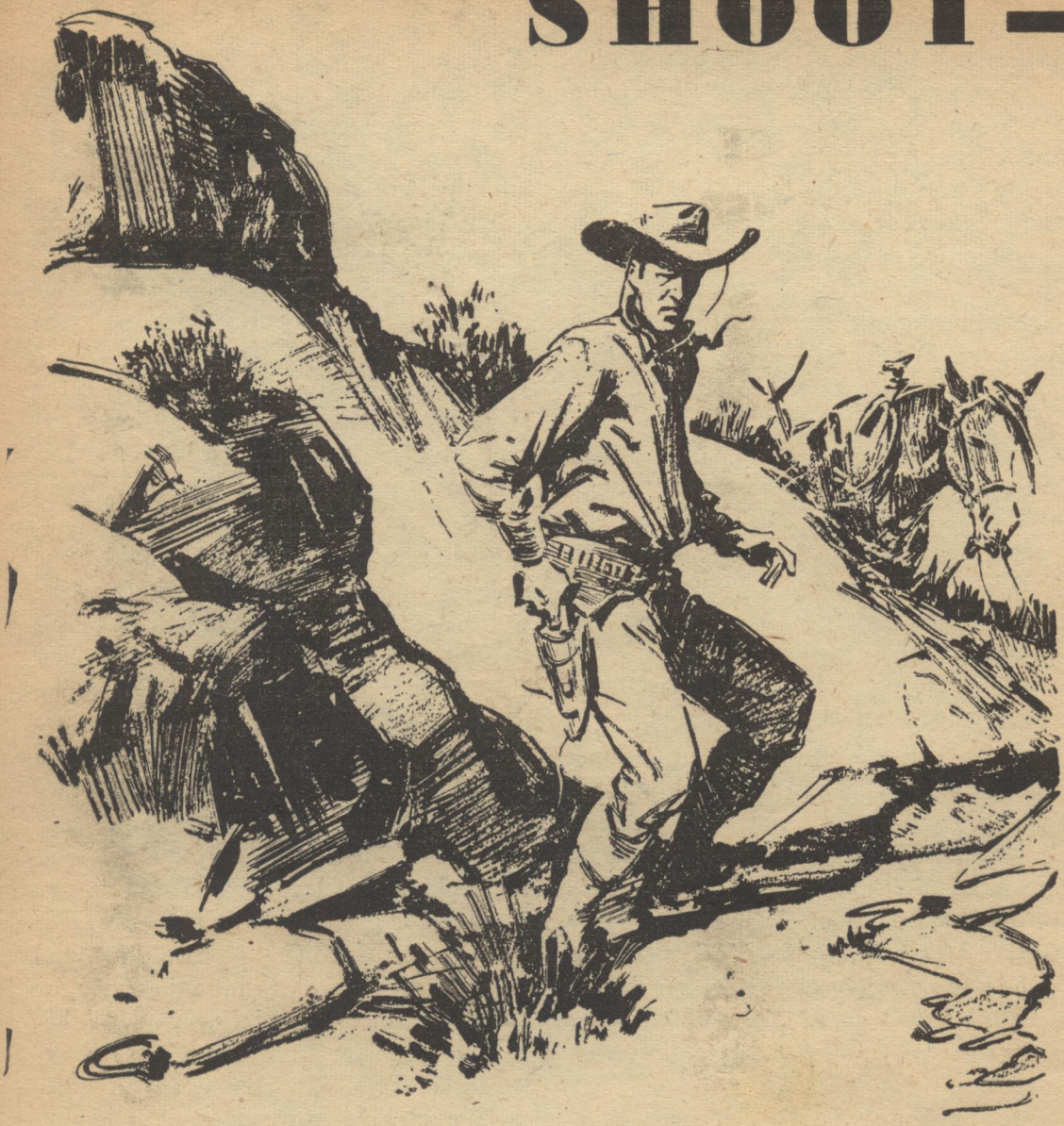
Soon now the last attack would come swirling down the creek, making white water as the lunging eagerness of lances twisted to the force of mahogany muscles. And there would be the ragged crackling of carbines and the thrashing of ponies and the lash of smoke and the shriek of savage throats and, after that, silence again.

It would hurt, but only for a moment. It would hurt Clay Kendall, but not as much as the past few years had hurt. This would be a momentary physical hurt, and in order to make it more bearable he pulled out the Andy Jackson nickel that he'd collected at keno and placed it between his teeth. He lay flat in the shrubs, carbine sighted through the lightening skies, waiting for the odds to hit. He bit down hard on the heads of Andy Jackson, one on each side of the new coin; and as dawn's grayness faded to day and he saw the first of the feathered ponies gathering upstream, he started to hum a tune. It wasn't much, as music went, but it sounded to him like a waltz.

A yell split the new day from the northern reaches of the creek.

The silver-coated leaden heads of Andy Jackson buckled to the bite of his teeth, and the coin was bright in the morning sun.

SHOOT-



CHAPTER ONE

The Unknown Six

AFTER breakfast, Deputy Sheriff Charlie Fahr stopped by at the undertaking establishment for a look at John Bilton. He never had cared for Bilton alive, and death did not add to the man's attractiveness. He stared sourly down into Bilton's dissipated, bluish-tinged countenance.

Ed Lukins, the undertaker, made a motion to unbutton Bilton's coat. "D'you want to see the bullet hole?" he asked.

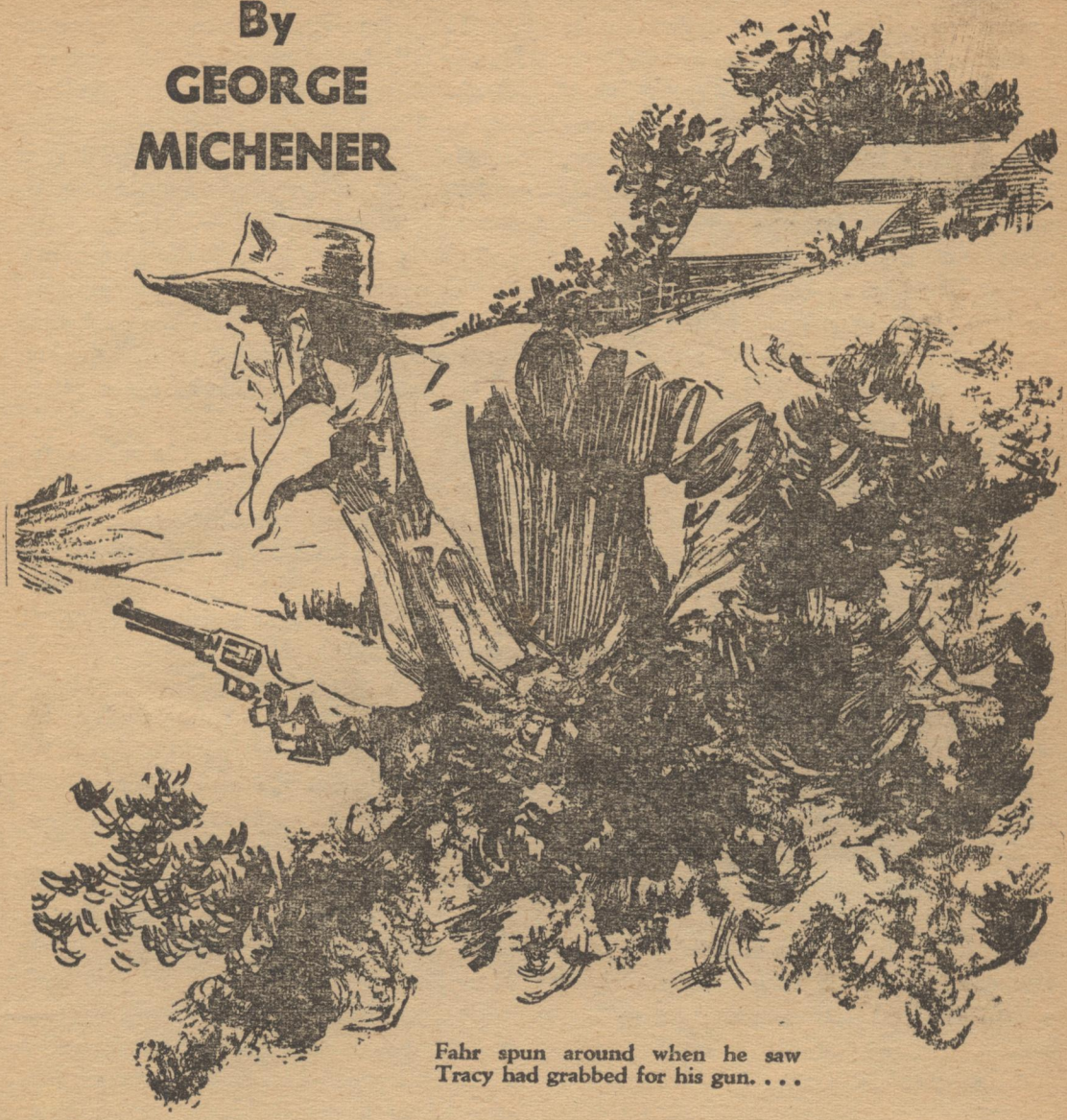
"No," said Fahr. "It's there, ain't it?"

"Sure it's there," said Ed. "Hell, yes. It's there all right!"

Fahr left the undertaking establishment. He strode briskly along the plank walk of Candle's main street and turned in at the two-story frame building that housed the jail and the sheriff's office. Sheriff

OR DIE HARD!

By GEORGE MICHENER



Fahr spun around when he saw Tracy had grabbed for his gun. . . .

Hobart Daceman was standing at the window, staring at nothing.

The big sheriff turned and favored his thirty-two-year-old deputy with an oblique glance. Charlie Fahr, his stocky one hundred and sixty pounds clad in a shabby suit of town clothes, was not—as he himself well knew—a particularly imposing figure of a lawman. "Well," asked Daceman in a disinterested tone, "did you see him?"

"Where I come from," the Texan said, "a dead lawman is a good lawman—an' the quick can do no wrong!"

"Yeah, I saw him." Fahr had been on an errand to the north end of the county yesterday, and he hadn't known about the killing of Bilton until he arrived back in town last night. "Any ideas, Hoby?"

"No," said Daceman. "I've told you everything I know about it. We found him yesterday in that gully near Hallard's place. The last he was seen alive was when he left Hoburn's saloon about eleven Tuesday night. Doc Bogart says he must have been lying in the gully all day in that rain Wednesday and until we found him yesterday."

"Did you see Mrs. Bilton?"

"Oh, yes. Said she hadn't seen Bilton since Tuesday evening."

"What did Bilton's kid have to say?"

"Harvey?" Daceman shook his head. "Harvey's not Bilton's kid. Mrs. Bilton was married before."

"All right," Fahr said impatiently. "What'd he say?"

"Nothing," answered Daceman. He went to his desk.

Fahr scowled and rubbed his chin. "Did Mrs. Bilton seem upset?"

"No-o. Not awfully. I guess she had a lot to put up with, with a drunken, no-account husband like Bilton."

"Yes," Fahr agreed soberly. "I guess she did. Well, I'll take a ride and see what I can find. I'll have a talk with Mrs. Bilton."

"I wouldn't, Charlie. Let Mrs. Bilton alone."

"Eh?"

"She don't know anything about the killing, Charlie. I've already talked to her —me and Doc Bogart. That's enough."

"You mean," Fahr asked sharply, "that you don't want me to talk to her?"

Daceman's long cheeks flushed slightly. "Yes," he said stiffly. "If you want to put it that way—that's what I mean. She's had enough trouble, and I don't want you bothering her. She—"

"Hoby," Fahr cried explosively, "you're trying to handcuff and sidetrack me!"

"No, I ain't, Charlie. It's just—"

"The hell you ain't! You're hedging on this job. I don't know why, but you are. Don't tell me!" Fahr's palm hit the desk top with a crack like a pistol shot. "I'm quittin'!" he shouted. "Any time I take orders from a lawman that's trying to front for a murderer, I—"

"That's a lie!" Big Hoby Daceman's cheeks were flaming. For a long moment he held Fahr's gaze, then the stiffening went out of Daceman and he said quietly, "You know you didn't mean that, Charlie."

Fahr lowered his gaze. He rubbed his stinging palm on his coat.

"We've been together nine years, Charlie. You couldn't think a thing like that of me!"

"No," said Fahr in a shamed voice, "I guess I couldn't, Hoby."

"Have a cigar, Charlie."

"Thanks, Hoby." Fahr stuffed the peace offering into his pocket. He lifted his glance. "But it's still a killing," he said doggedly.

"I know it is, Charlie."

"And as long as it's a killing," Fahr went on relentlessly, "I'm going after it. Or I quit! Right now I'm going to see Mrs. Bilton."

Daceman didn't say anything.

Fahr was five miles out of town on Ten Mile Trail when he saw the stranger jogging along ahead of him. The stranger, sitting the saddle with lean, indolent grace, abruptly swung his horse from the trail, climbed a knoll and disappeared on the far side.

Fahr kept to the trail. A mile further along, he crossed the log bridge over Goldsmith Creek. Cottonwood, chokecherry and willow grew on the creek banks, and here a saddle horse was tied. The horse belonged to Doc Bogart. Doc, seated on a fallen cottonwood—a rotund man with a too-small hat perched on the back of

his head—was uncorking a quart-size medicine bottle. He nodded genially to Fahr.

"Going someplace, Charlie?"

"Just riding," Fahr replied evasively. "What you doing here?"

Doc grinned. "Celebrating, my boy! I just played stork at the Gaston's. Life rolls on! Want a snort, Charlie?"

"No thanks, Doc."

"Business, eh?" Doc nodded wisely. "Bilton?"

"Something like that." Fahr dismounted and sat beside Doc.

Doc tapped him on the knee. "Forget it, Charlie. John Bilton was a low-down, no-good tinhorn."

"Yeah?" Fahr was startled by the doc's vehemence.

"Yes!" said Doc emphatically. "John Bilton was—" Doc broke off suddenly and nudged Fahr. "Company coming, Charlie."

FAHR turned his head. A horseman had emerged from the brush and was coming across the bridge. He was a young man with bony, weather-browned features and a pair of black, exceedingly bright eyes. He stiffened alertly as his gaze fell upon Fahr and Doc Bogart.

Doc waved, and the rider nodded. He smiled sardonically at Fahr and rode on, his lean body swaying easily.

"Know him?" Fahr asked Doc.

"No," said Bogart. "I saw him in town a couple days ago. He's not from around here. Notice the double cinch rig he was riding?"

Fahr nodded. "Texas, maybe. He looks like one of those boys. I know one thing about him. He don't like to be followed by a lawman. I came up behind him a little while ago, and he ducked off the trail."

"A lot of those Texas boys are touchy that way."

"Bilton came from Texas, didn't he?"

"I've heard he did. Now wait a minute, Charlie!" Fahr had gotten to his feet, and Doc stood up with him. "Forget Bilton, Charlie," Bogart said in a low, earnest voice. "Who cares who killed him?"

"I care. He was murdered, wasn't he?" Fahr looked closely at Bogart. "Doc, you went with Hoby to see Mrs. Bilton, didn't you?"

Doc hesitated, then nodded. "Why'd you ask that?"

Fahr smiled grimly. "Because," he murmured, "I'm anxious to hear what she has to say. A story that'll make a sheriff and coroner both want to cover up for a murder must be good."

The contrast between the inside of this little house—hardly more than a shack—and the slovenly corral and outbuildings of the Bilton place was illuminating. The

kitchen here, as Fahr observed in a quick and seemingly casual glance, was neat, poorly equipped and scrupulously clean. Fahr sat down in a chair and placed his hat on his knees.

Agnes Bilton, tall in a starched and mended house dress, shut the door and said, "Sheriff Daceman and Doc Bogart were here Thursday. I told them everything I could think about it then."

Fahr nodded. "I was out of town Thursday, and the sheriff thought I might want to talk to you myself, if you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind—not particularly." Agnes Bilton seated herself. There were tired lines on her face. Her brown hair was showing gray. Nevertheless, the evidence was there that at one time she had been a beautiful woman. Even now, if it wasn't for the bruise on her cheek—

The bruise was large and unsightly. It looked as if it were the result of a recent bad fall. Or as if she had been struck by a fist.

Agnes Bilton touched a finger to the bruise and said dispassionately, "My dead husband's handiwork."

Fahr tried to sound casual. "An accident?"

"No. Of course not. It happened on Tuesday evening, just before he left the house—before he was killed. A parting gift." She smiled as if following Fahr's thoughts. "It wasn't the first time he struck me. You know, don't you, that I have been married before?"

Fahr nodded cautiously. "I heard something like that."

"My first husband was killed in a mine cave-in in Virginia City. We were married soon after the war. Harvey was almost four when we moved to Virginia City."

"And you met John Bilton there after your first husband was killed?" Fahr asked.

"Yes!" She flung out the word bitterly. Then her eyes softened. "There was another man," she said, "but he was older and didn't have any money. John Bilton had money and I had a five-year-old son to raise. I married John Bilton. Marriage!" She started a harsh laugh, then checked it. "No," she said, "it wasn't marriage. I could give you a better name than that for it."

Fahr was silent. He couldn't pass judgement. A woman alone and desperate and with a five year old son—

"He lost his money," she said. "He was caught in a crooked mining deal and run out of Virginia City—and I went with him."

"How long ago did you leave Virginia City?"

"Ten years ago. We were in a lot of places after that."

"You were in Texas before you came here?"

She nodded. "He managed to get hold of some money there. I never knew how. I didn't want to know. Then we came here."

"How did he get along with your son?"

"Harvey kept out of his way. He never struck Harvey."

Fahr frowned. He sensed an evasion here. "Have you any idea who killed your husband?" he asked.

"How could I have? I don't—could it have been an accident?"

"No," said Fahr. "He was found lying on his back, with a bullet hole in his chest. It happened at night, as near as we can figure. Someone was waiting for him in that gully close to the Hallard place—someone who knew he'd be riding up that gully when he started home. Did you know he was going to Hoburn's saloon when he left here?"

"I had an idea he was."

"What did you do after he left?"

"I did some sewing, and then Harvey and I went to bed."

"Was Harvey here when he hit you?"

"No. He'd gone over to the Burton's on an errand."

"Where is your son now?"

"He's over at the Burton's. We're going to use their buckboard to go to the funeral this afternoon."

"You didn't make any report to the sheriff's office when your husband turned up missing."

"No. Why should I? I hoped he was dead." The woman leaned forward. "Don't you understand yet, Mr. Fahr? I hated my husband!"

Fahr felt a tiny chill run along his back. He looked down at his hat and said slowly, "You know, don't you, Mrs. Bilton, that you're casting a certain amount of suspicion on yourself?"

"Of course I know it. I'm not altogether stupid. But I know too that you'd have found out the truth anyway. I thought it would seem less suspicious if I told you myself."

Fahr stood up. There was growing in him the thought that Agnes Bilton was far from being a stupid woman. He was even getting the notion that she might be a very clever woman. He started for the door, hesitated, and turned. "Mrs. Bilton," he said, "one more question. Why didn't you answer me when I asked you if you had any idea who killed your husband?"

Her eyes widened. "I—I thought I did."

"No. That was the one question you evaded. You didn't want to lie—you aren't used to lying—so you evaded it. Why? Who are you trying to protect, Mrs. Bilton?"

"No one," she whispered.

"Who do you think killed your husband, Mrs. Bilton?"

Agnes Bilton gripped the edge of her chair and straightened. "No one," she said firmly. She sat there stiffly erect, her eyes blank and unwinking. A pulse at her throat beat furiously.

Fahr studied her a moment, then inclined his head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Bilton," he said gently. "I hope what I'm thinking turns out to be wrong. I hope that with all my heart." He left the house.

THE place where John Bilton was killed was within a half mile of Major James Hallard's house. Hallard was Bilton's nearest neighbor. Fahr rode that way, following a horse trail south along the curving brush line of Goldsmith Creek.

The fresh hoofprints of a shod horse, coming from across range, suddenly appeared in the trail ahead of Fahr. The deputy's gaze became alert; he scanned the trailside brush with sharp caution. The creek made a bend, and Fahr saw the chimney of Major Hallard's house poking up beyond the cottonwoods. Abruptly the deputy halted.

There was a crashing of brush, and a horse and rider bounded into the trail not twenty feet from Fahr. The rider was the lean stranger Fahr had seen earlier in the day, and he looked to be in a towering rage. At sight of Fahr he hauled back viciously on his horse. "You again!" he snarled.

"That's right," Fahr agreed mildly. "Me."

The man glared wildly. He started to speak, then thought better of it. Abruptly he quirted his horse and went tearing off in the direction of Ten Mile Trail.

Fahr turned into the brush. He was curious to see what had made the stranger so angry. He came out in a small clearing surrounded by a clump of cottonwood. Fahr pulled up his horse. Leaning against the trunk of a cottonwood, her back to him, was a girl in a red gingham dress. The girl had long brown ringlets gathered loosely in a red ribbon at the nape of her neck. Her right hand, pressed to the tree over her head, was clawing into the bark. Her whole body was quivering tautly as

if under the stress of violent emotion. Fahr took off his hat and cleared his throat.

The girl spun around. "I told you," she squalled, "I never wanted to—" She paused and opened her eyes wide. "Oh," she whispered. "I thought you were Tracy. I thought he'd come back, I—You're Mr. Fahr, aren't you? The sheriff."

"Deputy," Fahr corrected. "And you're Miss Bagley, Major Hallard's niece. I saw you with him in town once."

"You did?" Miss Bagley's voice held a note of pleased surprise. She glanced down and smoothed her dress. She was about nineteen years old and exceedingly pretty. She seemed to have regained her composure completely. She glanced up at Fahr from beneath arched brows. "I've been here almost a month now, visiting Uncle Jim."

Fahr nodded.

"I come from Kansas," Miss Bagley went on sociably. "I'm sort of taking care of Uncle Jim. He never married, you know. He had an unfortunate love affair." She shook her head sadly. "It's too bad. I don't think it's good for a man to live alone, do you, Mr. Fahr?"

"Well. . . ." Fahr had a feeling that the conversation was getting out of hand. He dismounted and in a businesslike tone asked, "I wonder if you'd mind answering a few questions, Miss Bagley."

"About John Bilton?"

Fahr started. "How'd you know that?"

"Well," said Miss Bagley reasonably, "he was killed near here, so I just thought you'd want to know about it."

"And can you tell me anything about it?"

"I might. What day was it when he was killed?"

"Tuesday—as near as we know. He left Hoburn's saloon sometime around eleven Tuesday night and never got home."

The girl nodded. "That's when I saw him. Tuesday night."

"John Bilton?"

"No. Tracy."

"Eh? You mean the man that just left here?"

"Yes. It was about half past ten Tuesday night. I was standing on the porch and looking at the moon. And all at once I saw him. He was kind of slinking along. I got the idea he was looking for someone. And then he rode off. Afterwards, I thought I heard a shot. And—and—well, I guess that's all."

"And you're sure it was this Tracy you saw?"

"Positive. Do you think he did it, Mr. Fahr? Are you going to put him in jail?"

"Well," said Fahr cautiously, "that depends. Now tell me something, Miss Bagley—who is this Tracy?"

"I don't know."

"What? Why, I thought—"

"I don't know," the girl repeated firmly.

"Then how," Fahr asked skeptically, "do you know his name?"

"Because he told me. Just a little while ago when he was here."

"What was he doing here?"

"He didn't say. I was sitting over there on that stump, and I heard someone riding through the brush—and there he was. He got off his horse and told me his name and—and that's about all."

"Then why'd he look so mad when he left?"

"I kicked him in the shins." Two spots of color showed in Miss Bagley's cheeks. "He—he kissed me," she said in a small voice.

Fahr stared. "You mean," he asked heavily, "that this man—a total stranger to you—rode in here, told you his name and then, without a word of explanation, kissed you?"

"Yes. Do you blame me for kicking him?"

"Great Scott! He must be crazy!"

"Do you think so?" Meditatively Miss Bagley swung the full battery of her big violet eyes squarely upon Fahr. "Do you really think he was crazy, Mr. Fahr?"

"Well. . . ." Fahr's voice trailed off. He felt a flush coming to his own cheeks. "Well," he said hoarsely, "I have to be going."

Miss Bagley held out a hand, took a step toward him and stumbled. "Oh!" she gasped. "My ankle!" She started to sink to the ground.

Fahr caught her as she fell. Her head lay back on his shoulder and her lips parted in a soft sigh. Gently Fahr sat her down on a windfall. Miss Bagley shrieked and arose. She stamped her foot.

"You pinched me!" she accused. Behind her a large beetle reared up on the windfall and champed his mandibles.

Fahr pointed helplessly. "I didn't!" he protested. "It was—"

"You did!" She stamped her foot again. "Apologize this instant!"

A dreary anger moved through Fahr. "Your ankle," he observed coldly, "seems better. How was it working when Tracy was here?"

He stalked to his horse and mounted. He left the brush, followed the trail along the creek and within a few hundred yards he came to Major James Hallard's small, two-story house.

The major, a wispy little man with a neat white goatee, was leaning by his gate and smoking a black cheroot. He inclined his head courteously as Fahr rode up. "Good day, suh. I presume you're out on that Bilton killing?"

Fahr nodded. "Do you know anything about it, Major?"

"I do not! He was a scoundrel, suh! A blackguard that the world is damned well rid of!" The major puffed fiercely on his cheroot.

"Did you ever have any trouble with him?" Fahr asked cautiously.

"A gentleman, suh," the major retorted witheringly, "would not permit himself to have trouble with a drunken rascal of that stripe! Your question, suh, is almost an insult."

"I'm sorry," Fahr apologized meekly. "You haven't seen any strangers around your place lately? Maybe a young man riding a double-cinch rig like they use in Texas?"

"I have not!" The major glowered. "And," he added warningly, "I'd better not! I have a young niece visiting me, and where I come from we know how to protect our womenfolks. Now, suh, do you have any further prying questions you wish to ask?"

"No," said Fahr. "Not at the moment, I don't. I—thanks, Major." He wheeled his horse and departed in haste. He had seen Miss Bagley coming around the rear of the house.

CHAPTER TWO

Ride the Man Down!

FROM the major's place Fahr rode west. He dismounted before Dutch Hoburn's saloon. Hoburn's, a log structure sitting lonesomely on Ten Mile Trail, turned in a fair profit evenings on drinks and card games. Daytimes, business was not rushing. Fahr entered.

Dutch Hoburn, plump, bald-headed and slightly pop-eyed, was alone at the bar. He nodded wisely to Fahr. "Bilton?" he asked.

"That's right. What d'you know, Dutch?"

"Nothin'," answered Dutch promptly. "He left here about eleven Tuesday night, and that's every last thing I know—so help me."

"Who all was here Tuesday night?"

Dutch shook his head. "I don't remember, Charlie."

Fahr scowled. "You know this is murder, don't you, Dutch?"

"Sure I know it! I'm tryin' my best to help, ain't I?"

"No," said Fahr bitterly, "you are not trying to help. You're just like the rest. Everybody's glad he's dead."

Dutch brightened. "Bill Magoon was here."

"I could have guessed that," said Fahr. "He's always here—and he's always drunk. Now try again, Dutch. How about a stranger—from Texas, maybe—and riding a double-cinch rig. He's been seen—"

"Hist!" Dutch shook his head violently and leaned close. "He's here now," he whispered. "In the back room."

"He is?" Fahr stared with interest at the partition against the far end of the bar. "Alone?" he murmured.

Dutch nodded. "Came in a little while ago. Bought a bottle."

"I didn't see his horse out front."

"It's in the back shed. He's here, all right. Calls himself Tracy. That's all I know about him."

"Was he here Tuesday night?"

"Well—yes." Dutch hesitated, then reluctantly added, "Tracy and Bilton had a little trouble over cards. Tracy told Bilton off pretty good. Then he left. Bilton left about a half hour afterwards."

The two men looked at each other. Dutch sighed and gently shook his head. "I hate this," he murmured. "I hate to see anyone get in trouble over that damn John Bilton. You goin' back to talk to him?"

"I am," Fahr replied grimly.

Fahr settled his coat, strode the length of the bar and stepped behind the partition. There were tables and chairs here and a closed door that led to the rear entrance. The stranger was sprawled at the table in the far corner, a bottle and glass before him. His head was tipped forward so that his glittering black eyes just showed beneath the brim of his hat. He wached without movement as Fahr crossed to the table and sat down.

Abruptly Fahr said, "How long have you known John Bilton?"

"Bilton, eh?" The man's glance flickered. "So that's it—that Bilton killin'. So that's why you've been trailin' me!"

"Do you know anything about it?"

"No." The stranger poured himself a drink—his hand was steady.

Fahr said, "What were you hunting in the brush below Major Hallard's place this morning?"

The stranger didn't answer. He tossed off his drink, and started to rise.

Fahr slapped the table. "Sit down!" he roared. "Sit down or—" He saw the fist coming, and it was too late to avoid it.

The blow landed solidly and Fahr crashed to the floor. Somewhere a mocking voice inquired, "Or what, lawman?"

Fahr bounced erect. The stranger was standing on the other side of the table, thumbs hooked in belt and staring with pleased interest.

Fahr thrust the table out of the way and heard the rolling thump of the whiskey bottle. Raging, he hurled himself forward. The stranger leaped aside, and Fahr banged into the wall. There was the impact of a fist on his ear. Fahr whirled and charged again. He received a cruel jab on the nose.

The man was taller than Fahr and had a longer reach. He moved on light, quick feet. He pecked at Fahr's face, and Charlie Fahr, in return, landed crushing blows on his elbows and sholuders. Somehow Fahr couldn't quite catch up with the other. He chased him across the room and back again. The man poked at Fahr's nose and then sent a shrewdly stabbing fist into his midriff. Fahr's breath was becoming shorter. The stranger set himself and swung tremendously. Fahr's head was jolted back and his eyes blurred.

"Lawman," the stranger taunted, "you're soft. You sit on your tail too much." He threw a long punch into Fahr's ribs.

Fahr grunted and shuffled forward. He was hit again, and his knees wobbled. He took another dogged, shuffling step forward. The stranger danced in and out. He hit Fahr almost at will. He was so intent on his work that he didn't notice where Fahr's shuffling advance was driving him. All at once he discovered he had been backed into a corner. He tried to spring away.

This was the moment Fahr had been waiting for. He sloughed off his pose of weariness. He brushed aside the other's defense and drove a fist into his middle. He slugged the man with savage ferocity.

The stranger started to sag. Suddenly he planted a foot in Fahr's belly and reached for his gun. Fahr grabbed the foot as he was catapulted backward, and both men crashed to the floor. In a desperate, scrambling rush, Fahr caught the stranger's wrist just as his gun cleared the holster. The stranger came to his haunches, and Fahr, kneeling, came up with him. Fahr twisted the wrist, and the gun dropped. Fahr balled his hand in the man's shirt, jerked him violently forward and hit him on the jaw. The stranger rolled soddenly.

Fahr squatted back on his heels and watched somberly as the stranger pushed to a sitting position, shoulders against the wall.

The stranger put his hand on his jaw. "Man, oh, man!" he whispered. "How you hit!" His gloomy gaze came to rest on the whiskey bottle that lay nearby. "Drink," he muttered.

Fahr shrugged and nodded.

The man pawed feebly for the bottle. He lifted it to his mouth to pull the cork with his teeth. He kept on lifting it. He lifted and swung it so swiftly that the surprised Fahr had no time to dodge. The bottle came down on Fahr's head. . . .

Charlie Fahr groaned, opened his eyes and quickly shut them. His head was pounding. Someone was assisting him to arise. He was hoisted into a chair. He propped an elbow on a table edge and peered into the pop-eyed countenance of Dutch Hoburn. "Where is he?" he asked.

"Tracy? I don't know," Dutch replied woodenly. "I heard him go out the back and ride off. Then I looked in here."

Fahr stood up. The room whirled, then steadied. "Dutch," said Fahr weakly, "I don't feel so good." He wandered out of the saloon and pulled himself into the saddle. He turned his horse toward town.

A hatless man on foot, wearing a torn shirt and overalls, scuttled across the road and paused well off to one side to watch Fahr pass. The deputy scowled at him, then suddenly halted.

"Bill," he called. "Come here a minute."

"Whatcher want?" Bill Magoon demanded suspiciously. Bill never worked, seldom was sober, and was always suspicious of lawmen.

"Bill," said Fahr in a wheedling tone, "I need some information. Where were you Tuesday night, Bill?"

"Drunk," said Bill proudly. "Drunker'n a b'iled owl and layin' outside Dutch's place. I was drunk last night, too."

"Did you see John Bilton leave Dutch's place Tuesday night?"

"Sure. I remember because I asked him for two bits, and the son—"

"Anybody come out right after Bilton?"

"Nope. About the only one I saw after that was his kid."

"Whose kid?"

"Bilton's. He rode up and looked in Dutch's and then rode off. Lookin' for his old man, I guess. Anything else you wanta know?"

"No," said Fahr drearily. "I got an idea I know too much now."

SHERIFF Hobert Daceman was tilted back in his swivel chair, reading a magazine. He glanced up as Fahr entered the office and his gaze fastened upon the deputy's bruised features. He set aside the magazine.

Fahr slumped down on a bench and stared at the floor.

After a moment Daceman murmured, "See Mrs. Bilton?"

"Yeah, I saw her." Fahr looked slowly up.

Daceman managed a sickly smile. "And now you know."

Fahr moved his head. "It's not her. She's trying to cover up."

"Cover up what? The killing?"

"No. She's trying to make us think she did it. She's covering up for Harvey."

"What!"

"That's it, Hoby. The boy. Bilton hit his mother, and I guess the boy didn't like it. Anyway, Bill Magoon saw him ride up to Dutch Hoburn's saloon Tuesday night just after Bilton left. The boy looked in and then rode off again. Who d'you suppose he was looking for now?"

"Did you talk to the boy?"

"Not yet. I'm saving that job for you, Hoby."

Daceman groaned. "This is bad, Charlie!"

"You bet it's bad!" Fahr stood up. "I think, Hoby," he said, "that, as of now, I'm through with this damn law job. Anytime I have to bring in a fifteen-year-old kid for killing a rotten, wife-beating son of a—oh, to hell with it!"

Daceman sprang to his feet. "You can't quit, Charlie! I won't let you! I—" Daceman paused, then in a changed tone he murmured, "You're thinking of something, Charlie."

Fahr nodded. He was fingering his bruised face. "Yeah," he answered slowly, "I'm thinking of something, Hoby. In case you've been wondering, I got into a fight."

"I kind of thought that. Who was it?"

"Tracy."

"Who's Tracy?"

Fahr shook his head in bafflement. "That's what I don't know. I ran into him in Hoburn's and tried to question him."

"What'd he say?"

"Nothing. He slugged me with a bottle and pulled out."

"Damnation!" Daceman opened his eyes wide. "Maybe he's the one that killed Bilton! We got to find out about him, Charlie."

"I know," said Fahr wearily, "but I got a hunch it won't do any good. I still think it's Harvey. How do you bring a fifteen-year-old kid in, Hoby? Handcuff 'im?"

Daceman didn't answer. Fahr waited a moment, then left.

Fahr slept late the next morning. Shortly before noon he left his room in the Candle Hotel and took the shortcut through the alley to the rear of the county building. He unlocked the back door,

crossed the storeroom here and was about to open the door to the sheriff's office when, from the opposite side of the door, he heard Major James Hallard's angry voice.

". . . inform you, suh, that I shall horsewhip him to within an inch of his miserable, scallywag life! Where I come from, suh—"

The major was interrupted by the soothing, muffled tones of Sheriff Hoby Daceman. Fahr opened the door a crack and peered in.

The little major was standing belligerently in the center of the office. In both hands he was holding—and nervously flexing—a buggy whip. Big Hoby Daceman, advancing upon him, was making pushing motions with his arms much as a man might shoo a banty rooster out of a garden.

The major retreated and his white goatee waggled. "I can also tell you this, suh," he stated coldly, "I shall make it my—"

"Now, now, Major . . ." Daceman raised his hands placatingly. "I can assure you, Major," he said earnestly, "that I will take immediate action. I shall look into this, suh—sir, and do my utmost to—" The sheriff herded the major into the outer hallway.

Fahr entered the office and sat down at his desk. He heard the front door close, then Daceman came back from the hall. The sheriff gave Fahr a frigid glance and sat down at his own desk.

Fahr had a sudden, dark suspicion. "Hoby, was it by any chance me that old Hallard was threatening to—"

"It was," said Daceman witheringly. "You pinched his niece."

"Oh, Lord!"

"Do you deny it?"

"Yes," said Fahr. "It wasn't me at all. It was a bug."

There was a short silence, then Daceman said gently, "Maybe, Charlie, you'd better tell me all about it." He grinned.

Fahr told him. Hoby Daceman, his eyes half closed, seemed to ponder deeply. Fahr glared at him. "Well," he demanded, "do you believe me, or don't you?"

Daceman sighed. "Yes," he said, "I believe you. Knowing you like I do, I pretty near got to believe you, Charlie. What I'm thinking about now is this Tracy feller. You say you ran into him just before you ran into the major's niece over by her place?"

"That's right."

"He keeps popping up, Charlie. We got to find out who he is and what he—hey! Where you going?"

Fahr was heading toward the front door. "Out," he said briefly "I got business with Major James Hallard."

"Uh-uh! No you don't! He's got a bad heart, Charlie."

Fahr paused. "What's that got to do with it?"

"You'd get him worked up, Charlie. And the least little excitement, and he's liable to pop right off." The sheriff nodded solemnly. "It's a fact, Charlie. Doc Bogart told me last Monday."

"Then why," Fahr asked sullenly, "does he come around trying to horsewhip people? I'm not going to stand for that, Hoby."

"Of course you ain't. Neither of us are. You just let me handle this, Charlie. I'll tell him you're sorry and you'll apologize and—"

"The hell I will! To that old goat?"

"Not to him—to her. After all, you did set her down on a pinch bug. You got to apologize, Charlie. You're a gentleman, ain't you?"

"No," said Fahr. Just the same, he had a feeling that he was going to apologize. He scowled and glanced out the window. Immediately he began a double-quick march to the rear. He nodded as he breezed by the mystified Daceman. "All right," he said, "you can start handling

him. The major's coming up the steps now."

FAHR heard the front door open as he left the office. He continued his brisk march on through the storeroom, out the back and up the alley to the hotel. He ate dinner in the dining room and went to his room on the second floor. He was sprawled on his bed and frowning abstractedly at the ceiling when Daceman knocked and entered.

With great heartiness the sheriff said, "I got it all fixed up. The major's gone home." With somewhat less heartiness he added, "You got to apologize, Charlie. There wasn't no other way. And with that bum heart of his—"

"All right," Fahr agreed resignedly. "You know," he went on slowly, "I've just been thinking, Hoby. Does the major himself know he's got such a bum heart?"

"Sure he knows. He's known it for a long time, but he didn't know how bad it was. Doc says the major asked him point-blank last Monday, so Doc decided to tell him."

"And it's really bad?"

"So bad," Daceman replied soberly, "that he may go any minute."

"How'd he take it when Doc told him?"

"Never turned a hair, Doc says. Just thanked him and said that he'd put his affairs in order. The major's got quite a wad, too. So I hear. Made it at Goldfield after the war. Mining or something."

"Yeah," muttered Fahr. "I've heard that."

"Well . . ." The sheriff went to the door, paused and coughed delicately. "Maybe," he murmured, "if you're going out there to apologize, you'd better put on a clean shirt."

"All right," said Fahr.

Daceman left. Fahr kept frowning at the ceiling. He wondered what affairs the major had to put in order. A man would have solemn thoughts with the sentence of death hanging over him—and what he needed to do would be done with desperate urgency. . . .

Fahr got up from the bed. He changed his shirt. He left his room, walking slowly, like a man going to his doom. He had been a professional lawman for nine years. He had the feeling that after today he would no longer be a lawman.

He got his horse at the livery barn and rode out of town on Ten Mile Trail. He passed the log bridges at Goldsmith Creek and shortly afterward came abreast of Dutch Hoburn's saloon. He studied the saloon with the gloomy expression of a man who contemplated drowning his sorrows. A rider was coming toward him and as the rider approached, the deputy's expression became even gloomier. He moved out his horse and blocked the trail. The rider was Agnes Bilton's son, Harvey.

The boy was small-framed and had thin, intense, startlingly mature features. His dark glance shifted warily, as if—just for a moment—he had contemplated flight. Then he pulled up and said with a trace of defiance, "I'm in an awful hurry, Mr. Fahr."

Fahr nodded gently. "I know you are, Harvey. But this is business—law business, Harvey. About your father."

"Don't call him that!" the boy cried fiercely. "He wasn't my father! He was my stepfather!"

"All right. Your stepfather. Do you know who killed him?"

"No!"

"What did you do Tuesday night, Harvey?"

"Nothing. After supper I rode over to the Burtons' for mother to return some sugar she'd borrowed."

"Was your stepfather still there when you got back home?"

"No!" The boy's eyes flashed. "I wish he had been!"

"Why, Harvey?"

The boy lowered his gaze. "He hit my mother while I was gone," he said in a choked voice.

"I see. Do you have a gun, Harvey?"

"Yes." The boy looked up sullenly. "You could find that out easy enough. I traded for one with Tad Burton two months ago."

"What did you do after you got home Tuesday night, Harvey?"

"Nothing. Mother went to bed and I went to my room and read a little while before I went to sleep."

"You did something else before you went to sleep," said Fahr. He gazed steadily at the boy. "You were seen, Harvey."

Panic showed in the boy's eyes. "Mother?" he asked.

"I don't know," Fahr answered slowly. "I have an idea she did, but I don't know. I do know someone else saw you. Tell me about it. You waited until you thought your mother was asleep and then you slipped out of the house. Is that right?"

The boy hesitated, "Yes," he murmured.

"You saddled your horse and rode over to Hoburn's and looked in. Who were you looking for, Harvey? Your stepfather?"

"I—I don't remember. I guess I just looked in."

"And then you went straight home again."

"Yes."

"And you didn't have your gun with you and you didn't find your stepfather and you don't know who killed him. Just answer yes or no."

"No," said the boy in a low voice.

"All right," said Fahr "I guess that's all, Harvey."

The boy went on, and Fahr left Ten Mile Trail. He cut across the range to Goldsmith Creek and forded the creek above Major Hallard's house. Before emerging from the brush, the deputy paused to reconnoiter. There was a saddle horse tied at the front gate of the major's house. Fahr couldn't be sure at this distance, but he thought the horse was Doc Bogart's.

CHAPTER THREE

The Death Gun Speaks

FAHR moodily dismounted and tied his horse. He leaned against a tree and waited. He was waiting for Doc Bogart to take his departure. He wanted no witness to his proposed interview with the major.

After a short period of waiting, Fahr suddenly tensed. He heard a horse coming down to the creek on the same trail he had followed. Fahr stepped behind the tree and gripped the nostrils of his horse.

Iron shoes clattered on rock and there was a splashing of water. Fahr stood concealed and motionless, watching a rider cross the creek. The rider was Tracy. Tracy halted and raised himself in the stirrups, staring fixedly over the top of the brush at the major's house. After a moment, he dismounted and tied his horse.

Fahr stepped into the trail behind him and said, "Tracy."

The man gave a startled grunt and whirled. For a second he was immobile. Then he lips drew back fiercely. "You!" he spat. "I've heard what you did to Ann! Lawman, say your prayers!"

Then Fahr saw the intent in the man's flaming eyes. Fahr took a step backward and his hands brushed his coat. "Now wait!" he cried out warningly. "Don't go off half-cocked; don't try—"

Tracy sprang sidewise. He grabbed for his gun.

Fahr's hand lifted smoothly. There was the crash of a gun.

Tracy spun completely around and fell. His gun left his hand and landed in the dirt a few feet away. He made a crawling rush for it.

"You touch that," yelled Fahr, "and I blow your hand off!"

The man paused and glared. Fahr strode toward him and kicked his gun into the brush. "Why'd you kill Bilton?" he demanded harshly.

"I didn't. I—"

"You lie! Why'd you do it?"

Tracy gripped his leg with both hands. "My leg!" he groaned.

"You had an argument with Bilton Tuesday night over a card game. Is that why you killed him?"

"I tell you I didn't kill him! I had an argument in Hoburn's with him, but I never saw him before that nor afterwards."

"What're you doing around these parts?"

"None of your business!"

"Don't give me that!" Fahr squeezed the man's lower jaw between thumb and forefinger. "Now! Why'd you come here?"

Tracy squinted his eyes tight shut. "To see Ann, damn you!"

"Ann? Who's—D'you mean the major's niece?"

"Yes."

"The devil! How'd you know her?"

"I knew her in Kansas," the man replied sullenly. "I'd come up from Texas with a trail herd, and I met her there. We were goin' to get married, then we had a fight. She didn't want to live in Texas."

Fahr sighed and released Tracy's jaw. In a milder tone he said, "And then when she came here to visit her uncle, you followed her. Maybe you wanted to get her to change her mind about going to Texas?"

"Yes—if it's any of your business."

"I don't know. I guess it ain't, if you're telling the truth." Fahr felt spent and tired. "Does the major know you're hanging around his niece?" he asked drearily.

"No. I don't think she told him. I was figurin' on seein' him and her right now and askin' her point-blank if—" The Texan paused. He was growing pale. "Listen," he said faintly, "we got to do something about this leg."

"All right. We'll have a—" Fahr ceased speaking.

A head was poking cautiously around the brush. The head belonged to Doc Bogart. With evident relief the doc exclaimed, "So it's you, Charlie! We thought we heard a shot. Was it you?"

"It was." Fahr stepped aside. "He's all yours, Doc."

Doc's eyes widened a moment as he stared at Tracy, then he moved briskly forward. He took out a pen-knife and slit Tracy's pants leg.

Fahr went to the edge of the brush and looked toward the house. The major, holding a gun, was stealthily approaching. Miss Bagley was standing on tip-toe on the porch. Fahr waved his hands. "Get a bed ready, Major!" He turned back to Tracy and Doc. Tracy was now standing on one leg with an arm about Bogart.

"How bad is it, Doc?" Fahr asked.

"Chipped bone. Torn muscle. Cloth in the wound," Doc replied concisely. "I'll get him to the house and work on him."

Fahr stepped aside, and the two moved slowly toward the house. The deputy tarried in the brush. He had no desire to make explanations nor to witness an emotional meeting between Miss Bagley and the wounded Tracy. Finally, leading his horse and Tracy's he sauntered after the two men. He tied the horses at the gate and sat down on the edge of the porch. The front door was open and he heard the rattle of a stove lid and the creak of a pump.

The major came out on the porch and nodded coldly to Fahr. "Are you aware, suh, that it was my niece's young man you just shot?"

"I am now," said Fahr. "Did you know he was hanging around?"

"No," said the major reluctantly. "He is a stranger to me. My niece neglected to inform me of his presence here until just now. May I inquire why you found it necessary to shoot him?"

"I'm afraid it's mostly my fault, Uncle." Fahr turned. Miss Bagley was standing in the doorway. In a small voice she said, "I lied to you, Mr. Fahr, when I said I saw Tracy acting suspicious on Tuesday night."

"Yeah? And how was he acting? Where was he Tuesday night?"

"Here," said Miss Bagley in an even smaller voice. "He was sitting right here on the porch. He—we were talking."

"For how long?"

"I—I don't remember. Not so awful long. But I really did hear a shot. And Tracy was right here with me. He couldn't have had anything to do with that killing! You believe me, don't you, Mr. Fahr? You've got to believe me!"

"All right," Fahr said wearily. "I believe you. But why'd you try to throw suspicion on him when I asked about him in the first place?"

"Because he's so stubborn! I thought maybe you'd arrest him and then I'd tell the truth and you'd have to set him free and then he'd be grateful to me for getting him free and—you understand, don't you, Mr. Fahr?"

"Naturally he understands," said the major reassuringly.

"And then," said Miss Bagley in a quavering rush, "I lied about you pinching me because you made me mad when you said Tracy was crazy, and now he's shot and it's all my fault and—Oh! Oh!" Miss Bagley burst into sobs and retreated within the house.

"Women!" the major exclaimed indulgently He sat down and gestured widely with a cheroot. "They have their little vagaries, Mr. Fahr. All of them do! A gentleman, suh, learns in the course of life to expect it."

FAHR scowled at the brush line along the creek. He was not, at the moment, inclined to be philosophical. The sun was gone, and he observed now that dusk was settling across the land. He spoke in a speciously composed tone, "Major, isn't Goldfield near Virginia City?"

"It is," said the major.

"Were you ever there?"

"I was, suh. I have lived in both towns. That was about ten years ago. Why? Were you thinking of investing in mining stock?"

"No," said Fahr. "I was just curious. By the way, Major, did you hear your niece talking out here Tuesday night?"

"No," said the major. "I knew nothing about it until just now. I retired early Tuesday night and took some sleeping pills. I generally retire early. I have a serious heart condition, Mr. Fahr. I have recently been informed that I have only a few months to live." The major took a long puff on his cheroot and added quietly, "I have been a soldier, Mr. Fahr. Death has no particular terror for me."

"That makes you a dangerous man."

"I beg your pardon!"

"I mean," said Fahr, "that you're kind of beyond the law. You wouldn't be scared of prison or even hanging because you've got your death sentence already. A man like you is dangerous to have around."

The major stiffened. "I don't like your insinuation, Mr. Fahr."

"And I don't like murder. I nev—No! No! Stay where you are, Major." Charlie Fahr slid to the ground. He moved along by the porch until he was opposite Major Hallard, and there he put one foot on the porch edge. "Major," he asked, "did you know that John Bilton beat up his wife the night before he was killed?"

"No!" The major held his cheroot straightly before him. "He dared?" he whispered.

"Yes," said Fahr. "He dared. Mrs. Bilton has a bruised cheek. You're pale, Major. You seem upset. Do you know Mrs. Bilton well?"

"No!" he major answered hoarsely. "But she is a neighbor, and naturally I have a speaking acquaintance with her. I—you'll have to excuse me, Mr. Fahr." Abruptly the major stood up.

"Sit down!" said Fahr.

"Do you presume, suh, to give me orders?"

"Yes," said Fahr harshly. "I'm tired of being lied to and made a monkey of—damn tired! Now I'm giving orders. Sit down!"

The major glared, hesitated, then sat down.

Fahr leaned forward. "Major," he said, "I have learned two important things about you—you lived in Virginia City ten years ago, and your niece told me yesterday that you once had an unfortunate love affair. Mrs. Bilton was also in Virginia City ten years ago. She mentioned to me that she knew a man there at the time—a man older than she was and without money. I got the impression that she must have liked this man pretty well, but she had a child to raise, and John Bilton had money. So she married John Bilton. I suggest, Major, that you were that older man."

The major was silent. He knocked the ashes from his cheroot.

"Major," said Fahr, "if you don't answer, I'll have to question Mrs. Bilton again."

"I know," replied the major in a wearily calm voice. "I'll save you the necessity. I was the man you speak of." His shoulders sagged.

"Then you knew John Bilton, too, in Virginia City?"

"No," said the major. "Only by sight—that's all. After he and Agnes married, I left Virginia City and went to Goldfield."

"And you made money there?"

"Yes," said the major. "I never asked Agnes to marry me because I didn't have any money. And then, when it was too late, I made money. A lot of money. One of life's little ironies, Mr. Fahr."

"Yeah? Well, how'd you come to move in here—only a mile from the Biltons? That wasn't just chance, was it, Major?"

"Naturally not. I trailed them here. It took several years and a good deal of traveling, but I finally located them."

"And why, Major, did you want to find them?"

"My original intention was to set John Bilton on his feet again. I had heard that he had lost his money."

"I thought you didn't know Bilton."

"I didn't. I wanted to do this for the sake of his wife."

"You thought a lot of Mrs. Bilton?"

"Yes," replied the major in a low voice.

"And did you give Bilton any money?"

"No! When I discovered what a blackguard he was, I changed my mind. I knew any money he got would just go for liquor or cards. I decided then to settle down here and wait until Agnes left him or he drank himself to death."

"Major," said Fahr, "have you provided for Mrs. Bilton in your will?"

"That, suh, is a question I decline to answer."

"I thought so!" Fahr leaned closer. "Major," he said, "why is it you didn't hear your niece talking out here Tuesday night? You say you were in your room asleep. I say you weren't in the house at all. I say you were out in that gully waiting for John Bilton."

The major smiled faintly and with complete composure. "And why," he asked curiously, "do you think I would live here nearly two years before suddenly deciding to kill him? You tell me he struck Agnes on Tuesday night. Do you think I killed him because of that?"

"No," said Fahr, "I'm pretty sure now that you didn't know anything about that. I think you killed Bilton because you had just been told that you yourself were going to die shortly. You wanted to provide for Mrs. Bilton in your will and you wanted to be sure that John Bilton didn't get his hands on the money—so you killed him."

The major took a leisurely drag on his cheroot. "Your line of reasoning, Mr. Fahr," he remarked politely, "is ingenious and unexpected. Is it your idea that I will now break down and confess?"

Fahr peered searchingly through the dwindling light, then shook his head in bafflement. "No," he said, "I guess not. You're a tough nut, Major. There's no use threatening you, and I can't strong-arm you. You're the first man I ever tackled that's so—so—"

"So beyond the law."

"Yes," said Fahr. "That's it exactly."

Major Hallard tossed away his cheroot. "I think," he said with an air of finality, "that you had better find another suspect."

"I have another one."

"My niece's young man. I presume."

"No," said Fahr drearily, "I hoped it would turn out to be him, but it didn't. Now there's only two left—you, and Mrs. Bilton's son."

"Harvey?" The major gave a start. "That's ridiculous, suh!"

"Is it? Why? He had the motive—Bilton struck his mother—and he had the gun. And I know he slipped out of the house Tuesday night looking for Bilton. Maybe he found him. His mother thinks he did."

THE major rubbed his hands nervously. In a shaken voice he asked, "You're sure about that? About his mother thinking that?"

"Yes," said Fahr. "She must have seen him slip out. Or, more likely, she saw him coming back in. She thinks he did it."

"You—you've questioned the boy?"

"Questioned him?" Fahr laughed bitterly. "No! I put words in his mouth—but I didn't actually question him. Naturally he would deny the killing. Maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe not. I don't know. I don't want to know. I couldn't face the job of telling Mrs. Bilton that her son is a murderer."

"The boy is not a murderer! He—you're wrong, Mr. Fahr."

"How do you know, Major?"

The major moved his hands back and forth. He didn't answer.

"All her life," Fahr murmured, "she is going to keep thinking her son is a murderer. And she won't know. She won't dare to know. That's a complication you didn't expect, isn't it, Major?"

The major dropped his gaze.

"Did you provide for Mrs. Bilton in your will, Major? I can see your lawyer, you know. Did you, Major?"

"Yes," said the major in a scarcely audible voice.

"And you killed John Bilton."

"I refuse, suh, to—"

"You'd better answer, Major. What good is that money going to do Mrs. Bilton, if all the rest of her life she keeps thinking her son—"

"Stop it!" cried the major hoarsely.

"No," Fahr said implacably, "I won't stop it. I want to be able to tell Mrs. Bilton that her son didn't kill her husband. It's either you or the boy. I think now it's the boy. Was it the boy, Major?"

"No! I've told you! You're a monster, suh! Why do you keep on this way? Have you no—"

"Then if it wasn't the boy, it was you. Is that it, Major?"

The major shivered and seemed to shrink into his chair.

"Was it you, Major?"

"Yes," the major whispered.

"You killed John Bilton."

"Yes."

Fahr took a deep breath. He felt no sense of triumph. He was drained, leg weary, as if he'd just run a long race.

The frail little major slowly came out of his chair. He stood upright with military erectness. "Do you want to take me into town with you now, Mr. Fahr?" he asked quietly.

"No," said Fahr. "Not now. Not ever, as far as I'm concerned." He waited a moment in melancholy silence. "Do you understand, Major?"

"I don't believe, suh, that I—" The major swayed and bent forward, peering in disbelief. "You mean," he asked falteringly, "that it won't be necessary for—for my niece to know that I—"

"Yes," said Fahr. "That's what I mean. Even Mrs. Bilton won't ever need to know that. It'll be enough for her to know that her son didn't do it. I—good night, Major."

Fahr turned and stumbled away.

Slumped in the saddle, he plodded townward. Hooves sounded behind him, and Doc Bogart emerged from the evening shadows. Fahr looked at him and looked away. "How's Tracy?" he asked.

"Fine." Doc's glance was keen. "And you, my boy?"

"Fine! Wonderful!" Fahr gave a barking laugh. "My badge is in my pocket, Doc. I'm no longer a lawman."

"I warned you, Charlie. I told you yesterday to forget Bilton."

"I know. You thought it was Mrs. Bilton, didn't you, Doc?"

"That's what I thought yesterday."

"Well, she didn't do it."

"No," said Doc. "I know she didn't now. I was standing in the doorway, Charlie, most of the time you were talking to the major."

There was a short silence and then Fahr said woodenly, "I can't bring him in, Doc. I simply can't! What good would it do? He's only got a little time left."

"Yes," said Doc. "Only a little while now."

"He's not going to kill anyone else."

"No," said Doc. "I don't think he is."

Fahr drew his hand over his face. In an agonized voice he cried, "Am I doing right, Doc?"

"I don't know," Doc replied gravely. "That's a question you'll have to answer for yourself."

"I can't, Doc! I—to hell with it! What's the difference? I'm through now! Any time I let a killer go, I quit wearing a badge."

"A quitter, are you?"

"Yes!"

Doc shook his head. "No, you aren't. We both know better than that. You're just confused because you've run up against something that goes beyond the rule books, beyond the law—our law, Charlie—for an answer. Sometimes, when you get as old as I am—"

"Quite a preacher, ain't you, Doc?"

"No," said Doc dismally, "I'm not that sure of myself. I can't tell you whether you're right or wrong, and I'm not going to try. But I can tell you this, Charlie—whatever the answer, you aren't going to change it by rolling over and quitting."

Fahr's hand crept to his pocket.

Doc nodded gently. "Pin it on, Charlie. We can't afford to lose you. You're too good a lawman for—"

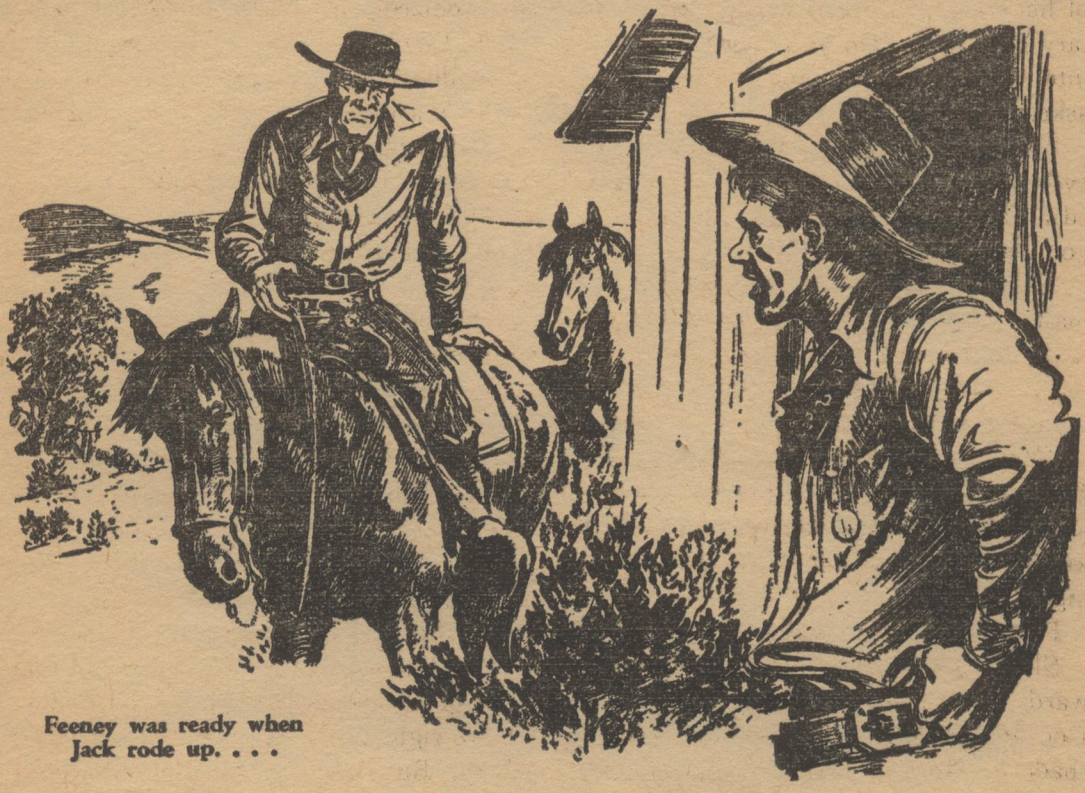
"Good? After this?" Fahr laughed again.

"Hush!" said Doc. "Stop fighting yourself, Charlie."

Fahr's hand came out of his pocket. Doc, he guessed, was right, in a way. Quitting wasn't the answer. Maybe there was no answer. You did what you felt was right and let it go at that. And you kept on plugging, you kept on trying to be a good lawman, even if—

He pinned on the badge and squared his shoulders. "Thanks, Doc," he said humbly.

MISTER FEENEY AND THE JACK OF DIAMONDS



Feeney was ready when Jack rode up. . . .

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

Feeney's judgment guns were good to the last drop—the last drop of Feeney's fighting blood!

TROUBLE followed Feeney like a faithful dog for ten years. Then Feeney turned around and said, "To hell with it! I'll follow trouble for a change and see if it makes things any easier for me."

It didn't. Feeney was a redhead, not too big as men go, but a solid man from high-crowned hat to bootsoles, and hard as a hank of twisted bobwire. The jaw of him stuck out like a wedge of kiln-burned brick. Someone's fist had lovingly flattened his nose when Feeney was younger and just shaping into the man he'd be.

Feeney was only twenty-seven when he came into Olivet, in the east slope cattle country that wasn't sure whether it was in California or Nevada. There were holes in his pants. He had no money in his pocket. A judge down in Tres Cruces had relieved him of his last cent.

"You look like a tramp," the judge had said, "but you speak like an educated man, Feeney."

"I'm the only college man that ever fought Diamond Jack Proudman," Feeney said.

"Whip him?" the judge asked, for Diamond Jack was one of those rowdies whose career, first on one side and then on the other of the law, had become legendary and notorious.

"Nobody ever whipped Jack, Your Honor. But I fought him. He made fun of me way of talkin'."

"With guns or fists?"

"Both," Feeney said.

"You acquit yourself favorably with both, they say," the judge came back thoughtfully.

"The fists seemed to come natural to me, for some reason," he said modestly. "The gun business I had to learn, Your Honor. For some reason, men like to try their luck with me. If I seek trouble, it's because I know it's going to find me anyway. I've that kind of a face."

The judge rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"How much money have you got, cowboy?"

"Two dollars and thirty-five cents, Your Honor."

"The fine," the judge said gently, "will be two dollars and thirty-five cents. There'll be a thirty-day sentence on the road gang if you're caught in town after the next ten minutes have expired."

Feeney's freckles suddenly looked pale as the surrounding flesh darkened with the blood of anger.

"Now, Your Honor," he said, very quietly. "Do you think that's fair to a man of my honesty, when I told you so plain how things happened?"

The judge said, "The law's the law, boy. Trouble has its place in this country, I'll grant you. So far, I haven't found that place. A word to the wise. Up around Olivet there's trouble brewing, I hear. It's out of my jurisdiction. I—"

Feeney interrupted him with a good deal of dignity.

"I don't have to go looking that far for trouble," he said. "Trouble's never a long ride away, for me."

"Oh? Well, Diamond Jack Proudman passed through this same court a week ago on his way to Olivet, boy. The sheriff tells me your horse has been given a grain feed this morning. You could make it by nightfall."

Feeney made it by nightfall. "I might as well, Mister Shawnessy," he decided aloud, saddling up. Mister Shawnessy had been loafing in the sheriff's corral for forty-eight hours, while Feeney languished in jail. He was a spoiled horse, used to Feeney's ways, and therefore uncivilized.

He hit the clouds when Feeney climbed onto him, but when he felt Feeney's strong legs lock about his barrel he seemed to say, "Oh, way, oh, woe! Jail hasn't softened him." There was a touch of Irish in the buckskin horse, too. He'd fight, but he'd also work.

He ate up trail until nightfall, and when Feeney climbed down he was in front of the Olivet National. Tawny bottles of whiskey gleamed in the lamplight on the National's backbar, where a brawny barkeep with a brushy mustache served a lean trade. Not more than four or five men were in sight when Feeney pushed through the batwing doors.

He couldn't be sure of the customer count, because some of them faded into the shadows, heading through a back door.

"I'm looking for Diamond Jack Proudman," he told the barkeep.

The barkeep picked up his length of lead-loaded pitchfork handle and nodded his head toward the rear room.

"Tell Davenport here's another of them," he told one of the drinkers.

The man faded back into the shadows and went through a door at the rear. The barkeep leaned across the bar.

"If you want to see that scum," he said, "go out where he's tolerated. Go out among the nesters, the two-bit thieves who

call themselves cattlemen, the land-stealers and cheap rustlers who've stolen an honest man's range, for you'll not find him here, you bum. Get out!"

"A bum, am I?" Fenney said happily, beginning to breathe hard.

THE name of Diamond Jack seemed to make this man mad. He seemed to get madder as he stared at Feeney's flattened nose and wedge jaw. This was usual. This was what Feeney had learned to expect. This was what he had tried—unsuccessfully—to explain to more than one judge.

He pushed his battered old hat back on his head, to show a more prominent twinkle of red hair.

"Seems there's a party named Davenport that's on the lookout for parties like Diamond Jack and myself," he said. "Seems he's in the back room yonder. I'll just go in and—"

"No you don't!"

The bartender reached out with his loaded persuader. Something struck like a snake at him. He never felt it. He never saw it, but he had an odd sense that the thing that hit him was shaped like a freckled fist, with red hairs on it.

Feeney stamped toward the back room, sucking the knuckles of his right hand, as the barkeep slid down into the sawdust and began snoring.

The tinkle of his spurs may have been a warning. When he pushed on the door, a man was leaning against the other side. Feeney rapped on it with his knuckles.

"Open up! I want to talk to a sidewinder named Davenport," he called.

The door was jerked open. A powerful hand caught Feeney by the shoulder and jerked him inside. It was a big, bearded man that held him. Two others stood in the shadows outside of candle range.

It was the man at the table who caught Feeney's attention, however. Feeney stood there, smiling crookedly, apparently not minding that another man's hands gripped him.

The man at the table was big and sleek, but he was strong, mean, afraid of nothing. His sleekness was not the kind that comes with a soft life.

"You're Davenport," Feeney said. "I want a job."

"What do you do for a living?" Davenport asked.

"I punch cows, can break horses, or I can whip any man in this room on an empty stomach. It's empty now."

Davenport burned his finger on hot wax and swore.

"Throw him out," he said.

"Any two men," Feeney pleaded, "including yourself, Davenport. I'm broke and hungry. I need a job. You've got a range war on your hands—a big man like you always has a range war on his hands. I—"

"Throw him out."

They threw Feeney out. It took three of them, and ten minutes, and Feeney was bleeding at the nose when he picked himself out of the dust at Mister Shawnessy's feet. Things spun when he tried to look at them for a few minutes. So he sat there.

His head cleared. He went into the saloon. There was a card table just to the right of the door. They hadn't bothered to take Feeney's gun away from him. He did not bother to draw it.

He turned the card table on its side, picked out the sturdiest of its four legs, and wrenched at it. There was a crackling and splitting, and the leg came loose. Brandishing it like a shillelagh, he headed for the back door.

The barkeep, resuming consciousness, saw him and moaned.

Feeney pushed the door open. They had not bothered to have the tall, bewhiskered man cover it with his body.

"I was interrupted in what I started to say, Davenport," Feeney told them, in a low voice. "Diamond Jack Proudman whipped me once. Next time it will be my turn, because I learn as I go along. It's not the easiest way to an education, but it's the best.

"Diamond Jack's on the other side. In a peaceful country, my price is thirty a month. To you, three times that, and a hundred dollar bonus when I've whipped Diamond Jack. Take it or leave it."

"Throw him out," Davenport said, still in the same dull voice.

They closed in on Feeney. The table leg curved viciously, with the close-quarters skill of a cornered fencer's weapon. Feeney pushed through them to the table. One eye was closed, from the previous toss-out. Blood from his own nose decorated his hairy chest. His shirt was a memory.

These three, however, were no trouble at all, once he took the initiative. He broke the bearded man's forearm with the table leg, caught another man on the back of the head with it, and made the third retreat, battered, behind Davenport.

Davenport stood up as Feeney reached the table.

"Now, you big, fat, lazy, no good bum—" Feeney began.

Davenport lit a cigar.

"So you've fought Diamond Jack?" he said thoughtfully. "I heard there was one man did that, and wanted more. One man! There's been almost as much talk of him as of Diamond Jack. Your name must be Feeney."

"It is that."

Davenport did not smile. He nodded and said, "If you hadn't wrecked the chairs, I'd ask you to take one. You'll do. Now, here's the trouble. For fifteen years I've lived in peace with my neighbors. A year ago I was told to stay south of the Jordan with my cattle. I'm not a trouble-maker. I thought it over a long time.

"I—"

"You lie, of course," Feeney said, "but that's neither here nor there. Where do I eat—here, or out at your place? I didn't ask for details, man, but for a job—and a second crack at Diamond Jack Proudman."

"Get your horse," Davenport said, "and meet us where you passed the live-oak grove, coming into town. We won't let them know you're with us—yet. Get going, Feeney! You're working for me now."

MISTER Shawnessy gave the warning; the horse was a scrapper and flung a challenge at strange horses—a challenge he was always ready to back up.

Mister Shawnessy nickered and snorted, and Feeney came to the door of the ramshackle shanty and peered around the edge into the gathering dusk. A single rider—a big grizzly-bear of a man who sat lopsided in the saddle—was coming up the slope.

This was one of Davenport's line camps.

It stood on a hilltop overlooking the river and the whole rich valley. This was Feeney's third night here. By now, he knew where to spot every twinkling, far-away light on the other side of the river. When dark fell, a man could pick out all of Davenport's enemies by the glow of their windows.

This man came from that direction, and something in the shape of him gave Feeney an oddly sobering thrill.

"That would be Diamond Jack," he said to himself. "Nobody but Jack would ride up here like a fool, openly. Only Jack would know I'm here."

And it was Diamond Jack Proudman, but he'd aged in the year since Feeney had fought him. He lacked Feeney's red hair, assertive jaw and flattened nose, but there was a kind of a challenging gravity about him. But he had aged. His movements were slower, and there was silver in the hair at his temples. His big, splayed gunman's hands lacked their old nervousness, and there was no more of that strut to him.

He slid off his horse at the shanty door and let the reins trail. Feeney stared at him, itching all over. Theirs was a cat-and-dog antagonism, built into each by nature.

Proudman was nearly fifty. He had been on the trail for thirty years. He lived on trouble, and it had paid him well. He had worn a dozen badges, in places where they weren't too particular whom they hired to clean up an area.

He was one of the giants who came out of the Brazos country with a rep going ahead of him like a shadow. Unlike most of them, he had survived. He had the perfect body for survival—strong and tough, fast and minutely coordinated. Besides that, he had brains.

Feeney let out a huge sigh.

"It had to be you, Jack," he said softly. "You took your chances, blundering up here this way. Why?"

"To talk to you," Proudman said. "I know your breed, kid. You're not an assassin, just a windy ranny whose face got him into so many fights he learned to like it. You've been following me."

Feeney said nothing. He studied the old gunman, and he had to keep choking down a cold lump in his throat. Now he saw the difference between them, a thing never apparent before. It made his palms clammy.

Feeney fought for the fun of fighting, once he had learned it could be enjoyable, once he learned no man with a face like his could escape it. Proudman fought without pleasure—for money, and to satisfy some lust in him. Some men sold shoes for a living, and some punched cows. Diamond Jack fought.

PROUDMAN slouched against the cabin wall and rolled a cigarette, and Feeney watched him curiously.

"You're on the wrong side in this scrap," Jack said.

The match that fired his cigarette lit odd glints in his dull gray eyes.

"You never used to worry about which side a man was on," Feeney said.

Proudman shrugged. "A man has to live with himself at night. At my age, it comes hard. You're still young enough to learn. I'd rather you were on our side, kid. There's a carrion smell to Davenport."

Feeney grinned. "I noticed that myself. The buzzards will get him still standing up, some day when the wind is right. I suppose this is a plain steal he's cooked up?"

"He's never had rights across the river. If he tries to cross now, there'll be a fight. I was pretty sure we'd lick him, Feeney, until you showed up."

"So you came here to talk me out of it."

Proudman went to his horse without a word. He leaned over to spit out his cigarette before wheeling the horse.

"Short and sweet! I was afraid it would

be like that, but I had to try. I kept telling myself maybe you was different than I used to be at the same age. Well, you're not.

"But listen, Feeney. I've got a little place of my own across the river there. It's home. Those folks are my neighbors now. This won't be just for the hell of it, kid."

"Trying to scare me, Jack?"

Diamond Jack said, "You know better than that, kid. Just trying to save you some sleepless nights in your late forties. See you!"

He turned his mount deliberately and jogged down the slope. Feeney sighed as the huge shape was swallowed by deeper shadows. "He is still saving of words. And still gets his point across. But it sounds odd to hear him that close to saying his psalms," Feeney said aloud.

He cooked himself a lonely bachelor supper for the third night in a row. He was an outpost, a picket, a dare.

"Don't pretend to do any work," Davenport had told Feeney. "Just let them see you. Just worry them a few days."

Sleep stayed away from Feeney that night. Something seemed to bother Mister Shawnessy, too. Mister Shawnessy was a workhorse, a cow pony who usually kept regular hours. This night he pounded the ground, grated his teeth on corral poles. And Feeney lay there and littered the floor with cigarette butts.

Morning came, and he slept. Mister Shawnessy warned him again, but this time it was Davenport and his crew, a dozen strong. The unwashed, bearded man rode at the burly rancher's side. They had pushed their horses hard.

Feeney came out rubbing his eyes and yawning, and Davenport snarled at him to make a big pot of coffee. But no breakfast.

Feeney stared at him and blurted, "Make your own coffee, fat man. Nobody has to prod me. I'm ready now, for you or anybody else."

Davenport flushed. He told another man to put the coffeepot on. A jerk of his head told Feeney to come closer. Feeney hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt and paid no attention. And a minute later, Davenport found an excuse to saunter his way.

"I didn't mean to rile you, redhead," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "But most men are hogs. You know that yourself. No more spirit than a hog in a mudwallow. And I've got too much at stake to risk getting pushed back." He went back to the crew.

They lolled around the cabin, eating cigarette smoke and cursing because the coffee was slow in boiling. Davenport knew his men. These were dregs that had to be prodded. Tobacco and coffee and empty stomachs—instead of Diamond Jack's native nerve.

Feeney squatted by himself, until the bearded man came over and shoved out a big, dirty hand.

"My name's Gil Britton," he said. "Davenport said you and me ought to get together. The rest of this scum will fade after we get our hands on that graze yonder. There's a place for you and me as long as—"

"Get out of here!" Feeney snarled at him. "You smell bad. I wouldn't touch you with a clean pole. I'd use a dirty whip."

Britton's teeth clicked together. He rubbed his palms on his hips and squinted at Feeney, and Feeney knew Britton hadn't heard about Diamond Jack, or Feeney's fight with him. Poor Britton, thinking himself a mean one, just hadn't been around.

"Why, you mouthy little pup—"

Davenport's roar jerked Britton back like a tight rope. He jumped to attention when the big cattleman spoke. "Stay away from him then!" Davenport yelled. "We won't start any private fights now. Drink your coffee, men, and we'll go."

They diluted the potful with cold water

so they could drink from the pot. Feeney turned his back when his turn came, and they knew why. He was last in the saddle when Davenport gave the order. He stalled, fiddling with his cinches, and Davenport winked at him once they were mounted. The big man came close enough to whisper, letting Britton and the others see, making them sore.

"That's the boy! Give them an appetite for trouble. Lord, redhead—if you knew what this means to me!"

He was almost trembling with anxiety. Feeney knew the story now. He knew which side he was on.

They splashed through the river with the full golden sunrise at their backs. A quarter of a mile beyond was an empty house, with empty corrals around it. Diamond Jack's men had fallen back from the river to pick their own fighting ground.

"Burn it!" Davenport said, and several of his men swung down to carry torches of twisted dry grass through somebody's rooms, firing them in a hundred places.

"Burn it!" Davenport said, when they came to the next one. He was mopping sweat off his face with his arm by now. He was doing what he'd wanted to do for years and years.

"Burn it!" he said as they reached the third place, five miles from the river.

His voice had a squeak to it now. Feeney looked at the brand burned into the gatepost unbelievingly. It was a neat diamond with a handsome J inside—Diamond Jack's own brand. Proudman had given up his own homestake for the success of a fighting plan. As far as Feeney knew, it was the only thing Jack had ever given up in his life.

They mounted steadily, leaving the lush lowlands and coming into the magnificent sweep of the treeless upper slope. They fanned out now, riding hard, Davenport in the lead, with Feeney on his right, Gil Britton on his left.

They were in open country when Diamond Jack and his crew hit them. Diamond Jack had crossed them up. They had itched, going through coulees and brushy glades where ambush was to be expected. As ambush failed to come, their empty bellies had filled with excitement, building up as house after house flared in flame and pillars of twisting smoke.

Proudman had thirteen men back of him. It was all even except that these were tired, angry, scared little men who did not fight for a living. These were farmers, nesters, small cowmen with families.

And what Davenport had was a hired army, fourteen mercenaries fed on nicotine, coffee and the kind of rawhiding a top sergeant uses to kick up a fury in his company. They started with a killer instinct. Davenport had whetted it to a keen pitch.

IT WAS like an Indian charge, except that Diamond Jack Proudman didn't yell. Back of him, his thirteen ill-assorted allies whooped and screeched like madmen as their line strung out to meet Davenport's head-on charge.

Proudman only leaned low in the saddle, hunched sidewise in the sloppy way that had become famous, and gave his nondescript brown horse its head. It had fought under him before, and knew its business. Feeney got a long look at Jack's face, and understood.

The old gunnie had known his men weren't ambushers. It might be smart to ambush, but it took the killer instinct they lacked. This way was better. It would empty some saddles, but it made fighters of them. Like Davenport's coffee and cigarettes, this fool Indian charge gave them the temporary nerve they needed.

And Feeney saw the end of it coming when Gil Britton, too, began whooping like an Indian. Feeney snarled, "The damn fool!" as he saw Britton slant his horse toward Proudman. That meant Davenport had whispered in Britton's ear, putting a special price on Diamond Jack.

And Britton, never one to turn down cash, had fallen for it.

There was nothing sensible in that collision. Even the horses seemed infected by that early morning insanity. They piled together in a screaming, hide-splitting, bone-cracking scrimmage. Proudman leaned sidewise in the saddle and pumped his .45 twice.

Gil Britton sailed over his horse's head and spread-eagled on the ground. Feeney let Mister Shawnessy carry him nimbly through the line. For some reason he held his fire. It was between him and Jack, not between him and that scrubby little old man with the worried look.

But the scrubby little old man's rusty gun blazed as Feeney went through, and something tore Feeney's hat off and sent it sailing. His shock of red hair caught the sunlight and he wheeled Mister Shawnessy and yelled Jack Proudman's name.

"All right, Jack!"

There was a whine in his throat, a high, keening tremor that did something to his mind. He had slugged it out with Proudman once—fought toe to toe for an hour, and fallen on his face. Later, learning that Proudman had done the same, he got his gun and hunted the big gunnie up.

And Proudman had come to meet him. They met in midstreet of a town somewhere and blazed away at each other. They were too eager, and fired from too far apart. Both men took lead. Both men lived through it, to wait for another meeting.

Now Jack whirled his businesslike brown horse and Feeney tickled Mister Shawnessy with the spur. Then Davenport, standing up in the stirrups and bellowing like a bull, sloped up toward Proudman from behind.

Davenport's big hand cuddled his .45 like a toy. He fired at Proudman from behind, and his eagerness betrayed him. The slug tore through cloth without scoring the old gunnie's stringy flesh.

"He's mine, dammit!" Feeney yelled.

Davenport jerked his horse back with iron-handed savageness and lifted the .45. Feeney forgot where he was in his rage at the chance of missing this showdown with Diamond Jack.

He grabbed at his gun and shot at Davenport, cursing the fat cattleman for interfering. Davenport slumped and clutched at his belly as his gun dropped.

Slowly he toppled from the saddle. Distance closed between Feeney and Proudman.

It was then that Feeney saw something new in Proudman's face. The big gunnie's skin was gray, like a corpse's. His mouth, twisted downward in the old-time grimace, nevertheless had a taut look of terror. His eyes were bleak and hopeless.

Diamond Jack was scared! There was no one there who knew him to see it, and Feeney knew it wouldn't be believed if he told it. But he knew! Jack, in his late years, avoided fighting and valued his skimpy hold on life.

That's why he had settled down here. A homing instinct, a badger-like yearning for a place to dig in, had followed that brutal, settle-nothing clash with Feeney. This time, Jack knew he wouldn't come out of a head-on collision with the younger man.

Jack's hand sloped for his gun as they came together, this time making sure they were not too far apart. Feeney grinned because he felt like grinning—felt the old, rollicking fun-feeling he hadn't had in him in years.

Mister Shawnessy grunted and jumped as the spurs dug in. He hit the brown horse grazingly. There was no time to yell, to argue.

Down came Feeney's gun splinteringly, swung with all the might in his brawny young arm. It broke the bone in Diamond Jack's draw-arm. It made him a farmer for life.

(Continued on page 125)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 87)

WHOA, pardner; rein up and rest a spell. And while you're about it, let's find out if you're properly alkalied . . . that is, how thoroughly you know your West. Below are twenty questions. If you can answer eighteen or more correctly, you're in with the tophand boys automatically. Answer only sixteen or seventeen, and you're good. But answer fewer than fourteen, and you land smack in with the lents. Good luck!

1. Which of the following is a *petate*? A rangeland potato? A piece of matting used to cover packs? A type of knife carried by the Indian cowpoke?

2. If the ranch boss sent you over to the "pie box," which of the following would you head for? The chuck wagon? A piano? A tool box?

3. What does the cowpuncher refer to when he uses the term, "quaker?"

4. True or false? In the slanguage of the Westerner, a "pup's nest" is a prairie-dog hole.

5. What is the meaning of the cowpoke term, "riding into the dust."

6. What is meant by the term, "riding straight up?"

7. If a cowpuncher friend of yours said he had recently "salivated" someone, which of the following things would he mean he had done? Given somebody a drink? Saved a man's life on the desert by leading him to an oasis? Shot and killed someone?

8. When used in connection with riding a bucking horse, what is the meaning of the expression "safety first?"

9. What kind of an earmark is a "sharp?"

10. Out West, what is a practical reason for pulling the tail of a horse which has been broken?

11. True or false? A "slick" is an unbranded animal.

12. When is a horse said to be "smooth?"

13. True or false? The cowpoke generally uses the term "squaw hitch" in terms of getting married or having a wedding.

14. According to the Texan's terminology, what is a "stake rope?"

15. True or false? A "stray" is a horse which has wandered in from another range.

16. True or false. "Suggans" are bedding blankets or comforts.

17. If the ranch boss told you to "top off" a certain horse, which of the following things would you do? Give him a good brushing? Ride him to wear him down a little? Walk him down after he'd been on a long ride?

18. True or false? "Tie rope" is a term sometimes used as a substitute for *mecate*.

19. True or false? An "underhand pitch" is a heel loop generally reserved for cattle.

20. True or false? An "under-round" is a type of earmark made by cutting a half-circle from the bottom of the ear.

SUDDEN SIX STAR

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

Matt Kennett knew every foot of this range—except the six-by-three that marks a tinstar's grave!

SHERIFF Matt Kennett abandoned his horse where the trail of the murderer raveled out and finally vanished on the hardpan. There had been a time, he thought without too much regret, when he might have swung his circle and picked up the trail again from the saddle of his horse. But when a man was nudging sixty he couldn't expect that much from his eyes. Trudging methodically, he cut three widening circles across the freezing flats before he once more picked up the murderer's tracks. He walked back to where his deputy was waiting with the horses.

"He's heading for the Pass, all right," Kennett said.

Wade Munroe nodded. "I figured so. We could have cut through and beat him here if we could have been sure he wasn't going to double back on us. Trouble is, we couldn't be sure unless we kept dogging him."

There was truth in that. It was a page out of the sheriff's own book: stay with the tracks if you want to keep your man from losing you. Wade Munroe, the sheriff reflected, was showing promise.

Wade sat tall in his saddle, with his sheepskin coat still lashed behind him across the roan's back. There was a ruddy cast to the deputy's flat cheeks, and his eyes were always moving, scanning the piñon and the snow-choked pass above, and already shaping his next decision. If Wade felt the dropping temperature, he wasn't aware of it.

"We should have gambled," he said. "If I'd taken the short way through to here, I'd have had him by now."

Kennett knew. Wade was thinking of the coming election and of the votes he might have won. Regret rankled in the deputy's tone, and Matt Kennett felt the edge of it.

"A killer can always handle one man easier than two working together, Wade," That was all Kennett had to say, but it did no good. Hindsight could always find itself a wound easy to open. Wade would learn that some day, with experience.

Impatience was in the movement of the deputy's shoulders. "He's heading across the Pass toward Pioche City or one of the mining camps over there. He can't be more than ten miles ahead of us."

Kennett remembered a young man's pride and ambition, and was careful not to smile. He said, "We take our breather now, and the fellow we're after will have to take a rest later on. It's all the same difference, in the long run."

He dug the old briar pipe out of his pocket and filled it. His fingers were stiff from cold, and he had trouble finding a match. He scratched it into flame, got his smoke going, then pulled the collar of his sheepskin coat high around his neck. He cocked his eyes toward the clouds piled up against the mountains, and a wet flake of snow fell on his cheek. He wiped it off and shook his head.

"From now on, it's going to be tough." He figured, since Wade was to be a candidate for the sheriff's office next election, that he ought to give his deputy a voice

Matt lunged as the man fired. . . .

in this matter. Wade deserved his chance to decide for himself. "We ought to leave the horses about here, don't you think?"

He felt the impatient touch of the deputy's eyes. Wade frowned. "And go ahead on foot? Is that your idea?"

Kennett blew into his cupped hands, trying to warm them. "The way I see it, that's our only chance of keeping that killer from losing us. There'll be too much snow up in the mountains for horses. The fellow we're after will have to travel on foot, and I figure that's the only way we've got to stay on his tail."

Wade Munroe shook his head. "We can swing back to Bonita canyon, and get to Pioche City ahead of him."

"What if the killer heads for the mining camps instead of town?" He looked up at the deputy. "If he does that, we've lost him."

Impatience thinned down the deputy's mouth. "A gamble we've got to take." Then he looked uneasily at the sheriff.

"But you're top dog here. It's up to you to say what we do."

Matt Kennett shook his head. "The election kind of changes that, Wade. Ollie Storr is running you against me this time, and that makes a different picture. You're your own man until the election is decided. It's your choice what you do from here on. Me, I'm going ahead on foot."

Wade Munroe smiled. "I'll be waiting for our man in Pioche City." He lifted the reins. "Luck to you, Matt."

Kennett nodded. "Same to you, boy."

MATT KENNETT left his horse hobbled there on the flats of the valley, picked up the killer's trail, and followed it up through the piñon. He didn't hurry as he climbed through rocks and scrubby trees, for experience and age had taught him to go easy on himself.

Above timberline he came to snow. He plodded on through ever-deepening drifts, and then he was in the narrow throat of the pass.

He reasoned that the man who had murdered that San Jacinto stage driver and passenger for a profit of less than a hundred dollars could not have holed up here in the pass. The murderer was traveling light; he needed food and in this constantly lowering temperature there was an ever-increasing danger for any man without shelter. So the murderer would have to push on, either toward town or the mining camps to the north.

He left the crest of the pass behind him and slogged his way down the west slope. This was rough country, three thousand feet higher than the valley where he had left his horse and with knee-high snow slowing his progress. Out of the pass, he quartered the mountain slope, working his way back and forth across the smooth tapestry of snow until he finally picked up the killer's trail once again. He smiled grimly. It was as he had expected. The outlaw had been forced to abandon his horse and travel on foot.

There were some things, he reflected, that only time and experience could teach a peace officer who was on a manhunt. He had learned to watch the wild life for signs, but if there was no wild life in the country to warn or alarm him, he learned to keep his eyes ahead of him rather than on the trail he followed. Nearly forty years behind a sheriff's badge had acquainted Matt Kennett with almost every tree and rock in this country. Knowing the land as he did, he was able to reckon closely what the killer ahead of him had done.

He came to the bald hump of a hogback, remembered the treacherous slope toward which the outlaw's tracks pointed, and circled instead to the gentler slope to the north. Past the hogback he again found the killer's tracks, and knew he had picked up a quarter of a mile on his man.

Clouds scudded darkly overhead, and there was no sun. He came to a black belt of piñon and now moved more warily, afraid of ambush. But the trail passed on through the trees, and Kennett thought narrowly, *With the lead he had, he must figure he's in the clear.*

Kennett lengthened his strides. Large flakes of snow again drifted down from the clouds, and ahead of him he could see only a few yards of the trail before that blended into the thickening haze. He came to the ancient live oak that had been split by a bolt of lightning, and knew where he was. A dozen years ago there had been a miner's cabin only a few yards from where he now was. The lake was just ahead, and he was wary as he approached it.

Wind had swept the frozen surface of the lake, baring the dark glassiness of the ice. He halted at the edge of the ice, wondering what the killer had done. The lake was kidney-shaped, less than a quarter mile wide at this spot, but spreading

out on either side. Across it was the most direct route to Pioche City and the mining camps, and Kennett wondered if the murderer had risked the safety of this first freeze in his haste to escape.

If he hadn't thought he was safe, he'd have tried an ambush before now.

The tracks, snow-drifted and indistinct, led out on the ice and vanished to thin scratches on the glassy surface. Kennett turned, kicking through the snow, and half a mile down the lake shore he saw where the killer had turned off the ice to circle the lake. Kennett considered this fact thoughtfully, and made his decision. The killer had decided to circle the lake rather than risk the uncertainties of the ice, and by cutting across the lake at this narrow point Kennett knew he could gain at least three miles on his man.

He turned and picked his way out on the ice, wary of its untested strength. The ice held, and he increased his speed. Halfway across, he heard the sudden sharp sound of a crack ripping through the ice at one side. He halted instantly, balanced to throw himself flat and spread his weight. He moved forward a step, careful with the way he eased his weight to the ice. Then, without warning, the ice splintered under him, and he felt the raw shock of the water as he went under.

His threshing hands brought him back to the surface, and even now there was no great panic in him. He was in a tough position, but he would manage to make out somehow, as he always had before. He could swim a little, but his most important job, he told himself calmly, was not to stay afloat but to get himself out of the water. Water like this could kill a man within minutes.

He moved arms and legs against the water, and drew himself to the sheet of ice. He slid his arms across the surface of the ice, and he knew just what he had to do. He warned himself not to be overviolent in his efforts. He would thresh his legs and at the same time heave his body up from the water, and in that way squirm his weight out onto the ice. He tried, and he was half out of the water when the ice buckled under him.

He came back to the surface, blowing for air, half choked by the water he had swallowed. He could feel the cold clubbing into his legs and body, already numbing him. The thought struck him that he might be able to break his way through the ice to the shore, but he instantly discarded that hope. It would take several minutes to do that, and he couldn't stand the deadly chill of the water for that long.

FEAR lashed through him then, but he refused to be panicked. Treading water with his soaked boots, he stripped off his heavy sheepskin coat and let it sink beneath the surface. That helped, but not enough. He unbelted his gun, and let the heavy weapon sink to the bottom of the lake. He could taste the blood cut from his lips by his chattering teeth. He turned in the water, still careful in spite of his desperate need for haste. He caught the large sheet of floating ice, and slid it out of the water and on top of the unbroken ice in front of him, thus forming a second layer to increase the strength.

He slid his forearms across the double thickness of ice, supporting his weight. He winnowed his feet and legs to one side, and then with a sudden violent threshing of legs heaved his body at right angles to the ice and to the surface of the water. He scissored one leg out of the water and onto the ice; he kicked desperately with the other, and rolled. Then he was out of the water, his weight supported by the double thickness of ice.

He wanted to lie there, flattened out and not touched by the rising wind, to rest. But he knew the danger of that. He had to keep moving, for now his life depended on maintaining body heat until he

was able to find some shelter and a fire.

He turned over, got to hands and knees, and started toward the shoreline, less than fifty yards away. He heard the threatening groan of the ice under him, and for the first time felt real panic. If he broke through again, he knew he would not have the vitality to pull himself out a second time.

He stretched his body out flat on the ice, and began rolling toward the shore. He kept forcing himself over and over, jerking his clothes free each time they froze to the ice beneath him, and not until he came to the shore slope did he realize his eyes had been closed all the time.

He pushed to his feet, doggedly refusing to give way to the desire to rest. He went stumbling up the slope, against fighting drifts of snow, slapping his arms around him in an attempt to restore circulation. Heat was what he needed now, and a chance to dry his clothes before they froze to his body. Getting to a fire was his only hope for life.

He pried red, numbed fingers into the pocket of his water-soaked pants. He located the matches more by instinct than by the feel of them. He drew his hand out, looked at the water-pulped heads of the matches, and let them fall into the snow. The low grunt of his breath was the nearest thing to despair that he had ever uttered.

He turned his head, his gaze traveling along the curve of the lakeshore, narrowly calculating his only remaining hope. The murderer had circled that end of the lake, but once past the lake had probably angled back toward the easiest route to Pioche City and the mining camps. Kennett thought about that, rooting his calculations into the knowledge of this rough territory that forty years had given to him. He tried to recall to mind every detail of the land, the rocky gulches that could trap an unwary traveler, and the windfalls in that neck of pines past the end of the lake which would make slow going for the outlaw.

With luck, Kennett thought, he might reach the main trail to Pioche City ahead of the killer.

He turned away from the lake, and felt pain drive into his feet and legs with each step. He hadn't realized the temperature had dropped so low, that he was so near to freezing. He broke into a shambling run, but it was difficult to control his legs, and he fell. He got up again, closer to panic than he had ever been before, with snow sticking thickly to his soggy clothing.

Walking hurt, and it hurt for him to even breathe. In a stubborn kind of anger, he bent head and shoulders and bucked his way through each drift of snow that blocked his way. He came to a belt of pines where he could not feel the raw impact of the wind so much. A pleasant feeling of warmth began creeping through him, and in his mind he cursed the falseness of it. *I'm cold and don't know it. This is how a man freezes to death.*

He stamped his feet as he trudged on, and he slapped his arms around his body, trying to beat out the chill. Snow stopped melting as it lodged in the stubble of his beard, and he knew a crust of ice was forming on his face. He remembered cattle he had seen on the high plains in winter, with rime clotting over their nostrils until they could no longer draw air into their freezing lungs. He pawed at his face with numbed fingers, and he kept walking, head down and shoulders bent, concentrating with dull stubbornness on his direction.

He didn't realize that he had fallen.

Something prodded him in the back, and a voice said roughly. "Get up, you!"

Something in the tone of voice dug life into Kennett's lagging senses. He heaved himself over, and managed to push into a sitting position. He looked up at

the man standing over him; stupidly he looked down at the ice crusted on his frozen pants and boots. He mumbled thickly, "Didn't know I fell down."

The man standing over him was tall and heavy across the shoulders. He prodded Kennett again with the rifle he held.

"You've been followin' me for the last half hour. I want to know why."

Matt Kennett wagged his head. It was hard for him to think. One part of his mind registered dully what the man said, and the other part lagged far behind, asking questions about the rifle in the man's hands and the finger curled around the trigger.

Then he knew; he remembered. He had caught up with the murderer without ever knowing it. Kennett's laugh came thickly through his throat, a croaking sound.

"Saw your tracks in the snow—sure, I followed you. Need heat, mister." It was difficult for him to make his lips move and shape his words. "I broke through the ice and fell into the lake. I need a fire before I freeze to death." He looked up at the man's hard face. "You got any matches on you?"

"I've got matches all right. I aim to keep them."

Kennett shook his head uncomprehendingly. He got his legs under him, and pushed up from the snow. His legs felt like stumps under him, with only a thin tingling of life in them.

The man stepped back a pace, holding his rifle ready. "You followed me through the pass and down here, fellow. I want to know why you've been doggin' my trail."

KENNETT pawed at his eyes, scraping the rime from his lashes and brows. He could see more clearly now. He looked at the carbine and saw the brass letters set into the walnut buttpiece: S. J. EXPR. CO. That rifle belonged to the San Jacinto Express Company. This, then, was the man who had done two murders for a profit of less than one hundred dollars, and would murder again if it would help hide his trail. The threat of danger squeezed hard around Kennett's mind and brought a measure of craftiness to him.

"Follow you from the pass?" He shook his head jerkily. "You're climbing the wrong tree, mister. I've got a mining claim down in Four Fingers canyon. Got another one up ahead a piece. Figured to shortcut across the lake on my way to the claim up ahead, but I fell through the ice. You got a drink on you, friend?"

"If I did I'd keep it for myself."

"How about some matches, then? Got to get a fire going and dry out. Mister, I'm freezing."

The man's eyes were hard and wary, and the willingness to kill was in them. He motioned with the rifle. "Got a grub cache up ahead, have you?"

Kennett tried to grin. "Food in my cache, but not a match. I'll bargain with you—grub for some matches."

The killer raised the rifle and rocked back the hammer. "You talk a poor deal, fellow. It's me got the gun. Now lead off to your cache. I need food, and I'm going to have it."

It was hard to keep moving. Kennett's legs wanted to give way under him with each step, and it was a chore to keep his direction laid out in front of him. That was the most important thing of all to him now, keeping his route lined up with his memory of this country.

He had hunted this high land many times in the past forty years, for game and for men, and it had always been his rule to see the small details as well as the broad screen of the picture. A wind-carved rock or a fallen pine were as much to be seen and studied as the mountain behind them.

The snow that whitened the ground

and made a shifting haze in the air was hard on his memory, threatening to tangle his sense of direction. He found himself cutting off uncertainly into a wide circle, and heard the harsh voice of the man behind him.

"I'm telling you just once, fellow—head straight to your cache and don't get any other ideas."

Kennett was too tired to reply. He only nodded and trudged on through the drifts of snow. He came to a small grove of pines, V-shaped and pointing up-slope, and he felt a little better. Just ahead was the snow-concealed meadow where the old gold camp named Bumblebee had once stood twenty years ago, a confused hive of placer mines, with nothing left to mark it except the scattered test shafts gouged into the earth by hopeful men and finally abandoned to become traps for uncautious animals. Once Kennett had pulled a fawn out of one of those sheer-walled pits, and he wondered if there was a lesson in that.

Vaguely, through the thickening haze of falling snow, he saw the dark shape of the ancient live-oak. He changed direction slightly, making toward the left of the tree. Wind slashed across the open meadow at him, blurring his vision, and he doubted if he could manage on his feet for much longer.

Then he was under the tree. *A few paces to the right,* his memory told him.

The killer came up behind him, rough with his shoulder and the prodding of the carbine.

"I'm not warning you a second time, fellow. Where is that grub cache?"

Kennett stepped aside, and turned. The man with the rifle heeled around, watching him warily.

"Right behind you," Kennett said.

The man started to turn, but suspicion stopped him. He took a step backward, feeling out behind him with his foot. He took another step, and Matt Kennett knew grimly that luck was not going to ride far enough with him this time. The outlaw halted, and it was in his eyes to force Kennett around until he could look for the cache without groping or turning. Or it was in his mind to kill. Kennett knew, and in another dismal moment like this, years ago, he had learned that on rare occasions it can be good gambling to bet a deuce against an ace. Kennett lunged suddenly at the man. He saw the killer leap backward, the carbine snapping up to his shoulder; and then the man's oath was muffled by depth and a shower of sliding snow.

Kennett slipped to one knee, at once drained out by relief and exhaustion. The outlaw at the bottom of the test shaft shouted harshly to him.

"Get me out of here! Damn you up there, give me a hand out of this hole!"

Matt Kennett raised his eyes, looking toward the mouth of the shaft. "I'll take that rifle, first," he called back. "And then matches so I can get a fire going. You might as well know now that I'm taking you in for the murder of that San Jacinto stage driver and passenger."

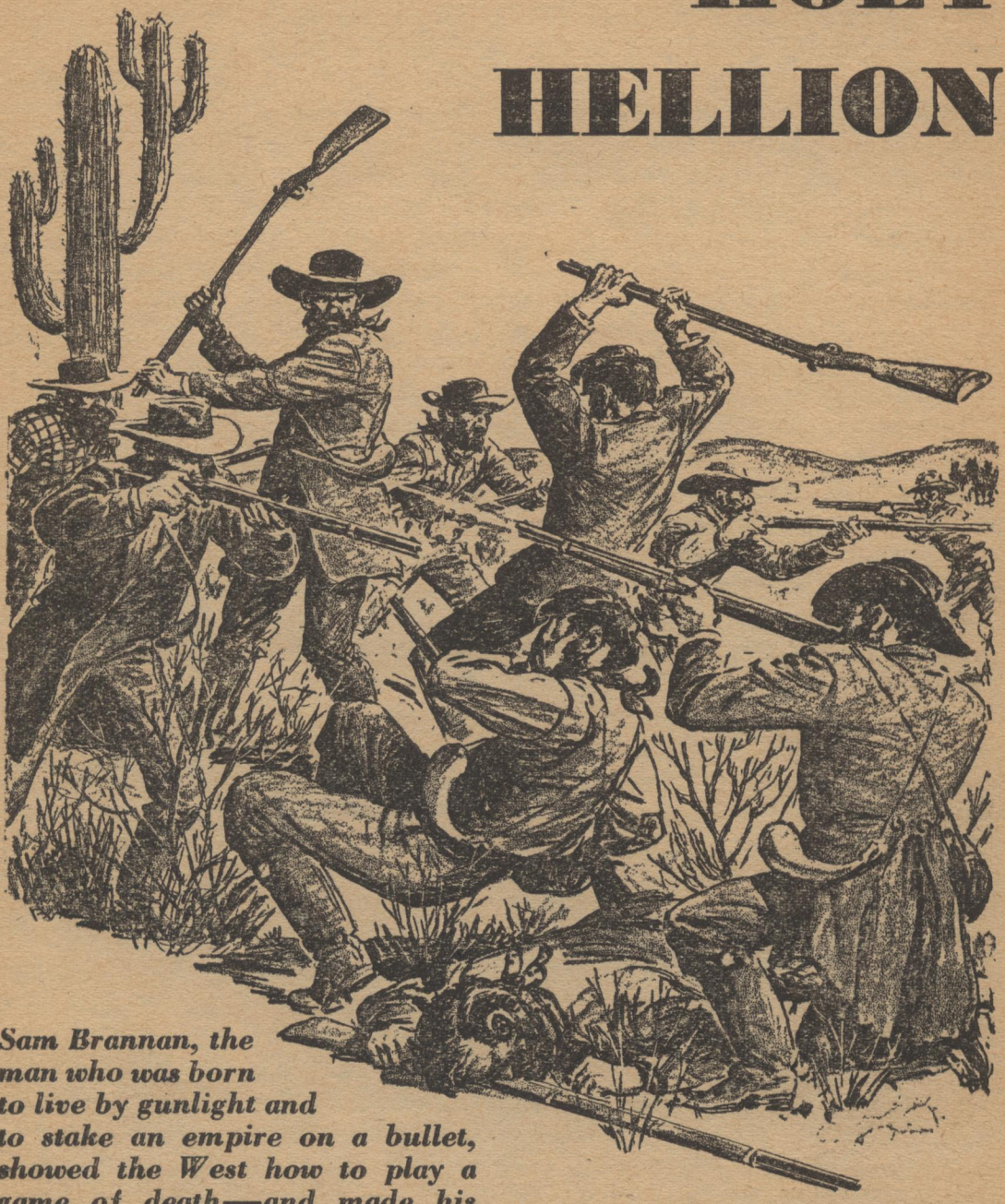
Kennett rested, listening calmly to the bitter cursing of the outlaw. He didn't think it would take long for the killer at the bottom of the shaft to wear out his threats and futile bluffing.

He reminded himself to tell this story to his deputy so that Wade would learn the object lesson: see all the small details and remember them, because you never know when they'll come in handy.

Kennett smiled in his ice-crusted beard. Effie would raise hell when she heard about him falling through the ice and getting soaked on a freezing winter day. He wondered if it wouldn't be wise for him to turn in his badge and stay home so that his wife could keep an eye on him. But he shouldered that thought contemptuously out of mind. Retirement was for old men, and Matt Kennett was only fifty-nine.

By M. KANE

HOLY HELLION



Sam Brannan, the man who was born to live by gunlight and to stake an empire on a bullet, showed the West how to play a game of death—and made his point with a loaded six!

It was the most sanctified gunfight in Western history. . . .

SAM BRANNAN was born to go West. A big man, given to big dreams, he was talking California long before he saw it. Unlike smaller adventurers, his first idea was not merely to strike a fortune there, but to possess the whole state. Before he died, he came mighty close to realizing his dream.

He showed up in Washington in 1846, representing the Eastern half of the Mormon Church in America. Though he never got as far as seeing President Polk, he

did wangle a promise of sorts from some contemporary V.I.P.'s that Upper California might safely be settled by the Mormom Church. It didn't bother Brannan that Upper California legally belonged to Mexico at the time, or that his "contract" with the U.S. was as up in the air as one of his own newspaper editorials. Time enough to solve problems, he figured, when he was smack up against them.

Accordingly, he sailed from New York in February, 1846, with two hundred thirty-eight settlers, on the steamer *Brooklyn*, ready to take over the Pacific coast. The voyage, although the travelers considered themselves comrades in a society of Latter-Day Saints, was a turbulent one. Brannan was a man who needed space, and the *Brooklyn* was just a steamer. By the time the vessel had rounded the Cape of Good Hope and made its slow way northward to San Francisco, he had excommunicated the four Church Elders immediately beneath him in comand, and they for their part were threatening criminal proceedings over Brannan's handling of communal funds.

These annoyances were forgotten briefly when the vessel docked. To Brannan's astonishment, the U.S. Army had arrived ahead of him. California was no longer Mexican. Forgetting his informal contract with Washington higher-ups—evidently he had placed little faith in it himself— Brannan lost his easily mislaid temper at the sight of the Stars and Stripes floating over the Presidio. Mexico was far away, and the intervention of the Mexican government in California's affairs had always been a slight one. Now there was going to be a real government here—something Brannan had voyaged thousands of miles to get away from. They say he threw his hat on the deck, and swore. In a reserved way, of course.

Though the army had beat him to the gun, Brannan did what he could to make up for lost time, and for the record was first at just about everything else that happened in San Francisco from then on.

He was the city's first publisher, bringing out a newspaper, the California Star, in January, 1847. He opened a general store at Sutter's Fort a year before gold was discovered there. He continued as titular head of the California Mormons, collecting tithes and administering the Church's affairs. He was a young man still. There was one quality in himself that he had not yet learned to account for. Wherever he was, he had to be top man. He didn't realize it. He pleaded with Brigham Young, who was far away in Utah, to come even further West, to settle the Mormon Church *in toto* on the Pacific coast.

How that plea might have changed the face of the west, neither Brannan nor Young was to discover. Certainly the conflict between the two men would have been greater than it eventually proved to be—certainly there would have been more bloodshed. As it was, Young decided to stay put in Salt Lake City, merely suggesting to Elder Brannan that he forward the tithes which were the Church's due.

Brannan didn't answer. Too busy.

Brigham Young sent some saints with guns to collect. Brannan hired some saints of his own and equipped them forcefully. The two holy gun crews met in the desert between San Francisco and Utah, and there ensued the most sanctified gun duel in the area's bloody history. Brannan's saints won.

Back in California, other disgruntled church members were asking questions too. To Brannan's credit, he didn't turn his armed hirelings on them—he still thought of himself as believing in law and order. Instead, he went voluntarily on trial on charges of misappropriation of funds.

It was the first jury ever impaneled in

California. It acquitted him completely.

Sooner or later, the big dreamer, the churchman, the editor, the storekeeper, the package-of-men in one man that was Sam Brannan, would have tangled with John Augustus Sutter, for Sutter, though peaceable, was certainly top man in those parts. But the times were on Brannan's side. History was happening, carrying him with it. The discovery of gold changed the friendly Sacramento Valley overnight.

The crazy, tumultuous onrush of Forty-niners pushed Sutter off his own land by sheer weight of their numbers. In vain, he appealed to Washington for protection. Gold had finished him. He had broken the ground for it, and the gold had been found in it, and the West was ready to turn a new page. Sutter's name wasn't on it. But Brannan's was.

In the lawless, mushrooming boomtown that the miners made out of San Francisco, Brannan was undoubtedly top man at last. Prices on any sort of goods were fantastic, a storekeeper's bonanza. Brannan had a store, at first the only store. Newspapers sold at a dollar a copy. Brannan was a publisher.

There was plenty to publish, too. Fortunes found and lost, murders, thefts, small civil wars, the ever-increasing stream of emigration from all the corners of the earth . . . .

SURELY Sam Brannan was living his halcyon days. True to his strangely chaotic nature, with its choleric streak of violent righteousness, he looked at San Francisco, and decided he didn't like it.

Accordingly, he founded the first Vigilance Committee. It was in this capacity that he made the mark which identifies him forever in the history of the times.

And it was Sam Brannan, vigilante, who became the guiding spirit in the epic of Tom Berdue, petty gambler. It is doubtful that Berdue, on his own, would ever have become the figure he was—but he crossed paths with Sam Brannan. In those days, it was enough to catapult you to fame.

In December of 1850, a shady San Francisco character named Jim Stuart was arrested in nearby Marysville, charged with murdering the town's sheriff and stealing four thousand dollars. However, he escaped. Two months later, he held up a San Francisco store, slugging the owner unconscious, and the next day, police arrested a man who protested in vain that he was only Thomas Berdue, that he had never murdered anyone, that it was all a mistake.

To no avail. He was the double of English Jim, and Sam Brannan, newspaper editor, began agitating for a lynching.

It was, actually, an extraordinary case of mistaken identity. English Jim had a small scar over his left eye, a knife scar on one ear, and half the forefinger on his left hand was missing. These conspicuous adornments were also present on the unfortunate person of the wandering goldfield tinhorn.

Said Sam Brannan, to the citizens of San Francisco, "We are the Mayor and the recorder, the hangman and the laws. The law and the courts have never yet hanged a man in California, and every

morning we are reading fresh acccounts of murders and robberies. I want no technicalities. Such things are devised to shield the guilty."

It was Sam Brannan's hour, it was Sam Brannan's town. For some obscure reason, the decent element which usually followed his lead decided to use caution in the matter of this particular hanging. Perhaps it was his luck, taking care of him in spite of himself. If Berdue had been executed at Brannan's urging, then and there, later disclosures would have ruined the publisher for good or taken the heart out of him certainly, for Brannan thought of himself always as a righteous man.

And so the law took a compromise course, and Berdue was indicted and tried as English Jim Stuart, and sentenced to be hanged as English Jim Stuart, and sent to Marysville to await execution.

So far, the Vigilance Committee had not been officially organized, though its spirit was certainly at work. An odd quirk of fate crystallized it into existence.

English Jim's friends decided not to believe Tom Berdue's protestations of innocence. They planned to avenge themselves on the city which had convicted their partner! Most people think of 1906 as the date of *the* San Francisco fire—actually, great fires plagued the city continually half a century earlier. English Jim's friends decided it was time for a conflagration. They set fire to San Francisco.

Before dawn, on the morning of May 5, 1851, incendiary flames were blazing over an area of twenty blocks. Looters and cutthroats were enjoying a devil's holiday in the gutted buildings, and honest men were defending their lives and properties at gunpoint. By the time the fire was out, only one-fourth of the city was left standing—a charred monument to the most heated case of mistaken identity on record.

Within a month, the boomtown had almost rebuilt itself. And outraged Sam Brannan, certainly not one to take a dare like that lying down, had organized the first Vigilance Committee to act as a responsible, defined unit.

He was sticking his neck out. Before he was through, he was to tangle with governors and militia. But what was earthly authority to a man who had defied Brigham Young? After all, the only approval Sam Brannan needed was the inner voice of Sam Brannan. Before he was through, he was to perform the seemingly impossible task of clearing poor, doomed, scarred Tom Burdue.

In July, a month after Brannan had declared his formal state of six-gun law, the real English Jim Stuart robbed a ship in San Francisco harbor. Summoned by the cries of the captain's wife, the crew arrived in time to make a capture. They turned their robber over to Brannan's men, who wasted little time on technicallities like habeas corpus or a panel of defense lawyers.

They tried him before a self-impaneled jury of four hundred men, heard his confessions, and sentenced him to die. Before the day was over, he swung from a derrick on Market Street, scarred ear, scarred eye and all.

And also, before the day was over, Brannan, who had once been an Elder of Zion, an employer of saintly thugs, and always a voice for righteousness, had sent a delegation to Marysville, where Tom Berdue was counting the remaining days of his life. He was free, they told him, grandly skipping the usual tedious processes of law. The Vigilantes took him out of the jail—he was perhaps the one man in the history of the west who survived that particular experience—and brought him back in state to San Francisco.

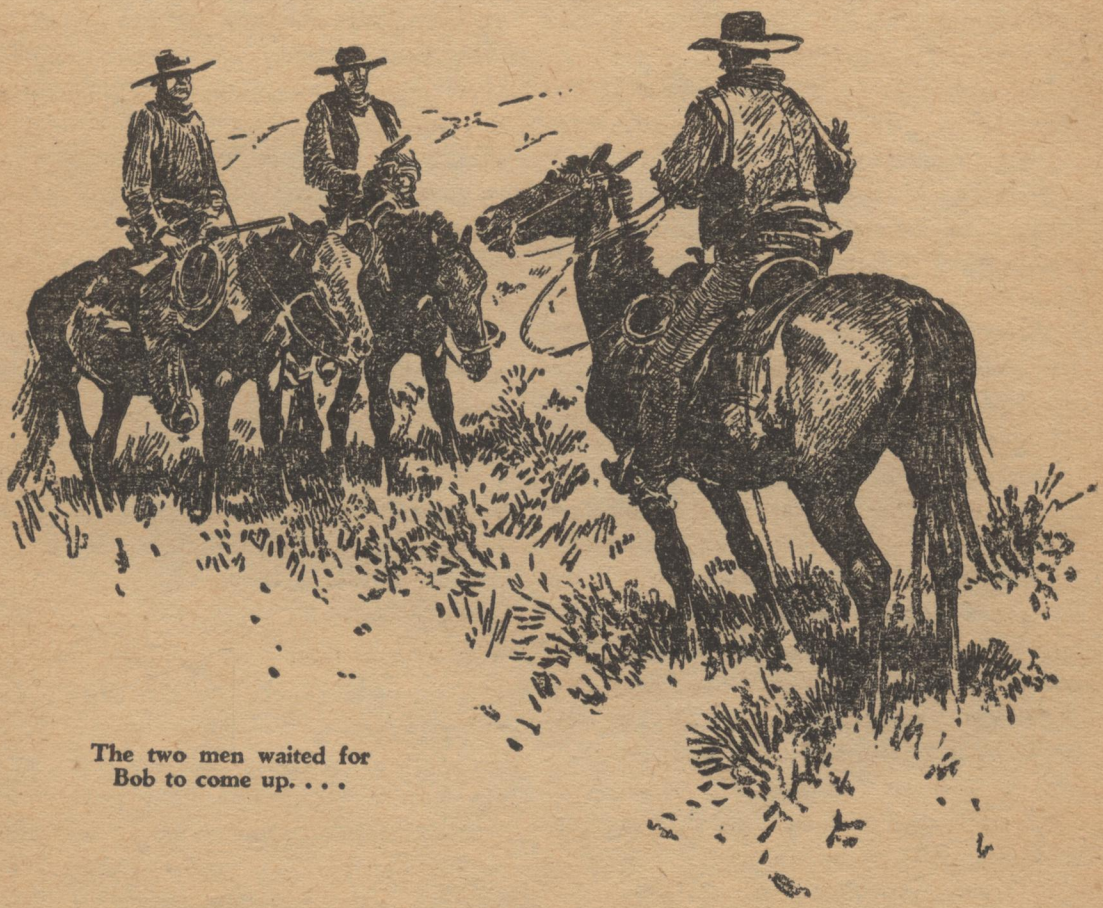
He was publicly presented with a purse

(Continued on page 126)

TRIAL BY BULLET

By PHILIP KETCHUM

"It's easy to run, kid—but the faster you run, the quicker you reach that final mile . . . the mile that you crawl with a gun in your hand, breasting a better man's sixes!"



The two men waited for Bob to come up. . . .

HE WAS riding the fringe of the Indian hills, looking for strays, when he met the two men. It was a sudden meeting. He came out of a long, blind draw, and there they were, sitting motionless in the saddle, waiting for him. One man held a rifle casually across his lap. The other had drawn his six-gun. They were older than Bob Dowling. They were strangers to him. They were thin, hard-faced, and the minute he saw them Bob could feel the sudden leap of his heart and a tightening of the muscles in his throat which made breathing almost impossible.

He reined up. There was nothing else to do. Perhaps he nodded. He was never afterwards sure. There was a gun belted at his waist, but he knew that if he reached for it he would never live to draw it. He could read that in the eyes of the two men who faced him.

"Who you riding for, kid?" asked one of the men, the one with the rifle.

"Brotherton," said Bob.

His voice was high and a note of fear was in it. He could feel the perspiration which had jumped out on his forehead, which was chilling the entire surface of his body.

"What you doing out here?"

"Looking for strays."

"Alone?"

Bob would have liked to have said he wasn't alone, but he didn't have even the courage to lie. He nodded his head.

"There's only one thing to do, Mobridge," said the other man, the one with the six-gun. "We don't want any quick chase."

Mobridge, the man with the rifle, shook his head. He said, "Wait a minute, Tex. Maybe the kid will do what we tell him."

Bob tried to swallow the choking lump in his throat. His mouth was dry. His breath was still coming too fast. Mobridge was staring at him. Mobridge had thin, colorless lips, dark, sharp eyes set deep in his head, dark hair. A brief and humorless smile cracked across his face and then was gone.

"What's your name, kid?" he demanded.

Bob told him.

"How long have you been working for Brotherton?"

"Three months,"

"Where were you before that?"

"Wabogen valley."

Mobridge nodded. He said, "All right, Dowling. Suppose you head back for the ranch. But don't hurry. And forget you saw us, understand? If you don't forget, you'll be out riding sometime and there'll be a shot. Maybe you won't even hear it. A man can die awfully fast."

Bob moistened his lips. He nodded his head, a sudden hope gripping him. A hope that he might live.

"Start riding, Dowling," Mobridge snapped. "Start riding, and don't look back!"

Start riding. That was it. Start riding. Bob wheeled his horse. He headed out across country and abruptly he was raking his spurs against the horse's flanks and was hunched over the saddle in a mad and reckless flight. He thought he caught the faint sound of derisive laughter from the two men, but that was unlikely. And it made no difference. He had escaped. He was alive. That was all that was important.

John Brotherton called Bob into the ranch house three evenings later. Brotherton was a big, broad-shouldered man close to sixty. He was an agreeable boss. The men who worked for him liked him.

"Bob," said John Brotherton, and he was scowling, "a few days ago rustlers got away with better than a hundred Box W steers. They drove them through the Indian hills toward the border. As near as we can figure it, they got away with them about the same day you were working the hills for strays. You didn't see anything that day, did you?"

Bob gulped. He shook his head. "No, sir. Not even many strays."

"I guess you were there ahead of the rustlers, then," said Brotherton. "And maybe it's lucky you were. If you had run into them, you might not have come back. That's all, Bob, but when you're out riding, keep your eyes open for strangers, or the signs of any overnight camp. The fellows who took that Box W stock got away easy. They'll probably hit this part of the country again."

"I'll keep my eyes open," said Bob.

He stepped outside, ran his fingers through his hair and took a long, deep breath. It wouldn't have helped any, he told himself, to have reported what he had seen, or to admit it now. The herd the rustlers had collected could have been driven through the hills and over the border, before any pursuit could have been organized. And alone against them he

would have had no chance to live at all.

During the last few days he had gone over all this with himself time and again, until now he almost believed what he wanted to believe. But he didn't feel good about it. He couldn't. A scowl gathered on his face.

It was just after supper, and was still light. Jim Cawthorne left the bunkhouse and joined him and gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder. "How's about a ride into town, Bob?" Jim asked.

Bob shrugged. "Why?"

"I bet Myra would like to see you, and well, I've got a gal to see, too."

"Only one?" Bob grinned.

He liked Jim Cawthorne. He liked Brotherton and the others who rode for Brotherton. He had run into a nice job here after a disappointing experience in Wabogen valley, an experience he was trying to forget. And he hadn't only been lucky in his job. In Waggoner there was a girl named Myra Hawes who represented, to Bob Dowling, everything he had ever expected to find in a woman. She was young, attractive. She was fun to be with, and at the same time there was a serious streak in her which Bob admired. She was a strong woman. She could be a good partner to a man.

"Well," asked Jim, "shall we ride?"

Jim Cawthorne was a Texan. He was slow and easy-going, but he never ducked out of the work expected of him. He was perhaps a year older than Bob, who was just past twenty. He had folks back in Texas and a ranch which would some day be his. He talked a good deal of his people and the ranch and what he would do when he settled down. He joked a lot, but he was steady too. As steady as they come.

"Sure we'll ride," said Bob. "Let's go."

A WEEK later, Bob Dowling sat on the porch of the Hawes home in Waggoner. It was a quiet, warm, pleasant evening. The old folks had gone to bed and Bob and Myra were alone.

"I haven't saved much money," Bob whispered, "but I've saved a little."

Myra laughed. It was a low and intimate laugh.

"Why did you do that?" Bob asked.

"Because I think I know what's coming next."

Bob felt a sudden excitement. "And is it all right?"

"It's all right," said Myra. "I've worked, you know. I've saved a little. If we put together what we have—"

Bob didn't let her finish the sentence. His arm, already around her shoulder, pulled her toward him. This was what he wanted, what he really wanted. He was lucky, the luckiest man alive.

Much later he started back uptown toward Webber's saloon, where he would meet Jim Cawthorne. He was feeling on top of the world, striding along on air. He came to the feed store corner, turned it, started up the street and stopped abruptly as someone called his name. Stopped, and felt the sudden jump of fear in his breast, felt its paralysis in his muscles.

"Over here, Dowling," said the voice. "I want to talk to you for a minute."

Bob knew that voice. He would never forget it. He turned, and in the shadows near the edge of the feed store building he saw a figure. Mobridge. He moved that way, fighting against it, yet unable to do anything else.

"I've brought you something, Dowling," said the rustler.

"What?"

"This."

Mobridge was holding something toward him, a thin fold of currency.

"What is it?"

"It's yours, Dowling. It's for keeping your trap shut. It's your cut."

Bob's lips tightened. "I don't want it."

Mobridge shrugged. He put the money back into his pocket. "Suit yourself. I think you're foolish."

"I don't want it," said Bob again.

He turned and started away.

"Dowling. Come back here."

He came back. A sudden and sharp anger was lifting through his body, an anger which might have smothered his fear, but it had no chance. Thin moonlight glistened on the barrel of the gun Mobridge was holding.

"One blast of this gun, Dowling, and you're finished," Mobridge was saying.

The street was quiet, deserted. Up the block, a few saddled horses were at the tie rail in front of Webber's saloon. Jim Cawthorne would be waiting there. He might come outside after a while, but he couldn't see into the shadows down here, couldn't see the man Bob faced.

"Leave me alone, can't you," Bob begged. "I did what you asked. Leave me alone."

"I can't," said Mobridge. "I need your help, Dowling."

"No."

"I said I needed your help." The rustler's voice had hardened. There was a brittle note in it. The gun he was holding had lifted a little.

"What do you want?" asked a faint voice, Bob's voice, though he couldn't have recognized it. "What do I have to do?"

"Not much, Dowling. Tomorrow, I want you to ride to the south fringe of the Indian hills. Get back at night. Report that you saw some men down there, some riders who ducked into the hills. That's all. Just make that report to Brotherton."

"Maybe I won't get to ride south tomorrow."

"You'd better work it some way, Dowling. It's important. You'd better do what I say, or some night when you leave your girl's house you won't walk very far. She's a nice girl, isn't she? Yeah, she's a nice girl. You know, maybe something might even happen to her if you don't make that ride."

The anger Bob had felt was back again. A sudden recklessness gripped him. He stepped forward. "Mobridge," he grated. "Mobridge, if anything ever happens to her I'll—"

The outlaw's brittle laugh cut into his empty threat. The gun Mobridge was holding jabbed out at him, prodding him in the stomach.

"We've talked enough," said Mobridge. "Move on. And tomorrow, make that ride."

Jim Cawthorne was ready to head for the ranch. He was in a jovial mood. He talked of Kate Jenkins, the girl in Waggoner who held his interest, and of his home in Texas, and several times on the long way home he looked over at Bob and asked what was wrong, why he was so moody.

"You know," he said once, "when I head for Texas, you're going with me. You'll like it down there. You can even bring Myra with you."

Bob had never had a really close friend, but Jim Cawthorne might become one. He could feel it. He grinned and said, "Sure, I'll go to Texas with you." And he tried not to think about tomorrow.

HE RODE south the next morning. He told Brotherton that the week before he had noticed a sagging drift fence in the mouth of one of the deep draws. Brotherton suggested that he check it, and the others as well, and Bob said he would.

He took his time. He checked the fences. He didn't see anyone, but he found a place where several horses had recently cut into the hills, and which would serve as a background for the story he was supposed to tell. And he would tell the story. He would tell it and then pull out. There was nothing else to do. The trap in which he had been caught had stretched out to take in Myra Hawes, and he couldn't risk what

might happen to her. He would tell the story and run away again, just as he had run from the Wabogen valley. It was the old pattern all over again, a pattern from which he could not escape.

It was dusk when he rode up to the ranch house, and no one was in the yard. The corral was half empty of horses. Bob felt a vague alarm. He wondered what could have taken the entire crew away at an hour when they were usually here.

Mrs. Brotherton must have heard him, for she came out on the porch.

Bob rode that way. "Where is everyone?" he asked.

"They've gone toward the hills," said Mrs. Brotherton, and she sounded worried. Her voice was high and strained. "It's the rustlers."

"Rustlers?"

Mrs. Brotherton nodded. "Two of the men noticed several riders pulling a herd together this afternoon. It was over toward the hills, due west of here. There was trouble. Jim Cawthorne was killed."

"Jim?" Bob gasped. "Killed?"

He couldn't believe it. He stared wide-eyed at the woman on the porch. He shook his head. Not Jim Cawthorne, who had been alive this morning, who last night had talked about Kate Jenkins and his home in Texas and the days that lay ahead.

"His body's in the barn," Mrs. Brotherton was saying. "They left him there. They rode out after the rustlers, but they'll never catch them. By this time—"

Her voice broke off, but Bob Dowling was hardly aware of it. He knew who had killed Jim Cawthorne. It was Mobridge, or one of the men who rode for Mobridge. He saw the plan, now. The plan in which he was supposed to have a part. Mobridge had wanted him to report strange riders on the south fringe of the Indian hills. He had expected that to be investigated. And while it was being investigated, Mobridge and his men would have driven off a herd through the north end of Indian hills. Perhaps by chance Jim Cawthorne and someone else had come on the rustlers as they started drawing a herd together.

Bob pulled in a long, slow breath. He mopped a hand over his face, a hand which came away moist with perspiration. He couldn't accept it. He couldn't accept what Mrs. Brotherton had told him. He couldn't believe Jim was dead.

But he was. The body under the blanket in the barn was cold and stiff and the wide open eyes stared sightlessly at Bob Dowling. Sightlessly, but in accusation. Bob Dowling dropped the corner of the blanket which he had lifted. He stumbled away. He stood outside under the stars. There was no point now in telling the story he had been supposed to tell. The men from this ranch and perhaps from others, were on the trail of the rustlers. Maybe they would catch up with them. Maybe not. Bob didn't know, and it really wasn't important. All that mattered was that Jim Cawthorne was dead.

The men who had set out on the trail of the rustlers returned to the valley two days later, empty-handed. They had followed the rustlers deep into the Indian hills and toward the Toltec mountains, but had run into a heavy rainstorm which had washed out the trail. There were five in the band they had followed, but who they were wasn't known.

Jim Cawthorne was buried the day the men returned, and afterwards John Brotherton set down to the hard task of writing Jim's folks a letter. He had suggested that Bob Dowling write the letter for him. "You knew Jim better than any of us," he had insisted. "You should be the one to do it."

But Bob begged off. "I'll ride by and see Jim's folks some day," he said vaguely. "You write the letter."

Bob was still stunned by what happened. The shock of Jim's death hadn't worn off. A feeling of guilt gnawed at him constant-

ly. It was his fault that Jim was dead. He couldn't look at it any other way. If he had had the courage to buck Mobridge the first time they had met, Mobridge and his band might even have returned to this valley and Jim would be alive. It wasn't Bob's hand which had killed his friend, but it seemed to him that it might as well have been.

For a week Bob stuck to the ranch, working from sun-up to sundown, working harder than he had ever worked in his life, trying to achieve some kind of peace through a complete physical exhaustion. But the solution to the problem which nagged him wasn't to be found in work, and at the end of this week, he started going to town every night.

Brotherton noticed the change in him, the moody spell which had gripped him, and tried to talk to him about it, but got only an evasive answer. Some one of the other men tried a lift him out of it, but eventually gave up and left him pretty much alone.

That suited Bob Dowling. This was what he wanted. To be left alone. Some night, tonight or tomorrow or next week, he would be walking down the street in Waggoner, or riding home, and a voice would call his name. He would turn and see Mobridge. The rustler would be back. It was in the cards. It had to be.

Mobridge would call his name, and then—

Bob couldn't think beyond that point, couldn't see beyond it, couldn't plan beyond it. The shock of Jim Cawthorne's death had made him, for the first time in his life, look at himself honestly. What he had seen wasn't pleasant, wasn't easy to face. All his life, he had run away from trouble. He had run away from trouble at home. He had run away from the Wabogen valley. He would have run away from here.

Could a man conquer the fear which drove him? Bob didn't know. What would happen when he again faced Mobridge? Would a cold paralysis grip him, blocking off his ability to think and act? He didn't know. But one of these nights he would.

He left Webber's saloon at ten-thirty and took the long walk up the street to the livery stable. He saddled and mounted his horse and rode out of town.

He rode slowly and behind him heard the sudden sound of hoofbeats. Startled, he looked over his shoulder. A mounted figure was hurrying after him, perhaps some man from the town, or perhaps, and it was very possible, some man who had been waiting in the trees, waiting for him to pass.

Bob loosened the gun in his holster, aware of the quick, heavy thumping of his heart. The man following him was coming fast. Bob pulled up and waited. The man slowed down as he drew near. Slowed down and stopped. He pushed back his hat. Starlight struck across his thin, tight-skinned face.

"Hello, Dowling," called the man.

IT WAS the voice of Mobridge. Harsh, brittle, cold. Bob Dowling tried to make some answer, but couldn't. His mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Both of the rustler's hand were in sight on the horn of his saddle. He wasn't holding a gun. Now was the time for Bob to reach for his, but there was no strength in his arms. He sat there bathed in a perspiration of fear.

"Things didn't work out the other night," Mobridge was saying. "We ran into some tough luck. A couple men saw us hazing up a herd. One of them got away and we had to run, but we've worked out a new plan, this time. Come on. We'll talk it over."

"Come on?" Bob gulped. "Where?"

"Not far," said Mobridge. "Just over the ridge. Two of the boys are waiting for us there."

A shudder ran over Bob's body. He

tried to summon the courage to refuse, but it wasn't there. This fear which had gripped him was worse than ever before.

They rode over the ridge and then on to the river and into a clearing on its bank. Two men waited for them, two tall, thin men whose faces were shadowed by their hats.

"Climb off your horse, Dowling," said Mobridge. "There's no rush. We want you to understand perfectly what you have to do."

Bob swung to the ground. He trailed the reins of his horse. He faced the two men who had been waiting here.

"Meet Red Wyatt and Tex McAdams," said Mobridge. "They're nice fellows if they're on your side. They're tough hombres to buck."

They looked tough. They looked lean and hard and dirty, and they gave only an unfriendly nod in acknowledgment of the introduction.

Mobridge tied his horse to a nearby tree, then came back and sat down, crossing his legs. Bob sank to the ground. So did the other two men. Mobridge rolled a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply. He blew out the smoke. "Dowling," he said slowly, "we're going to take Westcott's red herd. We're going to take it next Saturday night, shag it into the hills and run it to the border. You're going to help us."

Bob shook his head. "No," he said tightly.

The word surprised him. He hadn't known he had been going to say it.

"I said you were going to help us, Dowling," snapped Mobridge.

Bob tried the word again and it came even easier than it had before. Easier and louder. "No!"

A gun had jumped into the rustler's hand. It was pointed straight at Bob.

"You're going to help us, Dowling," Mobridge thundered.

Bob sucked in a long, slow breath. He could feel the clammy moisture of perspiration on his forhead. The paralyzing fear from which he had never entirely escaped was coming back.

"No! I'm not going to help you."

It was a scream this time. And fear was in the high sound of it, and desperation, too. The desperation of a man who was lost. And there was anger as well. Anger at himself and at these men who tortured him.

Bob came to his knees. His hand brushed the butt of his holstered gun. His fingers closed around it. His arm jerked. There was nothing planned about any of this, nothing thought out. His hand gripped his gun. His arm whipped it up and as it cleared his holster his finger curled around the trigger and pulled.

The roar of the explosion clouted his ear. There was another gun blast, a searing pain which scraped across his chest and stayed there, but pain held no importance. Mobridge had tumbled over sideways. Mobridge was down. He had dropped his gun. He was lying there, not getting up.

One of the other men had clawed at his holster. The third was rolling away. Bob fired at the man whose gun was lifting. He threw himself forward to the ground, firing again. He turned his gun on the man who had rolled away and fired twice more, and then pulled the trigger again, only to hear the empty click of the hammer.

The gun Mobridge had dropped was lying near him. He scooped it up, glancing swiftly from side to side. The figures of two of the three rustlers were motionless. The third man was writhing in pain, mumbling curses. He seemed to have forgotten all about Bob Dowling.

Bob stood up, mopped a hand across his still perspiring face, then stared once more at the three men on the ground, the three men lying motionless, helpless, impotent, the danger they represented gone. How had it happened? Oh, he knew the answer to that, but where had he found the courage to shoot it out with them? And was it courage which he had found? Did he have the answer? Did a man always feel fear, and then by the sheer power of his will draw up the courage to smother his fear?

BILL HAWES was a light sleeper. He heard the knocking on the front door. Grumbling, he rolled out of bed and pulled on his overcoat over his nightshirt. Then, with a gun in his hand, he went to see who was on the porch.

"Bob!" he gasped when he opened the door.

"Sure. It's me, Mr. Hawes," said Bob Dowling. "I've got to see Myra."

Hawes sniffed suspiciously, but could smell no liquor. He said, "Listen, Bob. Myra's asleep. It's after midnight. Can't you come around tomorrow at a more decent hour? Can't—"

"I'm not asleep, Dad," called Myra from her bedroom door.

She came forward. She said, "Maybe it's important, Dad." And then she moved past him and stepped out on the porch. She was wearing a long, heavy robe.

Hawes, still scowling and not liking this at all, remained at the door, listening while Bob talked.

"So that's the story, Myra," said Bob Dowling when he had finished telling her all that had happened. "Mobridge and another man are dead. The third is badly hurt. The sheriff has gone out there."

"And you, Bob?" asked Myra.

"I'm going back to the Wabogen valley for a while. There's a man there I have to see."

"Why?"

"I have to see him, that's all."

"So you can prove to yourself you're not a coward?"

"Yes."

"But you have already proven it, Bob. The fact that you stayed here and didn't run proves it. The fact that you faced those three men proves it."

"Maybe," said Bob. "I don't know. I've got to be sure. I can never live with myself if I'm not sure. I'll write to you, Myra, when I know."

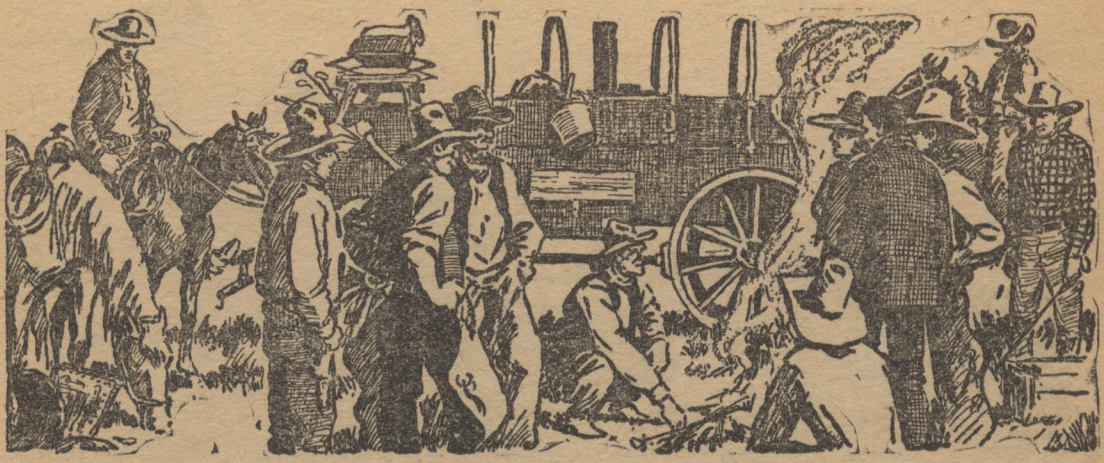
The girl shook her head. "I don't want you to write. I want you to come back."

"Then I will."

Myra stood close to him, close within the circle of his arms. "Hurry," she whispered. "Hurry. I'll be waiting."

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 67)



1. A *"petate"* is a piece of matting used to cover packs.

2. If the ranch boss sent you over to the "pie box," you should head for the chuck wagon.

3. When the cowpuncher refers to a "quaker," he is speaking of a quaking aspen.

4. True. A "pup's nest" is a prairie-dog hole, in the slang of the cowpoke.

5. The term "riding into the dust" means following someone.

6. "Riding straight up" means riding straight in the saddle, holding the reins in one hand, and holding the other arm in a raised position.

7. If a cowpoke friend said he recently had "salivated" someone, this would mean he had shot and killed somebody.

8. The term "safety first" is used in reference to riding holding onto the saddle horn.

9. A "sharp" is a type of earmark where the ear is cut along both edges so as to "point" it.

10. A practical reason for pulling the tail of a horse (out) once he had been broken, was to enable cowpunchers to tell at a distance and at a glance which horses had been broken and which had not.

11. True. A "slick" is an unbranded animal.

12. A horse is said to be "smooth" when he is unshod.

13. False. The term, "squaw hitch" refers to a type of knot.

14. According to the Texan's terminology, a "stake rope" is a picket rope, utilized in staking horses.

15. False. The term "stray" is generally used in reference to cattle which have strayed from other ranges. It is seldom used alone in reference to horses.

16. True. "Suggans" are bedding blankets or comforts.

17. If the ranch boss told you to "top off" a certain horse, you would, if you knew your business, ride this horse to wear him down a little before he was given to a less superior rider.

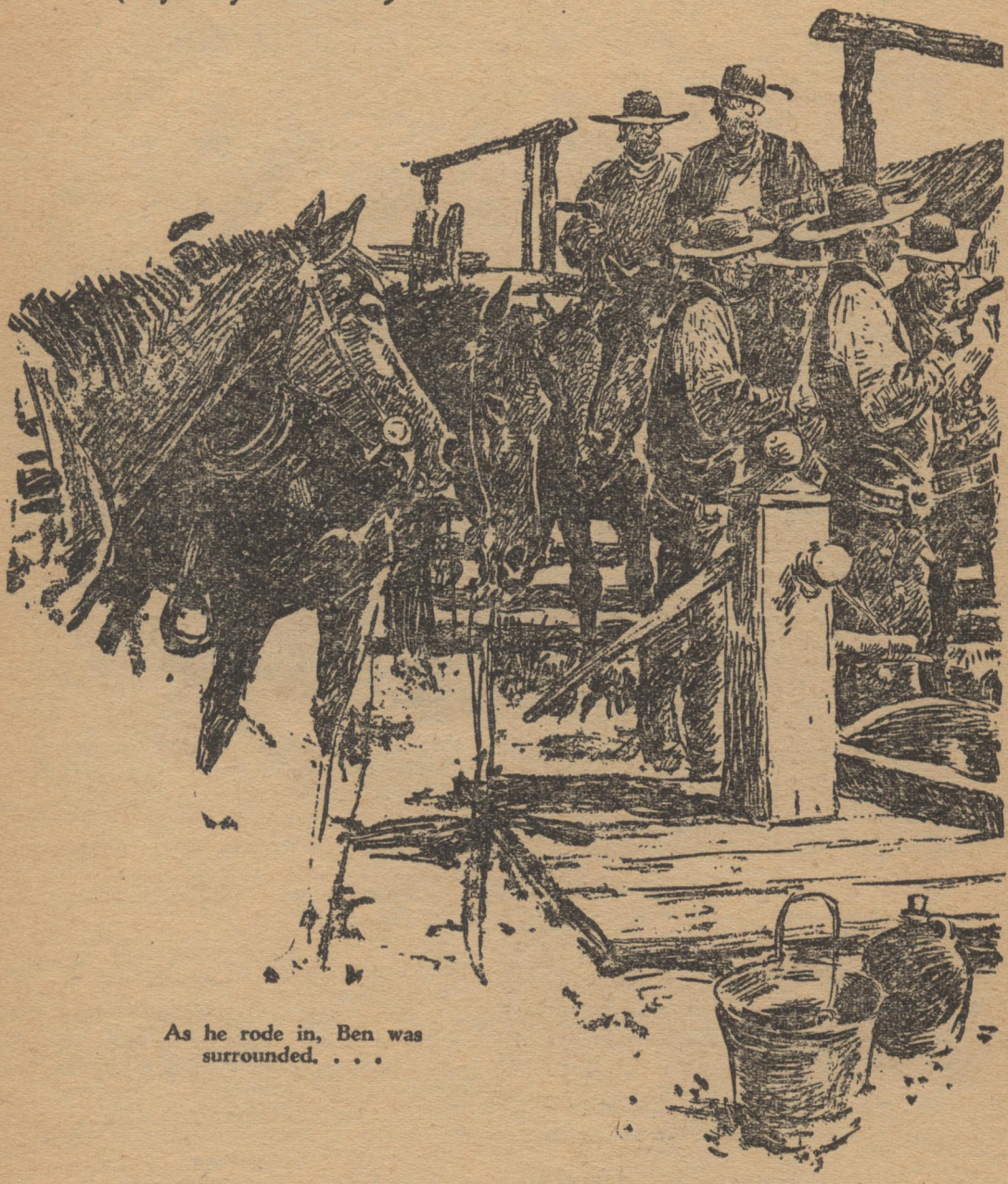
18. True. The term, "tie rope," is sometimes used as a substitute for *mecate*.

19. True. An "underhand pitch" is a heel loop generally reserved for use on cattle.

20. True. An "under-round" is a type of earmark in which a half-circle is cut from the bottom of the ear.

VENGEANCE VALLEY

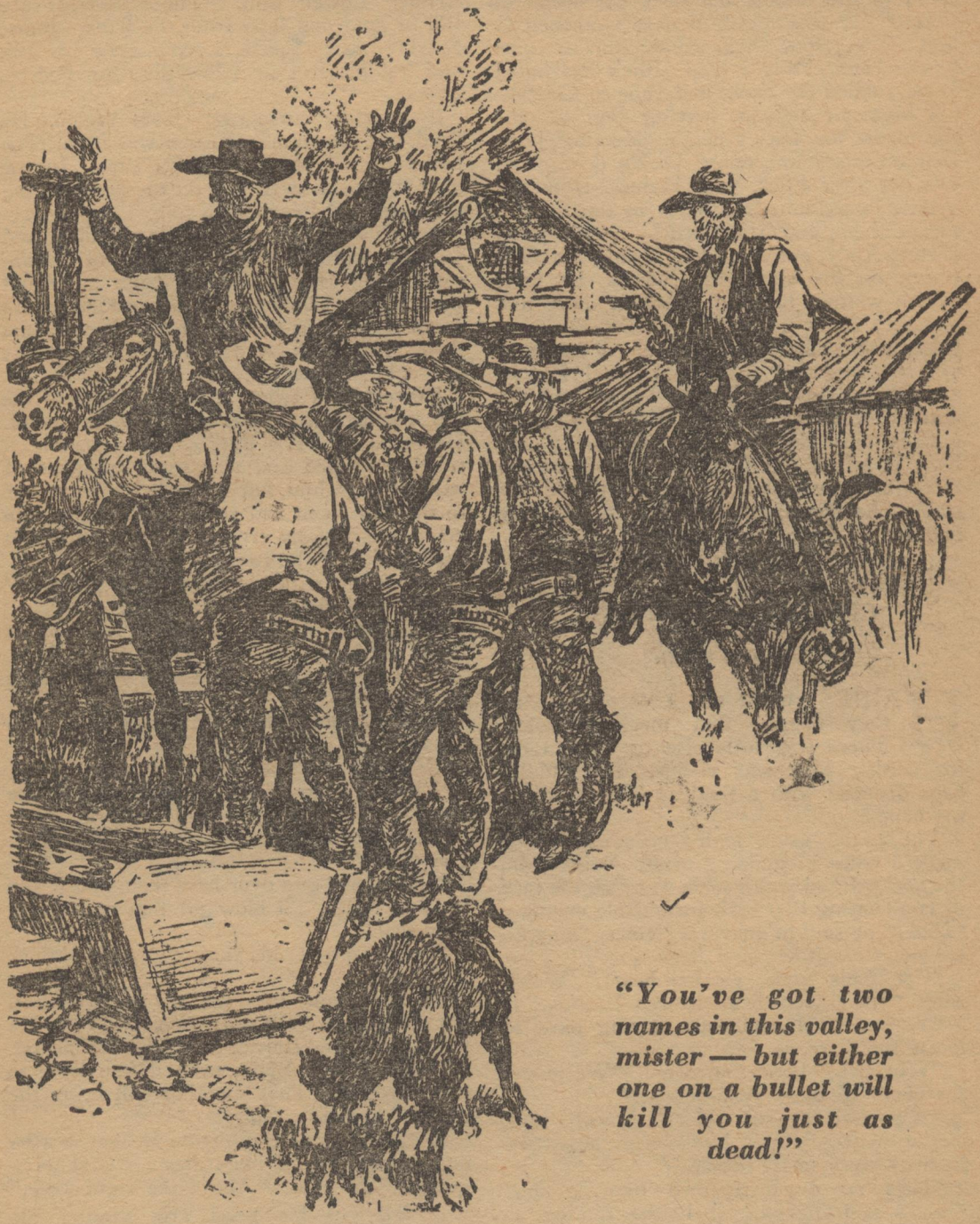
(Fifth of Six Parts)



As he rode in, Ben was surrounded. . . .

WHAT has gone before: Ben Lowell has come from Montana to the big Masan valley in Arizona to find Quince Kearney, who, twenty years before, killed Ben's mother and crippled his father, John, in a gunfight. John believes it was an accident, and wants Quince brought back to find out. Riding as Ben Lay with Kearney's henchman, Flick, Ben tries to get the password to Kearney's hideout from Jack Gill, an outlaw, but Gill is shot by Flick, before he can complete it. Coming into the valley, Ben rescues a girl, Jane, from a rattler and her brother, Dick, from lynching at the

By RALPH ANDERSON BENNITT



"You've got two names in this valley, mister — but either one on a bullet will kill you just as dead!"

hands of four punchers who think Dick is a rustler. Discovering that Dick is Kearney's son, Ben tries to question him, but Dick gets away. Coming into Dos Ramos, the valley town, Ben makes friends with Jim Beck, a deputy sheriff, and hears that Flick has telegraphed his description ahead as a train robber. Making contact with Joe Widener, the outlaws' man, Ben gets the rest of the password. In the saloon, Ben meets the four punchers from whom he rescued Dick—Spud Haines, Sticks Dow, Doug McCloud, and Raleigh Welch. They try to capture him as Ben Lay, but he disarms

them. Welch threatens to kill him. Flick appears in the saloon, but does not speak to Ben. Later that night, Ben is awakened to find a note from Dick, asking him to come to the bank. It is a trap. Flick has killed Dick, robbed the bank, and gone to Choclos, his Mexican hideout, leaving Ben to take the blame for Dick's death. Meeting Jane, Ben promises to avenge Dick's death, and sets out after Flick, with Haines, Dow and Welch in pursuit. He hides in the hills to escape them, and is warned by an old prospector, Andy, not to go to Choclos, but continues on his way. In Choclos, he finds Welch waiting for him. Flick is there too, and they shoot it out, Ben killing Flick but being wounded himself. Welch is about to kill the wounded Ben when Spud Haines and Sticks Dow stop him. Welch and the natives, who are loyal to Flick, trap Ben, Haines and Dow in the Choclos saloon. Dow is killed, but Ben and Haines escape through the cellar and a tunnel to the nearby stable. As they come out of the tunnel they find Welch waiting, gun in hand.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Six-Guns North

HAINES ripped out a deep curse as they obeyed that mocking voice. There was little else they could do, for neither Mex was visible. The saddlebags dropped with a thud as Haines raised his hands.

The sound made Pedro nervous, for he made a noise in jumping aside. Neither did the pockmarked youth seem to relish the task of confronting two such formidable enemies. "*Dios!*" he said in quavering voice, "why do we not shoot them and have done?"

"Get their guns, chicken-heart," Welch said. "Juan, keep them covered."

"You win," Lowell said, trying hard to locate the three.

"Win, hell," Haines growled. "We gunna surrender to these yella-bellies?"

"We have to surrender," Lowell said, loudly enough. "And I've always heard the Spanish were smart people—"

"He's no more Spanish than I am," Haines said angrily. He halted, fuming, as he caught on to the fact that Ben was up to something.

Lowell stamped a bootheel on the wooden floor. "There's my gun, Pedro. Come and get the gold you missed this evening and I'll tell you where there's more."

"*My* gold, Pedro," Welch barked, and glided two steps into the grain room. "Keep back, or they'll trick you."

"We only want to buy our way out, eh, Spud?" Lowell said. "These *alforjas* are full of gold and bills from the bank—Jump, Spud!" As he spoke, Lowell drew his gun and left his feet in a low dive for Pedro's knees.

A snarling curse came from Welch. He fired, but the streak of flame was high. The bullet passed above Lowell's back. In the next instant, Lowell was on the floor, taking the surprised Pedro with him.

Welch's gun crashed again. Haines and Juan fired almost together. A grunt of pain came from Haines, a yelp from the squat man. Welch's bullet struck the luckless Pedro when he fired at the tangle of bodies on the floor. Pedro's howl at Lowell's attack was suddenly chopped short.

Lowell fired twice at the entrance to the hay room. There was no answering shot. He stood up. His hurt shoulder had been roughly treated and was sending waves of pain through him, but he made his way over to the hay room and stood at the door. He could see Haines crouched on the floor at the far side of the room.

"Come out with your hands up, greaser!" Lowell barked.

"I can't," Welch wailed. "Your bullet broke my leg."

"Not me. I know I missed you. Where's my horse?"

"I know not, *señor*! In God's love, help me up."

"Where's my horse? Answer, damn you, or I'll toss a bunch of matches over into the hay!"

"No! No! He's in the first stall, unharmed. I swear it."

"Toss your gun over here then, and if you try any tricks, I'll blow off that ear, like I promised."

"Don't forget his knife, Ben," Haines whispered.

The gun came over the low partition and landed with a thud near Lowell's feet. He picked it up and shoved it into his waistband. "Fork a bronc, Spud, even if you have to ride bareback. That shooting will bring the others," he said crisply.

A dismal sound came from Haines, but he hopped up, like a huge frog. "That Mex got me," he said. "Above the right knee."

Lowell put his good arm around the rustler's thick waist, and in a series of hops they went past Boots' stall to the second one.

A shout came from Haines. "It's Peanuts! Saddled, too. These yella-bellies were all ready to grab the loot and fog it."

A moment later they were mounted and thundering through the west door of the stable. Once in the open, they turned south, away from the fire and the crowd

milling about the main street. Lurid flames lighted their way, and a few bullets whizzed about them. Again they turned, splashed across the little stream at the east of the town, and headed north.

Lowell's shoulder was giving him pain, and he saw that Haines was having trouble with his right leg, but they both could hold the saddle.

They rode until they were sure they were safe from immediate pursuit, then Lowell led the way into a dry coulee. He slid from the saddle. "Light, Spud, and let's have a look at that leg," he said.

It was an ugly gash, but the bone had been missed. Ben deftly staunched the flow of blood with a fresh kerchief from his saddlebags, and bound Haines' wound.

"Wish we had a little whiskey to pour on that rag," Lowell said. He was feeling rocky himself from his own wound. Haines looked at him.

"That's it, eh?" Haines muttered. He rummaged in his saddlebags, and brought out a bottle. "Have a snort o' this, Ben," he said gently, "then we'll have a look at your shoulder."

After a couple of drinks they both felt better. During the next hour they talked little. Each pain-ridden man tried to ease himself against the jolting as their horses trotted steadily on in the moonlight.

Lowell broke the silence. "How come Welch turned against you and Dow, Haines?"

"We had a little run-in. Welch left us in a huff."

"Not meaning to be too curious," Lowell went on, after a pause, "but I'd be surprised if there were any cows from the Tumbling T in that drive."

"You're in for a surprise, then. So's Tom Tate, and he's gunna be hoppin' mad. It couldn't be helped. The Tumbling T had to lose an even dozen critters along with some others."

"Such as the Rafter F," Lowell rasped.

"Especially the Rafter F," Haines said. "Come to think of it, all of 'em was carryin' that brand—maybe not such a good job of branding, but the buyers in these parts ain't so p'ticular."

"What brand does Quince Kearney use?"

"Kearney's brand?" Haines' voice held mild astonishment. "You don't know Kearney's brand?"

"You forgettin' I'm a stranger in these parts, Spud?"

"So you are. Wal, to tell the truth, Sticks Dow and Spud Haines were never on that spread of Kearneys. There's been a lot o' talk about a Kearney gang, maybe because he minds his own business and don't ever come up out of that holed-in valley."

"He lets Flick and his boys do the work?"

"That seems to be the story. Now that Flick's dead, I got an idea this rustling and bank robbing is gonna stop. If it does, Tom Tate won't be needin' me any more, so I'll be driftin' to some other place.'

"Where you can draw wages from some man and steal his cows? Damn you, Haines, I wish I'd let you lie there and burn."

"That's kind of rough talk, ain't it, podner?"

"If you don't like it, fill your hand! You told Dow you and Quince Kearney were the only ones who could outdraw Flick. Let's see you do it!" He was growing dizzy from his wound, but he fought to keep alert.

"You're a good man, Ben," Haines said at length. "I know what's stickin' in your craw, but it would put me in a tight if I should tell you what you want to know. Maybe Tom lost some cows, but it was part of something bigger. He don't know it yet, but a few days ago somebody bit five hundred dollars off the mortgage on his place. And it'll probably be done again."

Little of that made sense to Lowell. He felt his head whirling. "What trail you followin', feller?" he asked.

"What trail?" Haines peered at Lowell, who was by now swaying in his saddle. "Why, north, o' course. Back to Arizona. Then I'm pullin' out for South America. . . ."

The deep voice began fading out. Lowell saw a lot of reddish lights shooting about, like campfire sparks in the wind. He was dimly conscious of a thick arm supporting him to the ground before a wall of blackness loomed up and toppled over on him.

SUNLIGHT was filtering through leaves onto Lowell's face when he returned to consciousness. Glassy-eyed, he looked about, licking parched lips. He felt twinges in his left shoulder, so he rolled over to his right elbow.

"That's better, young feller," said a hearty voice. "You didn't knock over your soup that time."

The voice came from beside a small campfire, and when Lowell got his eyes in focus he made out the lone prospector with whom he had stayed on his way into Choclos. He could not remember the old fellow's name, though the face and voice were oddly familiar, as they had been before.

"That," Lowell said, "was right careless of me, mister. Where's that soup? It smells good."

"Right beside you. I was about to wake you when the coffee began boiling over. Don't you remember my giving you and your

partner some grub around ten last night?"

"Sort of. Where is he?"

"He rode away. Better get at that soup before it gets cold."

Ben sipped the soup gratefully. He felt safe for the first time in weeks.

"I'm sure obliged, mister—I've forgotten your name. Wait, I know! It's Andy. Andy Gill."

The old man shook his silvery-white head. "You're not just right in your head, young man, but you can call me Andy, like you did before. Best take another sleep and get your strength back."

Lowell did as he was bid. He fell asleep wondering about Spud Haines. That cowboy was made of steel.

He awoke toward evening, with the odor of coffee and frying bacon in his nostrils. The wizened little old prospector was busy putting food into tin dishes, and Lowell watched, trying to recall where he had known the old fellow before this last meeting. Rawling—that was the old man's name. Then it came to him. This man looked like an older edition of Jack Gill, the outlaw whom Ben had tried to save from Flick. Ben remembered now that old Andy had spoken of a son.

"Evenin', Andy," he called.

"Why, howdy! How's the shoulder? You look pert."

They talked as they ate, at least Andy did. Hungry for human companionship, he rattled on, telling of his wanderings, of his strikes and near strikes in his search for gold, but he did not mention his son. There was no doubt in Lowell's mind, though. Andy was mostly looking for his lost son.

The old man went on talking. Ben let his attention wander and began to think of Jane. . . .

". . . So, here it is," Andy was saying. He was holding out a bit of paper. "He told me to give it to you when you woke up. I stuck it under the salt can and plumb forgot it."

Aroused, Lowell took the paper and read:

> Dear Ben: I got a couple of jobs which can't wait, then I'm pulling out for you know where. So long.
>
> Spud.

"He left word," Andy said, "to look inside your vest where you kept a certain paper."

Lowell investigated and found five one-hundred dollar bills. The bank draft made out to Ben Lay was gone. Why had Haines cashed it?

"He wouldn't stay," Andy explained to the thoughtful cowboy. "After a couple of hours' sleep, he rode away."

"My partner figured I was broke," Lowell explained, "so he left this *dinero* to pay my board bill."

"I ain't never asked pay for a little grub," Andy said crossly. "What are you doin' out here, young feller?"

"Fact is, Andy," Ben said gravely, "we caught the two owlhoot gents who robbed the Dos Ramos bank. The bank offered a thousand dollar reward."

Andy nodded with satisfaction. "I reckon you're a gov'ment marshal, just as your partner said."

"I'm neither outlaw nor lawman, Andy." Lowell wondered briefly why Haines should have persisted in his belief that Ben Lay was a government man, but it didn't seem important, and anyway just then he was thinking of getting back to the Tumbling T. "Maybe," he said, "you'll give me the right steer to go through the Chiricahuas. Fact is, I don't know if I'm in Arizona or Mexico."

"You're ten miles north of the border." Andy squared his thin shoulders. "I always stay under Uncle Sam's flag. My son, Jack, used to be in the cavalry. He got his honorable discharge, but a soldier's pay isn't much. He went into these mountains looking for gold, and his ma and I haven't seen 'im since." Andy looked sharply at Lowell.

"Did he ever write?"

"Regularly, until he got into a shooting scrape a year ago. He wrote he was taking the name of Jack Gill. You mentioned that name. You've met him recently—where is he?"

"Jack's dead, Andy," Lowell said gently. "Did you ever hear of the Kearney gang?"

"Jack wasn't one of that gang," Andy said hoarsely.

"Of course not. These bank robbers Haines and I caught up with belonged to the gang. Flick and a slant-eye called Chino—those two and some others, held up a train near Gallup, New Mexico. I had thrown in with a young fellow called Jack Gill. We got separated from the posse and ran into this Kearney gang near the head of the Little Masan. We made a stand by some rocks on the mesa—where Jack's lying now."

"How'd those varmints get him?"

"In the back, with a thirty-thirty."

Dumb with misery, the old man stared into the glow of the dying fire. "I've only been fooling myself," he whispered. "Well, I can go back to ma, now. We got a right pretty place up in Idaho. If you don't mind, we'll travel together a piece. If your shoulder can stand it, we'll start in the morning." He turned away and left Ben staring at the fire.

It took a week for Lowell and Andy Rawling, accommodating the dawdling pace of Andy's burros, to reach The Tumbling T.

Except for a half-crippled old puncher who had been with Tate for fifteen years, Mrs. Tate and their daughter, Vera, were the only ones about. Tom Tate and Doug McCloud and five of their cowboys had joined a score more from neighboring ranches, and all had ridden down to a place called Choclos, Mrs. Tate said.

During the following week, the two visitors worked hard to make up for the absence of seven men. On the seventh day, they rode up beyond the headwaters of the Little Masan to the rock outcrop on the mesa, where Jack Rawling had died.

Lowell was astonished and not a little relieved to find that someone had buried the dead outlaw. A stake had been driven into the ground and marked: HERE LIES JACK GILL.

Lowell was glad the grieving father had not had to suffer the sight of bones scattered by coyotes and buzzards. Leaving the old fellow alone, Lowell walked around the big rock, trying to figure out who had buried Jack. It wasn't Flick; he wasn't that kind.

The money was in the rock crevice where Lowell had left it. He replaced the loot and rode slowly back to the little river.

THE Tumbling T Yard was alive with men and horses when he reached it alone that evening. He got scraps of talk that told him the raid on Choclos had been a success, that the stolen cows had been recovered after a brisk battle. Strangely, though, the men were in an angry mood.

Doug McCloud saw Lowell first. His lips tightened, then he gave a harsh command and a dozen guns menaced the lone L-K cowboy.

"Keep 'em high, feller," McCloud crackled. "Get his educated hardware, Wick." While the wiry little puncher was eagerly obeying, McCloud glowered at the astonished Lowell. Wick Wickwire took Ben's gun, and McCloud said, "You can put 'em down now—Mr. Quince Kearney!"

"Quince—" Lowell gasped. "You think I'm Quince Kearney?" The sardonic humor of it hit him so hard he sat down on the edge of the horse-watering trough, put his head between his hands, and laughed until the tears came.

In exasperation, young Wickwire cursed and pushed the unsuspecting "Kearney" over into the water. "Laugh at that, damn you!" he yelled. "Get a rope, somebody, and we'll hang this jasper to the nearest limb!"

"That's it," shouted several of the punchers from nearby ranches. "He'll laugh hisself to death that way," one added. Ben pulled himself out of the trough, dripping.

"Wait a minute!" McCloud shouted. "He'll get a fair trial. Wait till Tom comes out!"

Tom Tate was already coming out of the house, buckling on his gunbelt, and Lowell turned to Wickwire, who had pushed him into the trough.

"That's a dirty trick when it ain't in fun," he said in a mild voice. "You haven't grown up yet, or I'd do more than this!" As he ended, his open hand swung around. There was a loud smack, the wiry young puncher went down, and rolled completely over. He bounded to his feet, spitting oaths, eyes burning with anger. "You dirty cow thief, you'll pay for that!" he cried, and drew his gun. "Where's that rope?"

"None o' that!" Tom Tate broke in. He caught Wick's wrist, twisted it, then kicked the gun away when it fell. His blue eyes were frosty as he stared at Lowell. "Don't get any wrong ideas because I chipped in. I only did it because you don't have your hog-leg on you."

"Thanks, anyway," Lowell said coldly.

"Ain't nobody gunna blame you for slapping him," Tom went on. "He had no call to mix pleasure with business. Maybe you're all right, but you're the only one here who thinks so. Now, if you ain't Quince Kearney, then what in time is your name?"

"Ask Jim Beck. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"We did that," Tom growled. "He wouldn't say. He said he'd promised not to tell. What brand you carryin' on that horse?" he asked Ben.

"Have a look," Lowell said. He knew they would, anyway. The L-K brand was under Boots' flowing mane; let them hunt for it. "Where's Spud Haines?" he asked sharply. "He knows I'm not Kearney."

McClould spat. "He's on his way to South America," he said sourly. "He's all right, Spud is. He told us Flick murdered young Kearney and that you shot it out with Flick and that slant-eyed jasper."

"We're beholden to you for that," Tom Tate put in, "and for gettin' the bank's money back. Spud left us after we crossed the border, but he took the *dinero* back to the bank, all right. We stopped in Dos Ramos long enough to learn that."

Lowell felt glad Haines had done that. He understood now, what the big fellow's "two jobs" were—leading these cowboys back to the stolen cows and returning the money to the bank.

"So he took his thousand dollars reward," McCloud added, "and lit out for Argentina."

"That's fine," Lowell said, "but what gave you gents the idea I'm Quince Kearney? If I were would I be likely to kill a couple of my men? Anyhow, to be Dick's father,

Quince would have to be as old as Tom or Haines."

"You could be Dick's brother," McCloud snapped. "How would we know how you rannies of the owlhoot trail are related? You're all plenty handy with your hardware. You ride into this country and Beck recognizes you immediate as Ben Lay, the train robber. He has the description of you even to the mole under your right ear and the stockings on your cayuse."

"Show us whether you got a mole or not," Tom said.

"No need to," young Wickwire cried. "Here's an 'L-K' under his hoss's mane, plain as day. C'mon, let's take 'im. Everybody knows L-K is Quince Kearney's brand!"

"What?" Lowell cried. He felt amazed and just then a little chagrined that Kearney should have clung to the old brand, which his father still used up in Montana. "That brand doesn't prove I'm Kearney!" he protested. The crowd started to shout him down.

Tom Tate tried to calm the eager men. "You rannies hold your horses," he bellowed. This gent gets a fair trial if I have to lay out every man myself and then hang Ben Lay all by my lonesome. Now mister, what you got to say?"

"What makes you think I'm Quince Kearney?" Ben asked.

"Raleigh Welch told us," McCloud answered. "He rode up from Choclos and told us how Kearney has been down there with the stolen cows, and how Kearney shot it out during a quarrel with two of his men and killed them both. He said it was Kearney who stopped us from hanging young Dick that day—described you to a T. You shot Dow and tried to get him, Raleigh said, because he wouldn't let you steal his girl. Then you set fire to the *cantina,* crawled out through a tunnel with Spud Haines, and fogged it."

"Looks like I was pretty busy," Lowell said dryly. "I'm betting that the towhead didn't catch up with you until Haines was out of sight." He stared wonderingly at the Tumbling T boss. "You gents aren't taking the word of a dirty halfbreed against mine. I know that."

"Darn your onry hide," Doug grumbled, though there was a twinkle in his blue eye, "you've got a way of makin' a man believe you're ace-high when he knows good and well you're not. But how you gunna explain that L-K brand?"

"Easy." Lowell turned to the Tumbling T owner. "Tom, if you'll hold these boys here where they can throw down on me if I run, I'll take Doug off a piece and clear up the whole mess in five minutes."

"I'd be plumb s'prised to see you run," Tom grunted. "Go along, Doug, but keep your eyes peeled." McCloud grumbled, but stepped over to Ben, and they walked away together.

Then, for the first time, Lowell revealed his whole purpose as well as his true name. He told of that scene of twenty years ago and what followed, and showed Doug the faded daguerrotype he had found on Flick. When the L-K cowboy had ended his story, Doug reached out and gripped Lowell's hand. "Dang, Ben, I reckon that clears you complete," he said. "You've got my word not to let it out until you say."

"If you'll do what I've been planning, we'll clean out that nest in one day," Ben said. He sketched his plan, and presently they returned to the curious spectators.

"I was all wrong, boys," Doug said in a clear voice, "and I'm apologizin' right now. So are you, Wick. You're too hotheaded for your own good. Shake hands with the finest gent that ever hit the Masans."

Lowell reddened. "I'm right sorry I swung on you, Wick, but you touched my sore shoulder."

Wick shook hands, grinning sheepishly. "Me, I ain't never gunna monkey with no buzz-saw again," he said.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Into Kearney's Hideout

THE sun was low in the west a week later when Lowell rode up the valley of the Big Masan. To take that outlaws' stronghold by assault alone seemed impossible, and Lowell's heart pounded as he thought of McCloud and his cowboys, who were to come up before dawn.

Knowing he was being watched by keen eyes, Lowell halted four hundred yards south of the cleft and raised his hand in the outlaws' salute. There was no answering sign. He rode on.

McCloud had reluctantly agreed to Lowell's "fool stunt." He had said, "Don't trust any outlaw. If Flick distrusted you in Gallup, he and Kearney may have rigged up some new passwords."

The next few minutes were the most trying of Lowell's life. Only the thought of that beloved cripple in Montana held him steadily on his way. It would be less terrifying if someone showed himself and began shooting. His pulse hammered in his ears as he studied the raging river.

"What trail yuh follerin'?" a man's voice boomed. It was Peewee Jones.

Beside the giant outlaw two more heads appeared above a low masonry wall twenty

feet above the ground. All three were looking at the intruder along rifle sights.

"South!" Lowell bawled. He could only recognize the giant Peewee. The great, black-bearded face was wide with apparent good humor, and that recalled Jack Rawling's warning: *Don't let Peewee's laughing fool you. He likes to get a man between his paws and break his back.*

"How was the trail? Wet or dry?"

"Mojado, hombre!" With the uncomfortable thought that Widener might have deliberately misled him, Lowell steeled himself against the crash of rifles.

Peewee bellowed in laughter. "You got it right, however you got it. Light and stay put." A knotted rope dropped over the wall, down which the big man came with the ease of a gymnast. "Shake, Ben Lay," he roared, and put out his huge hand.

"Not me, Peewee." Lowell drew back a step. "Not meaning to be impolite, but I only have this one good hand."

Brows knitted, Peewee bent over, and his piggy-small eyes seemed lost when they wrinkled shut in laughter. He slapped his big thigh. "Damm, if that ain't good!" he roared. "Boys, here's a gent what ain't afraid to say he's scairt to shake hands with Peewee. I don't blame you, feller. I seen that eddicated hand work in Moke's place."

"Where else did you hear about it, Peewee?"

The giant put both hands on his hips as he regarded the slim, cool-voiced stranger. "Gallup was one place; the Little Masan was another. I reckon you've come by your rep honestly. Anyhow, when the chief rode through here—what you want up here, anyhow?"

Lowell did not miss that break in what the slow-witted giant was about to reveal. The "chief" did go out now and then. "I'm looking for Quince Kearney," he said.

"Gotta have more'n that, feller."

"This confab is private. Ben Lay is no tinhorn. Any deal he makes has to be with the chief himself. How in hell do I get through this slot?"

"He may take you on," Peewee replied after a long five seconds. "You gotta pass his test. Go back twenty yards and cross over by that string of boulders. There's a shelf of rock all the way through about six inches under water."

"Thanks, Peewee. I'll be seeing you."

The slot was twenty feet wide and two hundred yards long. Lowell rode through without difficulty, although little of the fading light of day came down from the top of that hundred foot cleft. At the head of the gorge began a pleasant green valley.

Directly across the rushing river was a ledge which gave access to the bench where Peewee and his men were stationed.

Lowell gave up a sudden idea of crossing then and there. The ledge was about two feet above the water, and Boots could not get a foothold, even if he swam across the fast-flowing stream. Moreover, three riders were headed that way, obviously to relieve Peewee and his two companions.

The three riding south along the opposite bank of the river were strangers. They looked to be hard-bitten, easy riding gents, each armed with two hand guns and a rifle.

Lowell felt terribly alone. Suppose he succeeded in wounding Kearney? How would he get him past all these guards? It was unlikely that Quince would come willingly. He would have to be dragged out.

Jane would suffer the consequences no matter how the meeting came out.

"Even if I live," Ben muttered, "I'll lose her."

As he looked over the lush meadows dotted with fat cattle, he wondered if he were ever to have a home.

With a curse, he broke away from these gentler feelings. It was from here that these hard-bitten outlaws had come out on such jobs as in Gallup and Dos Ramos. Flick had carried out those raids, but Kearney's shrewd brain and command of men had held the band together and made it a success.

Lowell rode up to a hitchrail outside a neat white picket fence, expecting to be challenged by the men who were lounging about the bunkhouse and barn east of the house. The place looked like any prosperous ranch.

The men stared with curiosity at the stranger riding up, but no one came nearer when Lowell dismounted. That spoke volumes for Kearney's organization. Once a man was inside, he belonged, and that was enough.

After opening the front gate, Lowell walked up a gravel path toward the wide porch. A light streaming through the front windows showed a man and a woman there. They watched the stranger's approach; the woman stopped rocking her chair.

With the aid of a cane, the man limped across the porch to the top of the steps. He loomed large against a lighted window as he leaned over and peered down at his visitor. "Come up and set, stranger," he invited, his face in shadow.

Lowell paused at the bottom step and took off his black hat. This was the end of the long trail! The relief of it made him want to yell. Then came a sudden burning curiosity to meet, at last, the man who had such a wide reputation, but whom no one seemed to know.

There was a familiar timber in Kearney's

deep voice, however, perhaps because of Jane and Dick, that set Lowell's nerves to jangling. "Are you Quince Kearney?" he asked.

"That's me." The outlaw laughed quietly. "Did you ride in to read the brands on my beef, Ben Lay?"

Lowell stepped back, and a red mist began swirling about in his brain. It was Spud Haines!

SO SUDDEN was the overturn of all Lowell's plans and ideas that for a space of time he could neither move nor speak. He stood and stared.

"So Spud Haines and Quince Kearney are the same, are they?" he got out finally.

"So the Ben Lay and the Ben—" Kearney's pause was deliberate— "The Ben Jane told us about are the same, eh? Well, well."

"Quincy," rebuked the woman, getting up, "are you going to keep a guest standing up?" Kearney turned to her.

"My mistake. Leah, this is Ben Lay. Ben, meet Mrs. Kearney. Make yourselves acquainted while I tell the Chink to rustle up some grub."

"Thanks, I'm not hungry."

"Oh, but have a bite," Mrs. Kearney said.

Kearney patted his wife's shoulder. "Take it easy, mother. Ben and I will have a little drink back in my office. We have to drink to our good luck, don't we, Ben?"

His seeming ease was good acting. Nettled as he was by Kearney's hidden meaning, Lowell still marveled at the ease with which "Haines" had deceived them all. Here he was a man of culture and standing, but on the Tumbling T and elsewhere he had been an illiterate cowpoke.

Lowell followed the stalwart figure into a central hall, his every sense alert.

Ben heard music as the two men paused at one end of a great living room, tastefully and expensively furnished. Jane was seated at a piano, and when she saw who was with her father, her mouth opened and one hand went to it.

For a moment she and Lowell only looked at each other.

The silence lasted but a few seconds, then Jane gave a little cry and came toward the two men with hands outstretched. "Hello, Ben," she said.

"Hello, Jane," he got out awkwardly.

Jane saw that something was brewing.

She looked from one man to the other with curiosity. "Daddy, do you and Ben know each other?" she asked.

"We ought to." Kearney forced a laugh. "We helped each other out of a couple of tight fixes, didn't we, Ben?"

Lowell nodded, though anger flushed his face. At another time, a woman had come between the man she loved and that man's enemy. She had died. "Those *were* tight fixes," Lowell drawled. "That time when my horse bogged down and you threw a long loop that got us out."

"And that other time," Quince returned evenly, "when my cayuse stepped into a gopher hole and you picked me up before those stampeding cows got to me—evened the score, eh?"

Lowell nodded, because Jane was looking at him in wonder. Intuition may have warned her that things were not as they would have her believe. "What bog? What stampede? I've never heard of them before, nor of you, Ben, till—" she gave him a quick smile—"till the day you shot that rattlesnake."

Lowell tried to return the smile, but the skin felt too tight over his cheekbones. What had happened that day did not make sense now. He drew back. "Have to be getting along, Jane," he said, after a moment.

"But you've just come!"

"Run along, pet, and stay with mother," Quince said. "Ben has come on business, and he's anxious to get away." The outlaw's face was a frozen mask. He turned toward his office, and Ben followed him.

Kearney opened the door to a lighted room half way down the long hall, then stood back for his guest to enter first.

The gesture of courtesy only put Lowell on his guard.

"After you, Mister Kearney."

"So, you don't trust me behind you, eh, Ben Lowell?"

"The score's even. You said so."

The room was large, more a den than an office. Kearney limped with his cane to a flat desk set endwise against a bay window. The shades were drawn, but the windows were open. Lowell shut and locked the door behind him.

Kearney made no comment. With a wave of his hand he indicated a chair.

"I don't trust you enough even to take a chair, Kearney."

"Thanks. I know where I stand now. I was going to offer you a drink and a cigar but—" Kearney went to a sideboard, poured whiskey and tossed it off neat. He lighted a cigar. "Mind if I sit at my own desk?" he asked.

"Just keep your hand out of the drawer."

Kearney let himself down into a swivel chair. The arm rest made it difficult for him to draw a gun, even if he had buckled on the big .45 hanging in its belt by the fireplace mantle. He drummed on a green blotter with the fingers of his right hand. The bandage on the finger was gone now.

He examined the stump and a rumbling laugh came from his deep chest. "Queer, ain't it, how a man can handle a six-gun better without that first joint than he can with it?"

"He could," Lowell agreed, "if he files off the trigger dog and fans the hammer like I do."

"Your old man and I both did that," Kearney said. "I reckon he taught you."

"He taught me a lot."

A silence fell during which each man measured the other. Lowell finally frowned. "When did you find out I was Ben Lowell?"

"About a second after you shot off my finger. You moved like your Dad. You look like—" Kearney swept a hand across his face. "What the hell's the difference? You came here to get me and I know it. You can believe it or not, as you damn please, but I told the boys to let you in if you showed up."

"I believe you." Lowell could not help but admire the man's cool nerve. He had not even bothered to arm himself. "Did Flick tell you he'd seen me in Gallup; rather, did he send you word so you knew I was coming?"

"Flick's dead. You gave him what he had coming and saved me the trouble. Forget Flick."

"You were expecting me, so it was you, not Flick, who gave Jim Beck that close description of Ben Lay, the train robber."

Kearney shook his head. Ashes fell from his cigar to his lap. "No," he said.

"You and Joe Widener," Ben said, "were the only ones around here who actually knew of that mole on the right side of my neck."

Kearney nodded. "You were a kid of four the last time I saw it. It was about the size of a dime."

"So then you told Flick about it. He tapped a telegraph wire somewhere and sent the description of me to Beck."

"Hold on. I read the message Beck got about you, and there was nothing in it about a mole. I didn't tell anybody about it because I had forgotten you had a mole. Flick must have remembered it from the old days."

"All right, forget it," Lowell said. "The first time I saw you, Kearney, you pulled the trick which threw me completely off. You were about to hang your own son. Explain that."

"You're smart, Ben," Quince said, "but there's a lot you don't savvy. In the first place, we weren't going to hang the lad. We were only running a windy on McCloud so he'd be sure we weren't with the Kearney gang that people had begun to talk about."

"It was a good thing for Dick I cut the rope."

"I'm beholden to you for that, Ben. Dick saw how things stood for me, and that hanging business was his suggestion. Dow fixed a loose knot so Dick wouldn't be hurt."

"And Welch made the knot tight."

Kearney's face darkened. "Dow got his rope, but he didn't tell me what he found until the night we hit Choclos. That's why we had the ruckus with the greaser."

"What else don't I savvy?"

"Plenty." Kearney laughed. "This ought to give you a free hand if you've been feeling tied up. Jane and Dick aren't my kids.

They're my wife's by her first marriage."

Lowell tried to conceal his joy at the news. Face flushed, he stepped back.

Kearney chuckled. "I think a lot of her, myself, Ben."

"You must, to bring her out here to live with a gang of murdering outlaws!"

"Bueno," Kearney said after a moment. "You've got me carded for a badman, so I'll let it go at that. You came here with something on your chest."

"You know why I came, Kearney. It's taken me a year to catch up with you. After you left Montana, you went to Colorado. The trail wasn't too dim for a while—cattle stealing and stagecoach holdups eighteen to twenty years ago. Then it broke clean off."

"Sure." Kearney's face was gray now, and his black eyes stared steadily at Ben.

"Prison, wasn't it, Kearney?" Ben asked.

"Damn you!" Kearney burst out. "That's just like a Lowell! Gimme a gun and you won't talk like that."

"I will pretty soon." From a vest pocket, Ben drew out a wilted paper. "Here's a message Dad sent to you," he said, holding it up.

"Let's see it."

"Keep your shirt on and you will," Lowell said savagely. "Don't forget, your bullet killed my mother and crippled my Dad—"

"It was an accident," Kearney said.

"That's what Dad thinks, but I don't. He told me all about it a year ago. How you accused him of stealing L-K cows and selling 'em on the side. You two stood there and drew at the same time. Only Dad stopped his draw when mother rushed in, and you didn't."

"I didn't see her in time!"

"You expect me to believe that? How could she have taken two or three steps while you two were drawing?"

Kearney came to his feet and stood swaying. His bleak gaze wandered to the fireplace and a sardonic grin twisted his lips. "Gimme that gun and I'll show you! Go ahead, don't be scared. You can dump out the cartridges first."

Kearney caught the empty gun which Ben tossed to him. "I ought to have my belt and holster but this will do," he said. "Notice! When I draw a gun, my right foot is forward. You and your Dad, most men, have their left foot forward. Now, imagine that fireplace is the door where your mother was standing without either of us having seen her."

"Dad did."

"Shut up, you young fool! I don't give a damn about you or your sneak of a father. I only want to clear myself."

"Prove it! Then I'll prove Dad was too soft-hearted to believe a murdering outlaw could have shot a mere woman in the back!"

Kearney brought back his right arm as if to hurl the empty gun. Eyes blazing, he stood panting. Rage twitched the muscles of his face. "I aim to prove it," he said in a choked voice. "After that, I'll tell you something, and then I'm going to string you up back of the barn."

"That sounds more like you."

"Watch!"

Footsteps sounded in the hall, then some one rapped on the door. "What you want, boss?" boomed a voice.

"Nothing, Peewee." Kearney darted a look of unholy joy at his visitor when Lowell drew his gun. "I was just showing an old friend the right move in checkers. If I need you, I'll let you know." With a grin, he turned back to Ben.

Lowell listened to Peewee Jones' departing steps toward the rear of the house, then circled wide of the big outlaw to go to the desk. He lifted the blotter and found a push-button nearly flush with the top. Kearney had warned his men.

The top drawers of the desk did not disclose the gun he was half expecting to find, but there were two fine wires which ran down through the floor.

He yanked the wires loose and looked up. "Got a galvanic battery somewhere, eh? A Kearney trick," he jeered.

The outlaw shrugged disdain. "You aren't near so bright as your old man. If I'd wanted help, that door would have come in as if it were so much paper. In two minutes, the house would be surrounded."

"And you'd be shot full of holes?"

"You wouldn't shoot a man unless he had a gun on 'im. I'll say that at least for a Lowell."

Lowell circled back to the door. "You were going to prove how you shot—"

"Watch! Remember your mother came by the door where the fireplace is. Notice my back comes square to the fireplace when my right foot comes forward? My gun—"

"Hell! You could have seen her from the tail of your eye."

"Come over to the light," Kearney said in suppressed excitement, "and you'll learn something no one, not even your old man, knows. I can't see from the corners of my eyes, because there's a cloud in each one. Look across the eyeball toward the light."

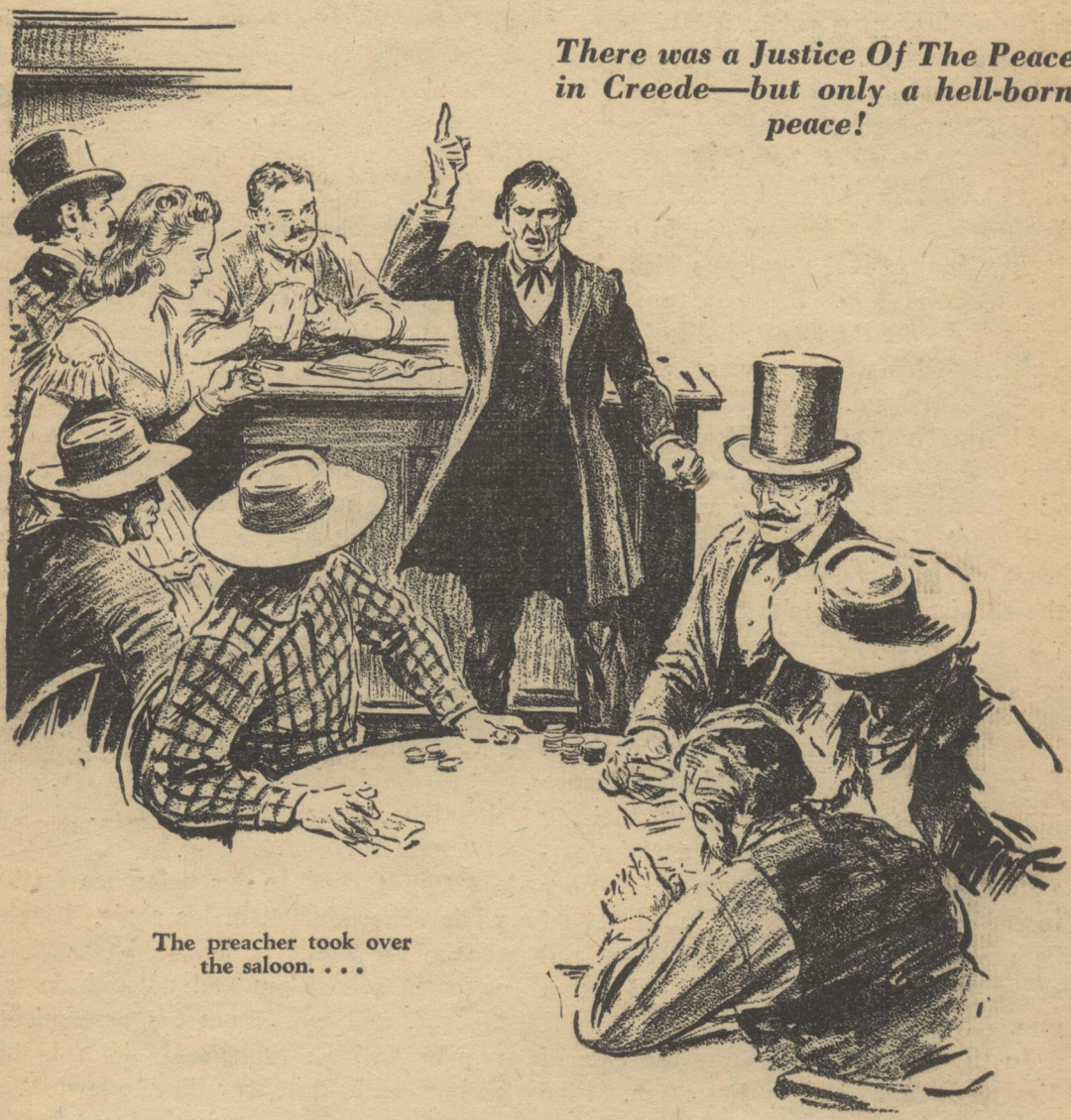
Lowell did, and after one glance he stepped back with a gasp. There was a faint nimbus on each eyeball, enough to satisfy him that Quince's sidewise vision was defective. Only then did he recall Kearney's habit of turning his head when he looked at something. Quince Kearney had cleared himself!

To Be Concluded

BLOOD NIGHT

By HARRY VAN DEMARK

There was a Justice Of The Peace in Creede—but only a hell-born peace!



The preacher took over the saloon. . . .

IT WAS nearly eighty years ago that Nicholas Creede made his trip from Willow Creek, Colorado, down the valley of the Rio Grande, carrying the news of his discovery of a tremendous silver-bearing lode—a mine which he had named, with curious significance, the Last Chance.

The rush to the new location began. Thousands of miners and prospectors struggled through the snows to the upper reaches of the river and into the hills. An extension of the railway was pushed up Wagon Wheel Gap twelve miles to the little settlement which was first known as Jimtown.

Some sentimentalist, observing the coloration of the rock outcrop, named it

Amethyst, and the town worked under this name for a few months. Then it became officially Creede, and has thus remained.

Before the rush there were perhaps thirty cabins in the gulch. Within a year it was a city of 17,000 adventurous souls.

Among the early arrivals was Tony Gavin, afterward the Honorable Anthony Gavin, Attorney General of the State of Colorado in the cabinet of Governor Waite. Even at this time, Gavin had the highly impressive dignity which later distinguished him. He wore a silk hat and a Prince Albert coat, both of vintage years, and his whiskers were, to say the least, picturesque.

He was Justice of the Peace in Creede and practiced law on the side, such as it was in what at that time was a virtual No Man's Land. There was some argument about surveys of county lines, and the district immediately surrounding that part of the valley didn't seem to belong to anybody.

Those who had staked claims up Willow Creek Gulch in the rush after Nick Creede had located his Last Chance mine had a good deal of a job to hang onto their claims. To leave a claim unwatched was simply to invite the jumper to get busy. Sometimes the jumper could be dislodged by process of law—and sometimes he had to be argued out with a gun.

In the latter category was the case of Jimmy Pike and Bug Patterson. Pike had been prospecting in the hills for some months and finally came upon a promising outcrop. There was little of it visible on the surface, and Pike decided to drift in from lower down the slope to see if he could cut the vein.

After he had worked the claim for a month or so, he had drifted about twenty feet. He opened up the entrance sufficiently to make a fair-sized room, big enough to contain a camp bed, a few cooking utensils and supplies. He boarded up the entrance and dug himself in, all set for some extensive mining operations.

Then one day Pike fell and broke his arm and had to go over to the hospital at Pueblo. He was gone six weeks. When he returned to Creede and went up the trail to his claim, he got a disagreeable surprise. In the doorway was a tall, bewhiskered person, a dangerous looking forty-five in his holster, a Winchester casually resting in the crook of his arm.

There was no use arguing under the circumstances, but Pike wanted to know what the interloper was doing there.

"I'm reckonin' on doin' some work on this yere claim of mine," said the man behind the guns.

Jimmy turned and walked back to camp and went straight to the office of Tony Gavin. He told the lawyer what had happened.

"What did you say this claim jumper's name was?" Tony inquired.

"Didn't say, but he looked like this Bug Patterson from Silverton way, the feller they accused of bein' a hoss thief."

"Look like he was ready to do some shootin' when you talked to him?"

"Sure did."

Gavin turned to his reference books, while Pike fidgeted in his chair. Finally the lawyer said, "If a man has a claim properly staked out and entered on the records, and works out his assessments regular and on time, said claim is his and he can hold it, according to law. Was your first assessment worked out before you broke your arm?"

"All but one day," said Pike.

"Well, there you are. You just missed out. Now this Patterson man has a shade the best of it. He's in possession and will probably do some shooting if you monkey with him. You ain't got a case, Pike. Fifteen dollars, please."

Pike silently paid over the three five dollar bills and started for the door.

"Reckon I'll have to see Patterson," he said.

THE next afternoon Gavin and some friends were playing stud in the back room of Doc Pratt's drug-store. A man came in hunting for the doctor, who was also the coroner.

"Say, Doc," he said, "there's a couple of dead men up by Jimmy Pike's claim. Both of 'em shot through the heart, looks like. One's a chap named Patterson. The other's Jimmy Pike."

"Hell!" exclaimed Tony Gavin. "I told him he didn't have a case. Your deal, Lon."

Creede, as an entity, did not realize that it was without the visible means of salvation until the coming of Parson Reed. In other words, it had not thought much about being without a church or a minister of the gospel. Thomas Reed had done a great work among the unregenerate in Denver.

Somebody had told him that away down in the mountains some four hundred miles from Denver there was a new mining camp which had no church, and no minister to lead them into the paths of righteousness. He decided to go down there.

William B. "Bat" Masterson, with Marty Watrous, had opened a restaurant, saloon and gambling house in Creede. It was a big place, and run on the square. Anyone who ever knew Masterson will know that that's the only way he would have it.

Along one side was a mahogany bar, one of the finest in all Colorado. Back of this were the usual mirrors, glasses, bottles and appliances. In front of the bar, filling a wide space, were many small tables. In the back part of the room was a space devoted to the devices for testing a man's skill at keno, roulette, faro, craps, chuck-a-luck, stud or straight draw.

When it became known that Parson Reed had decided to come down and lead Creede's sinners to the mourner's bench, Masterson and Watrous promptly offered the use of this big room for his endeavors.

It was Cy Warman, the engineer poet, who wrote the lines which gave the camp much advertising:

It's day all day in the daytime,
And there is no night in Creede.

Also, there were no Sundays, as such, so far as camp activities were concerned, and camp activities meant the carrying on of such things as were considered necessary. Gambling was one of them.

Consequently the Sunday on which Parson Reed chose to perform his first operations was not particularly different from other Sundays. A committee met the parson at the railroad station, conducted him to the Brainard House, saw that he was properly cared for, and arranged the time of the meeting for seven o'clock that evening.

Word passed around the camp, and when the time came for the service the place was jam-packed. Business at the bar was flourishing and every gambling table had more than its quota of players.

Bat Masterson escorted the reverend gentleman to a place at the end of the bar and asked with all possible courtesy if he'd have something.

"Not now," said the minister. "I'll wait till after the services, then I'll have a glass of milk."

His Bible lay open on the bar. Masterson rapped for order and asked Lon Hartigan to introduce the speaker. Hartigan was a big, handsome Irishman, an ex-newspaperman. With an eloquent flow of oratory, he introduced Parson Reed.

Meanwhile, play at the tables had stopped. The players turned their chairs to face the minister and settled back comfortably. Big Dan Butler, the bartender, casually wiped a glass—the same glass—

(Continued on page 127)

TALES of the

by LEE

GAMBLING QUEEN

NOBODY EVER RIGHTLY KNEW WHO SHE WAS OR WHERE SHE CAME FROM. SHE WAS IN HER TWENTIES, BEAUTIFUL, AND WITH INNOCENT, BIG BROWN EYES--UNTIL ONE LOOKED CLOSELY. SHE SPOKE WITH A TRACE OF A FRENCH ACCENT, REMINISCENT OF NEW ORLEANS, AND CARRIED HERSELF LIKE A LADY.

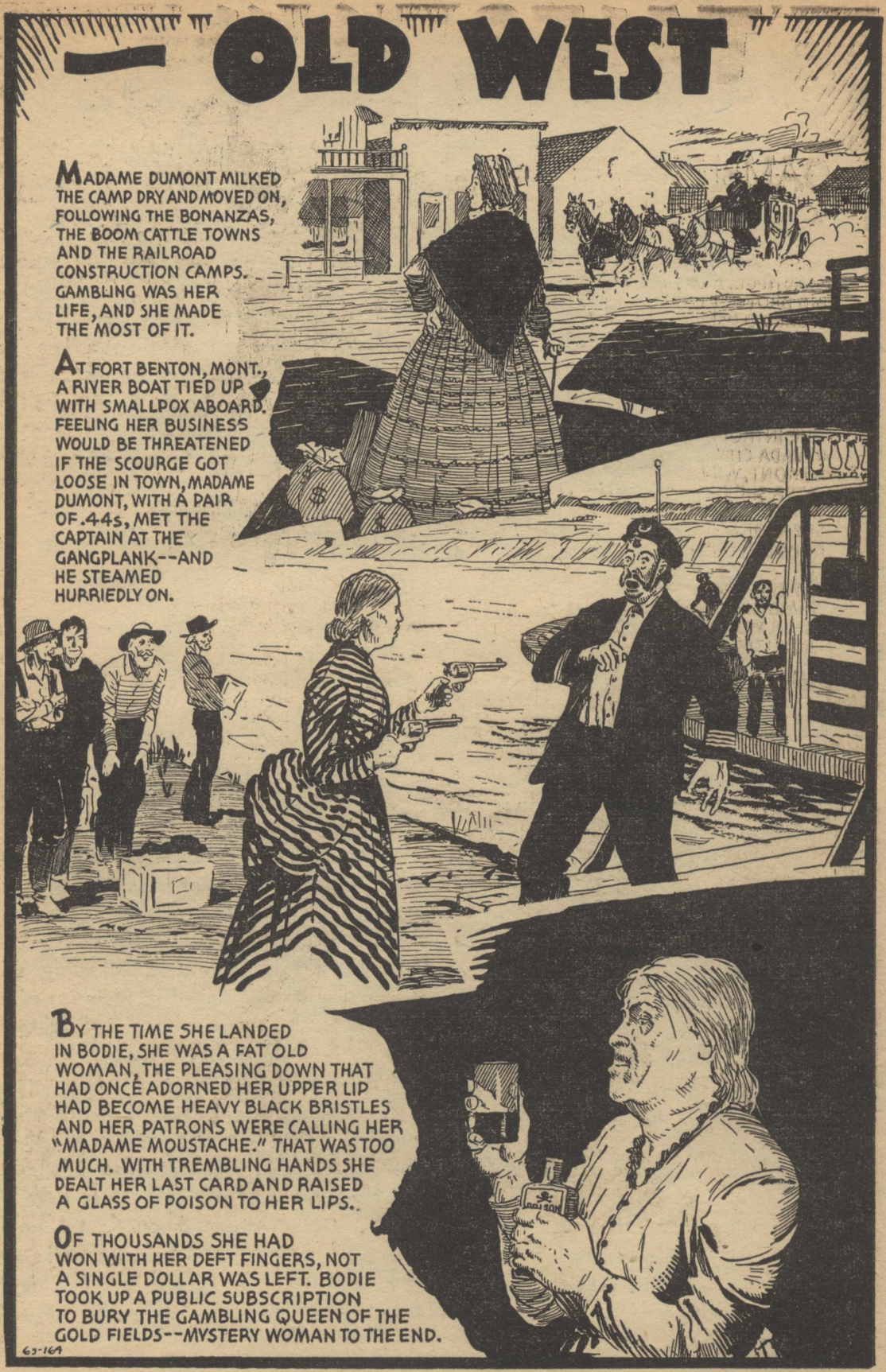
SHE INTRODUCED HERSELF TO NEVADA CITY IN '54 AS ELEANOR DUMONT, WIDOW--THOUGH LATER SHE BECAME KNOWN BY A DIFFERENT NAME. TO MANY SHE LOOKED FAMILIAR, THOUGH NOBODY COULD QUITE PLACE HER.

AFTER LOOKING OVER THE ROARING GOLD-RUSH CAMP, SHE OPENED A PLUSH GAMBLING ESTABLISHMENT AND PRESIDED AT THE MAIN TABLE, WHERE ONLY VINGT-ET-UN WAS PLAYED, HERSELF. MADAME DUMONT DEALT LIKE A PROFESSIONAL, AND ONLY FOR THE HIGHEST STAKES.

THE ROISTERING, WELL-HEELED PROSPECTORS FOUGHT FOR THE PRIVILEGE OF TOSSING THEIR POKES ON HER TABLES AND THEIR HEARTS AT HER FEET. SHE TOOK THE FORMER BUT REJECTED THE LATTER WITH A SAD SMILE.

WHEN ONE MINER, CLEANED OF HIS DUST, BOORISHLY SUGGESTED THAT HER DEALING WAS NOT ETHICAL, EAGER HANDS HEAVED HIM THROUGH A PLATE-GLASS WINDOW.

OLD WEST


MADAME DUMONT MILKED THE CAMP DRY AND MOVED ON, FOLLOWING THE BONANZAS, THE BOOM CATTLE TOWNS AND THE RAILROAD CONSTRUCTION CAMPS. GAMBLING WAS HER LIFE, AND SHE MADE THE MOST OF IT.
AT FORT BENTON, MONT., A RIVER BOAT TIED UP WITH SMALLPOX ABOARD. FEELING HER BUSINESS WOULD BE THREATENED IF THE SCOURGE GOT LOOSE IN TOWN, MADAME DUMONT, WITH A PAIR OF .44s, MET THE CAPTAIN AT THE GANGPLANK--AND HE STEAMED HURRIEDLY ON.
BY THE TIME SHE LANDED IN BODIE, SHE WAS A FAT OLD WOMAN, THE PLEASING DOWN THAT HAD ONCE ADORNED HER UPPER LIP HAD BECOME HEAVY BLACK BRISTLES AND HER PATRONS WERE CALLING HER "MADAME MOUSTACHE." THAT WAS TOO MUCH. WITH TREMBLING HANDS SHE DEALT HER LAST CARD AND RAISED A GLASS OF POISON TO HER LIPS..
OF THOUSANDS SHE HAD WON WITH HER DEFT FINGERS, NOT A SINGLE DOLLAR WAS LEFT. BODIE TOOK UP A PUBLIC SUBSCRIPTION TO BURY THE GAMBLING QUEEN OF THE GOLD FIELDS--MYSTERY WOMAN TO THE END.
63-164

Satan's Saddlemate

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

A man goes to hell for a friend—but shoots his way back for them he hates!

CHAPTER ONE

Last Stand

A DOZEN times in the past hour old Joe Boudrow's scarred fingers had plumbed pockets and searched ammunition-belt loops in hopes of finding a shell he had overlooked. But there was only one: the bright-rubbed .30-30 cartridge he had carried for ten years as a sort of lucky piece, though a secret corner of his mind knew the truth. That bullet was intended for insurance, a last resort to be used in a desperate extremity—on himself.

He crouched there, grizzled and spent, hiding his face from Tuss Ramont and the girl who shared the besieged room. Dust particles danced like suspended gold in the slant of a needle-thin sunray, coming through a recent bullet hole in the clapboard siding at his shoulder level. The beam refracted dazzling spears of light from the sheriff's star pinned to his gallus strap.

It was that badge and all it stood for which set Boudrow apart from those two, the difference that made surrender impossible.

Boudrow stole a glance over at Adrian Millermile's corpse, on the corner bunk. Sally had covered her father with a patchwork quilt she had been piecing for his birthday, and had taken Adrian's station under the east window with the old man's Texas-Enfield .57.

Her thin, immature face was pinched looking, and now and then a keening, muted sound issued from her compressed lips to show the pressure of the grief that rode her, but she wasn't staring at her father's body any more, and her eyes were dry.

Boudrow's glance ranged further along the wall, to where Tuss Ramont was sprawled, Stetson tilted back so he could keep one eye to a handy knothole, inches above the floor. The aperture gave him a quartering view of the Millermile front yard, seemingly deserted but hiding its deadly menace behind a variety of objects large enough to shield the killers who had them surrounded.

Ramont shouldn't be here. He was young, boot-tough, this cowboy who had volunteered to side Boudrow on his manhunt chore back in Riverbend, six days ago. A Diamond X rider, the kid must have had some impelling motive for tracking down Quinto Petrie, knowing the suicidal odds they faced in their invasion of the border-hopper's domain. Whatever it was, Ramont hadn't said.

The sheriff bellied down to the floor and crawled over to where Ramont stood vigil, a cocked .44 in his fist. The kid's jaw was sparsely stubbled with red whiskers, like the rusty ends of fine wire, a week's growth accumulated on the trail. Fatigue had puffed blue pockets under his eyes, and the strain of this day-long siege had rutted his cheeks, aging him beyond his years. Young he might be, and bone tired, but so far Ramont had shown no

The shot caught him as he scrambled up the ladder....

hint of cracking under the pressure of this thing they faced.

"Wouldn't use that knothole any longer, son," Boudrow advised. "Too obvious. Like a bull's-eye. Might draw a shot. Hunt yourself up a crack."

Ramont grunted, giving Boudrow the briefest of glances. He pulled his lean frame a few feet along the wall, the nickel *conchas* on his bullhide chaps scraping the puncheons.

Somewhere out there a rifle crashed its flat, spiteful note across the afternoon swelter. Daylight flashed through a new, splinter-collared slot in the wood exactly one inch above the knothole Ramont had just left. The bullet passed on through the opposite wall with a thumping sound like a fingernail striking a taut drumhead.

Echoes of this shot—the first that had been fired in the past two hours, proof that their attackers had not withdrawn into the relieving shade of the brasada thickets—reverberated crazily off the adobe wall which formed a short-legged L around the east and south sides of the nester's yard.

On the heels of the echo came a jeer-

ing shout, the voice of Quinto Petrie himself.

"Last warnin', Johnny Law! Toss your guns out, for the sake of the girl. Otherwise we're burnin' the shack."

Tuss Ramont and the sheriff glanced down the room toward the east window, to get Sally Millermile's reaction to this latest ultimatum, with its hint of amnesty for her, perhaps for them.

Sally's thin, work-worn fingers were rubbing the polished walnut stock of the Texas-Enfield she had taken from her father's dead hand that morning.

"Petrie isn't to be trusted." Her voice was a dull, flat monotone. "The reason Dad sided you today was for my sake. Petrie wants me to marry him. I'd rather burn to death here than go with him to Chihuahua."

Sheriff Boudrow nodded bitterly. Back in Riverbend, the rumor was current that Quinto Petrie, kingpin of border outlawry in this stretch of Texas, had been sparking Sally Millermile. It was that rumor which had brought the sheriff to this isolated homestead between the Nueces and the Rio Grande.

This threat of fire had been preying on his mind all day. It was the only logical outcome of this stalemate. At the moment, Quinto Petrie's ultimatum was partly bluff. The threat of their guns could hold the border-hoppers outside the yard as long as daylight held. It would take luck for a man to throw a torch across the intervening distance and lay it just right against the tinder-dry walls. The roof was pitched too steep for a torch to have much show of firing the shakes.

"'*Sta bueno,* Sally," Boudrow muttered. "You'll not fall into Petrie's hands. That much I g'arantee."

Young Ramont caught the grim implication in the sheriff's words, and his lips moved in a silent oath. Sally could hardly know how much she meant to Tuss Ramont. Except for once at a dance in Riverbend, over a year ago, she had never seen the Diamond X puncher before the manhunter's arrival last night.

She was around twenty, he judged, but the grueling hardships of helping old Adrian clear off a homestead here in the brasada thickets had robbed Sally of her rightful heritage of fresh, earthy beauty. The beauty was there, behind the gaunt cheeks and the red-knuckled hands. Sally deserved something better than this end she faced.

Ramont and the sheriff had spent the night out in Millermile's barn. Quinto Petrie and five of his bunch had cornered them here shortly after dawn, during breakfast. Before the sun was an hour high, Millermile was out of the fight. A bullet had ricocheted off the iron leg of the cookstove and killed the old Texan.

That had been an eternity ago. Thirteen hours, by the clock which had kept on ticking even after a random slug had knocked it off the mantle shelf. The four walls of the homesteader's shanty resembled a colander now, perforated by the steady, hammering shots of the day-long siege, bullets which had ripped through the cabin coming and going, as if it were built of cardboard.

Thirteen hours. . . .

BOUDROW and his deputy, and Sally with her .57 rifle, hadn't done badly. They had sensed the pattern Petrie's bunch used in systematically riddling the house from end to end and from floor to ceiling, and by changing positions frequently they had thus far escaped the sieving crossfire.

Boudrow had a bullet burn on his right shoulder, which had bled profusely for awhile, around noon. But it was more of a nuisance than anything serious. So far, Tuss Ramont and the girl were unscathed; though this last shot, aimed at the knothole he had been using for a lookout, had almost had his name on it.

"They're dead, Quinto!" a throaty voice from behind the windmill tanks broke the quiet, speaking in Spanish. "Not a return shot in three hours. We're wasting our time on a morgue."

The rough voice of Quinto Petrie answered his henchman from an opposite direction, near the angle of the L-shaped adobe wall.

"You so sure of that, Primotivo, suppose you parade across the yard!"

Boudrow grinned, wincing as he moved a bullet-torn muscle in his shoulder. The silence which followed the outlaw's proposal was eloquent.

"I say the odds are ag'in us now!" complained another voice, a *gringo* voice. "You'll have to rush the shack to fire it, which don't make sense for my money, three ag'in four."

"Shut your mouth, Cutler!" came Petrie's angry rejoinder.

Across the smoke-hazed room, Sally's eyes caught Tuss Ramont's exultant look, and for the first time since this ordeal had begun, a smile eased the harsh fixture of her mouth.

The odds were in their favor! Cutler's disclosure meant that the defenders had inflicted higher losses than they had known or dared hope for.

Tuss was reasonably certain he had tallied the big *pelado* he had spotted climbing the roof of Millermile's hayshed, around eleven o'clock that morning. The sheriff had trapped another Mexican behind the nester's wood rick, trying a quick sneak across the yard toward the blind fireplace end of the cabin.

The sheriff had imprudently used up a whole magazine of .30-30 loads knocking the cordwood to pieces. The *contrabandista* trapped behind that uncertain shelter had surely died.

And Sally, from her window commanding another sector of the yard, had bagged a target skulking past a break in the adobe wall. She had not claimed a sure kill, but Cutler's yell to Petrie just now had confirmed her marksmanship.

"I'm out of shells," Boudrow whispered, jacking open his Colt .45 and punching empty cases out of the chambers. "Except for one load in my carbeen. How about you, Sally?"

"One shot here," the girl said. "I've earmarked that for Petrie, at the finish."

Boudrow turned his questioning eye on Ramont. The cowboy's belt loops were significantly empty, though, unlike Boudrow during the woodpile episode, he had not wasted a shot all day.

"I got two loads," Ramont said, hefting the .44. "I'll split with you, sheriff. One apiece."

Boudrow shook his head, snapped his Colt cylinder back into the frame and skidded the useless gun across the floor. He might as well tell them what preyed on his mind now and get it over with.

"You listen to me, both of you," the Riverbend sheriff said heavily. "Those sidewinders out there wouldn't give us no more mercy under a white flag than Comanches did in the old days. Save your last shells for yourselves—like I'm doin'—understand? To make sure we don't die staked out on an anthill."

Tuss Ramont felt a stab of disillusionment as Boudrow worked his way back to the door, where his rifle waited.

Their count had revealed four shells left to them, and only three targets outside. Yet Boudrow was suggesting suicide when the showdown came at dusk. The tacit admission of defeat lowered the lawman's stature in Ramont's eyes, desperate though the situation was. It gave point to the whispers long current in Encinal County that Boudrow's guts had turned to water, that his long and losing feud with Petrie had undercut the foundations of all it took to wear the star in this wild and lusty land.

Boudrow, nearing the end of what he knew would be his last term in office, had

left Riverbend a week ago in one last despairing effort to cut Petrie's sign. Ramont, hearing of the sheriff's intention, had drawn his time at Diamond X and overtaken Boudrow en route through the thicket jungles.

Ramont's incentive for donning a deputy's badge was obscure to Boudrow. Maybe he was a spy for Diamond X, the big beef syndicate ramrodded by Colonel Jeff Diamond. It was the Diamond X that led the hue and cry for Petrie's capture or Boudrow's defeat at the polls. For years the syndicate's herds had been whittled by Petrie's gang, who hazed jags of wetbacks into Mexico for sale to *rebelista* armies.

Colonel Jeff had put up with Petrie's depredations for going on twelve years. Of late he had come into the open, branding Joe Boudrow for an incompetent old mossyhorn living on past glories. Diamond's scorn had turned to outright hate six months back, when his *segundo,* Benj Random, had been dragged to his death out in the brasada, at the end of Quinto Petrie's rope. Tuss Ramont, youngest cowhand on the Diamond X payroll, had found Random's broken body and got the story from the foreman's lips, a moment before Random's death. They had been inseparable friends, Ramont and the foreman. Maybe that was why Tuss had insisted on coming along with Boudrow.

The third night out of Riverbend, the sheriff had confessed that he was heading for the Millermile homestead, on the off chance that the old sodbuster harbored the outlaw under his roof.

If Boudrow had any doubts as to Millermile, they had been dispelled this day. When Petrie's bunch had closed a ring of guns around the cabin at dawn, Boudrow had suspected Millermile of tipping the border-hoppers off concerning the sheriff's presence here. Instead, old Adrian had backed their decision to fort up and stand off the one-sided siege. And Millermile had died with a ricocheting slug in his skull.

"I'm not takin' your advice, sheriff," Tuss Ramont whispered hoarsely across the room. "Petrie knows we'll try a break when it gets dark. With the odds even, I say we got a chance."

Boudrow flushed guiltily, feeling the acid taste of fear curdling his parched tongue, knowing he stood stripped of his honor in the cowpuncher's eyes.

"And I agree with Tuss," Sally Millermile said. "Dying mayn't be as hard as living, Mister Boudrow."

The sheriff licked his lips, misery in his faded eyes.

"It's bein' tortured by that *lobo* out there I'm thinkin' about," Boudrow said desperately. "Petrie's waited a long time for this chance."

An uneasy silence settled down. Sundown was less than an hour away now. Darkness promised some scant hope of leaving this blockaded shanty and making a break for the nearby brasada.

The three bayed prisoners heard furtive scuttling sounds out behind the adobe wall, sounds which told them that Quinto Petrie and Cutler and the Mexican, Primotivo, were meeting to plot their last move.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Strikes

RAMONT calculated the sun's elevation by the angle of the myriad pencilling beams which filtered through the riddled walls, one of them touching off highlights in Sally's combed-back auburn hair. Another forty minutes of daylight, maybe. Days were infernally long in West Texas at this season.

Ramont's gunmetal eyes raked the interior of the shack, sliding briefly over the quilted form of Millermile. Broken glass and splinters and the contents of a bag of beans which had been suspended from a ceiling beam and punched through by

gunfire made a litter on the floor. The buzzing of flies around Millermile's body made a sickening macabre obligato to the remote music of the evening breeze, which was starting in the thorny *junco* and *chaparo prieto* hedges beyond the adobe fence. And that damned clock ticked on inexorably, like a metallic heartbeat measuring their shortening span of life. . . .

A thunder of gunfire broke through Ramont's thoughts. Dust flew in the shack as bullets, slamming in from three angles, began raking the floor of the shanty, clanging bell-like off the cookstove, poking the last shards of glass from the shot-out windows.

The three defenders knew what to do. Petrie's gunmen were spraying the lower level of the shack with lead, like a sweeping blade of a scythe. Safety lay in getting to a higher level, up to the attic, where Sally had her sleeping quarters.

A bellow of panic came from the sheriff as he gripped his Winchester and stood up, oblivious to the fact that he could be seen through any of the windows.

Undiluted terror spurred the lawman as he raced for the pole ladder leading to the attic and started climbing.

Sally retreated to the comparative safety of the fireplace, knowing she would be out of the line of fire there. Tuss Ramont was bracing himself for a lunge across the floor to join her, waiting for a lull in the firing, when the borderhoppers paused to reload. Then it came.

Boudrow was shoving his carbine through the attic trapdoor, his jaw level with the ceiling beams, when a bullet caught him between the shoulderblades.

For an instant the old lawman clung to the ladder, his belly arching against the rungs, taut with bullet shock. Then he let go and plummeted backwards to hit the floor with a jolting crash that carried to the besiegers outdoors.

"I tallied the sheriff!" yelled Quinto Petrie. "I just saw the old son drop!"

Sally Millermile, over by the fireplace, let out a stifled, despairing moan.

The firing had subsided out in the yard. Tuss Ramont, his throat choking under the pressure of a new desperation, as he realized that it was him and the girl now, came to his feet and risked a quick peek around the edge of the broken window nearest him.

He saw a *serape*-clad Mexican scuttling on all fours past the gate in the adobe wall, shoving a bolt-action Springfield along the dirt ahead of him.

Thrusting his Colt barrel across the splintered sill to steady his aim, Ramont squeezed the trigger and laid his shot dead true to the half-concealed target.

The way the Mexican jolted, the way his half-visible legs beat a tattoo on the hard earth out there, told Ramont that Primotivo was out of the fight and that the odds stood two against two, evened off once more.

Ramont scuttled crabwise across the room to join Sally beside the fireplace, close enough to catch the subtle fragrance of her starched gingham dress, smudged now with gunpowder and dirt.

His hand gripped the girl's spindly arm with a poignant tenderness and he detected a tremor there.

"Maybe this finishes it," Ramont said. "Petrie knows he plugged the sheriff. That's who he was after. Maybe him and Cutler will pull stakes now they know that."

The girl shook her head, reading his words for what they were—an attempt to bolster her flagging spirits.

"No, Tuss. I know Quinto. You don't. He wants me. He won't stop till he has me—dead or alive."

Ramont pulled the girl to him, kissed her roughly on the mouth, in that moment a prey to his own wants and fierce, long-pent hungers. He felt no response, nor did he feel resistance. Only a dead, in-

different passivity. Sally seemed numb.

He released her, ashamed and contrite. "I'm sorry, Sally."

Her eyes met his.

"Don't be. I don't want pity. From you —from anyone."

He had said the wrong thing, she had misunderstood. Ramont abruptly changed the subject. "I just dropped the *peon* out by the gate, Sally. If we can hold out till dark—"

The girl leaned back against the fireplace, her hands squeezed white on the barrel of the Texas-Enfield.

"Tuss—if I—if I agreed to go with Quinto to Mexico in return for him letting you ride away from here—"

Ramont thrust a palm against her mouth, shutting off her words, humbled by this knowledge of how far Sally Millermile would go to save his life.

"I didn't come along with Boudrow for the ride," he said harshly. "You heard about Petrie ambushin' the Diamond X foreman durin' spring calf gather?"

Sally's nod was indistinct as the light faded in the shack before the ruddy glow of sunset.

"Benj Random. I met him at that dance last Christmas. We talked about you, Tuss. I—I got him to introduce us."

The cowhand's eyes held a bitter glint at the memory of their meeting, recalling Benj Random's role in it.

"Benj was my brother, Sally. His real name was Benjamin Ramont. He got into a little trouble in a gambling hall over in San Antone a few years back and hired out to Diamond X under an assumed name. Now do you see why I've got to see this thing through? Why I've got to take Quinto Petrie to hell with me tonight?"

Twilight was short in the brasada country after sundown, and with darkness close at hand there would be no way to prevent Petrie or Cutler from crossing the yard unseen and reaching the west end of the sodbuster's shack, which had no windows and was broken only by the rock fireplace and chimney.

Flowering *agarita* and honey-scented *huisache* shrugs grew over this wall, tinder made to order for starting a fire. The only thing that had prevented the outlaw from firing the brush before now was the belief that four guns—three now that the sheriff was known dead—stood ready to open fire through handy knotholes on either side of the fireplace.

A MUTTER of voices out beyond the adobe wall told Ramont and the girl that Primotivo's body had been discovered. As dusk changed imperceptibly from crimson to purple, and the night wind started spinning the tin vanes of the windmill, Quinto Petrie made his last call to the prisoners inside the shack.

"Sally, I'm talkin' to you, hear? We were only after Boudrow. We got no grudge ag'in his deputy or your Dad. And you know how I feel about you."

Catching Ramont's head-shake, the girl held her silence.

"Come on out where we can see you," Petrie resumed, "and you got my word there'll be no doublecross. You won't regret marryin' me, Sally."

Cutler's voice reached their straining ears.

"I tell you, Quint, the gal's dead. You're propositionin' a ghost."

Sally Millermile's peal of hysterical laughter scotched Cutler's theory.

"We're three to your two, Quinto!" Sally called into the night. "We'll see you in hell!"

Tuss Ramont shook his head glumly.

"That'll let loose the dogs," he said. "They'll fire the shack and smoke us out now. I wish you'd have strung him along till dusk was over."

The girl's harsh breathing was his only answer. She was trying to bait Petrie into

showing himself in range of her gunsights. But Petrie could move at will behind this lowering darkness now.

Ramont crossed the room and swung up the attic ladder to retrieve the sheriff's Winchester, balanced across the trapdoor opening. When he returned to the west end of the room, it was to find Sally crouched on her knees, peering through a crack between two warped clapboards.

"They're lighting torches," the girl whispered.

Kneeling beside her, Ramont squinted through the crack to see a flare of ruddy light limning the upper edge of the adobe wall like something cut out of black cardboard. The light flickered out.

"They'll sneak up on the wall before they do that," Tuss said, cocking the sheriff's carbine. "With luck, we may be able to spot them crossing the yard. If there was a moon—"

They waited in silence.

An eternity later, an alien sound came from close at hand outside the wall. The hissing outlet of a man's breath, the rasp of a bootsole on the dry ground beside the fireplace.

"One or maybe both of 'em have snaked across the yard," Ramont whispered in Sally's ear. "They'll light the brush and then hightail for the fence. That'll be our last chance to bag ourselves any game, Sally."

A match scratched across the fireplace rocks and red light bloomed with an intensity which told of oily rags or brush being ignited to form a torch.

"You still got your chance, Sally," came Quinto Petrie's voice. "I lost four men today. I got no choice but to see Adrian an' that deputy fry in their own grease."

From his corner, Ramont saw a firebrand streak through space as Petrie hurled his torch into the *agarita* bush growing close to the wall. The oily foliage burst into instant flame, carrying the blaze up to the protruding rafter poles of the overhanging eave.

Simultaneously, another torch thumped against the wall near Sally's corner, and the *huisache* shrub blazed and crackled ominously. With the wind quartering in from the west, the fire would be carried along the roof and outer walls of the doomed shack within a matter of minutes.

Blinded by the mounting flame tips, feeling their heat through the warped wall boards, Ramont saw that the two outlaws could make it back behind the adobe wall without detection. They had probably left the security of the fireplace by now, the thud of their retreating boots lost under the sinister crackle of the blazing shrubs.

Tendrils of smoke were beginning to push through the bulletholes in the near wall when Sally reached Ramont's side.

"We've got a root cellar—under the far end of the house," she said. "If you could take Dad down there, Tuss, I'd feel better. I—I can't endure the thought of him roasting like a barbecue calf on a spit."

Ramont grunted his assent. Dancing firelight guided them across the length of the room. Sally pulled a coyote-pelt carpet aside to reveal the ringbolt of the cellar trap.

Ramont lifted Adrian Millermile's stiffening form off the bunk, quilt and all. By the time he reached the trapdoor leading into the root cellar, Sally had descended the short flight of steps hewn from the flinty earth.

It was cooler down there, the cellar pungent with the moist, earthy odors of stored potatoes and hanging quarters of beef and slabs of smoked bacon.

Ramont lowered his burden to the rammed-earth floor, unable to see the girl in this stygian blackness. On the far wall of the cellar he saw a crack of firelight glow at the ground level, made out the shape of the floor joists.

Brushing past the girl in the darkness, Ramont climbed up on a sack of spuds and thrust a questing hand at the crack of light showing between the ground and the cabin's foundation timbers. Adzed postoak logs above, supporting the floor puncheons; the earthen wall of the dug-out cellar below. A scant six inches of open space between left that way for ventilation purposes.

Overhead, the roar of the fire was a deafening crescendo now. The night was a hellish red glare beyond the shot-out windows, turning the cellar trap into a square rectangle of scarlet.

Ramont saw the girl crouched beside her father, stroking the old man's death-stiffened hands outside the suggan. He passed her, scrambling up the earthen steps, his face meeting the intolerable pressure of heat gathering in the house.

He recovered the sheriff's gun where he had dropped it alongside Adrian's bunk. Stepping over Boudrow's sprawled form, he beat a tunnel through the gathering smoke and reached the cookstove they had shoved against the front door for a barricade, expecting a rush which had not materialized. Using the Winchester for a lever, Ramont pulled the stove to one side and pulled the hickory bar out of its sockets to free the door.

Then, down on all fours where the smoke and heat were at a minimum, he crawled back to the cellar trap and saw the white oval of Sally's face peering up at him.

"The roof'll come down in another couple of minutes!" Ramont shouted above the sullen organ-roar of the flames. "Listen, Sally. Petrie wants you alive, not dead. He'll hold his fire if you go out that front door. I want you to go to him."

The girl shook her head, recoiling as he came down the cellar steps toward her. Smothering heat was funneling down the trapdoor now, bringing its compounded odors of burning wood to their nostrils.

"No, Tuss. Not that—not Petrie. You don't know—"

He seized her by the shoulders, putting his lips close against her cheek as he spoke rapidly, desperately, goaded by the knowledge that time was fast running out against them.

When he had finished, the girl stumbled up the cellar steps and edged over to her father's bunk, pulling a sheet off the rumbled bed.

Holding the white fabric as a shield before her face, Sally Millermile stumbled across the room and jerked the rawhide latch thong of the door.

CHAPTER THREE

Blazing Range

A SECTION of the roof caved in, filling the west end of the room with a crisscrossed tangle of flaming rafters and ceiling beams.

Geysering flame and sparks billowed into the Texas sky, turning night into day. By that glare, Quinto Petrie caught sight of the door swinging open, saw the white-shrouded figure which stumbled out into the yard, weaving toward the gate amid a rain of blazing débris.

Petrie lowered his gun and a grin touched the harsh line of the outlaw's mouth as he recognized the fugitive. He moved away from his place of concealment behind the windmill's brimming watertanks as he saw Sally Millermile lurching toward the front gate. He kept his eye on the open maw of the front door, from which flames were now billowing in a hellish blowtorch. He saw no trace of men following Sally's example.

Inside the holocaust which enveloped the Millermile home, Tuss Ramont lowered the floor trap on its bullhide hinges, cutting out most of the killing heat.

Firelight shafting down through the cracks of the puncheons glinted off a rack of tools in the corner of the cabin. The

Diamond X cowboy selected a blunt-bladed miner's shovel and, scrambling up on the uncertain footing of a sack of seed potatoes, started chopping at the hard adobe soil, widening the gap between earth level and floor joist.

He shoveled until sheer exhaustion forced him to halt. Peering through the opening he had thus far made, he had a view of the angle corner of the adobe wall.

Behind it, standing crouched against the background of the brasada jungle, he made out the figure of Cutler, a bandanna knotted around his face as protection against the searing heat, a six-gun glittering ruddily in either hand.

With a cold grin, Ramont stepped back into the smoke-filled cellar and seized Boudrow's rifle, with the single cartridge in it that the sheriff had carried through the years as a tool for his own destruction if he ever found himself faced with inescapable doom.

Ramont thrust the Winchester muzzle through the hole he had gouged under the shack wall. Firelight glinted off the exposed barrel, drew the attention of Cutler.

With a yell, Petrie's gunman lifted a Colt and drove a shot into the dirt close enough to spray Ramont's cheek with stinging gravel.

The Winchester swung quickly to follow Cutler's leap toward the wall, and flame spat from its bore, the roar of the shot lost in the thunderous cacophony of the fire.

Cutler pitched forward, hanging jack-knifed over the adobe wall. The six-guns dropped from his dangling hands, and a paroxysm shook the outlaw's invisible legs on the far side of the wall and pulled his body back in that direction.

Ramont dropped the empty Winchester and picked up the shovel. Death by asphyxiation was a near threat now, as the fire above the shielding puncheons sucked the oxygen out of this storage cellar.

It was Sally who was taking the long gamble in this thing. It was for Sally that Ramont started gouging with desperate, dogged strength at the rocky soil, making a hole large enough for him to crawl out from under the blazing ruins.

Choking from the bite of smoke in her lungs, the back of her head singed by the heat from which she was retreating, Sally Millermile had stumbled on the white sheet she was carrying and fallen headlong through the front gate, where the body of Primotivo lay in the shadow of the adobe wall.

She was coming to her knees when a shape detached itself from the roundabout shadows and she saw Quinto Petrie scuttling toward her on all fours, a cocked six-gun in one fist.

It was a face that had haunted her dreams of late, the nutshell skull and wide-lobed nose with the knife scar on it, the ropey black mustache italicized by the cruel shape of the lips beneath it.

Under the cuffed-back brim of his sombrero, Quinto Petrie's eyes were aflame with triumphs which this moment brought him. Reaching the girl's side, he pulled her into the shadow of the adobe wall, his whiskey-fouled breath in her nostrils.

"This is good, *señorita.*" His eyes raked her in search of a concealed knife or gun, saw that she had lived up to the terms of his ultimatum. "This I must know: you came to me, or you were running from the fire?"

Sally twisted her mouth into something like a smile as she crouched there in the moving fireglow with this man she had sworn to kill. . . .

"I came to you, Quinto. There was nothing to hold me here."

He reared up on his knees, scanning the front and east end of the building as he saw the shack collapse inward upon itself, adding fuel to the conflagration which, if the wind carried it into the sur-

rounding brasada, could gut Encinal County range for miles.

"The others? Your father? The rider from Riverbend—they chose to burn rather than trust my word?"

Sally raised up to intercept his view of the blazing house.

"Dead. All dead. Daddy got hit by a ricochet early this morning. Tuss Ramont . . ."

Petrie leaned forward, his grip on her arm threatening to snap the bone.

"Yes? This deputy—what happened to him?"

Sally tugged at his fist, wincing under the pressure.

"Tuss died in my arms . . . around two o'clock. All afternoon it was Boudrow and myself, running a bluff."

Petrie's glance shifted over to the dead body of his Mexican henchman, a darker shape against the shadow of the wall.

"It was you, then, who killed Primotivo just before sundown." The girl saw the outlaw's hooded eyes go somber for a moment, and then his expression changed. "*Esta nada.* I do not hold his death against you, my pigeon. Quinto would not want a woman to share his *casa* who would have done otherwise."

He came to his feet, lifting her with him.

"If they were not dead—if you lied to me, *paloma mia*—they are dead now," Petrie said, gesturing with his gun muzzle toward the doomed shack. "Cloyd Cutler is covering the far window, so I know no man could make his getaway from that side."

Petrie glanced around, maintaining his grip on her wrist.

"Come," he said finally. "To the barn, my little pullet. Shortly we will leave this place, and head for the Rio Grande. There is a *padre* over in San Castro who will marry us by dawn. But first, Cutler and I have graves to dig. I paid a high price for you."

SALLY MILLERMILE stumbled along at his side, past the windmill and into the grateful coolness of the barn, where the horses were stabled.

Taking a *reata* from a handy peg, Petrie slipped a loop over the girl's shoulders and pinioned her arms to her sides. He drew the *reata* taut, stooped to put a couple of dallies around her ankles and fashioned a quick knot.

Then, seizing her in a quick embrace, the border-hopper carried Sally over to a mound of straw and set her down.

"It is not that I don't trust you, my little dove," Petrie grated, "but in my business, the doublecross is a gamble I cannot take. You *sabe,* no, my Sally?"

The girl made no protest, relaxing in her bonds. Petrie stepped over to the door of the shed and she saw him check the loads in both six-guns before thrusting them back into his holsters. Then he passed beyond her vision, headed toward the house.

Following the line of the adobe wall, making no effort to conceal himself now that he was positive all life was extinct in the razed shack. Quinto Petrie passed the front gate, sidestepped Primotivo's body and rounded the far corner of the fence, where he had been posted throughout that hellish day.

At the far end of the other angle of the fence, Cutler would be waiting, posted there to make sure no prisoner escaped through the north or east windows.

Heading along the fence, the glare of the gutted shack a blistering pressure against his near cheek, Petrie knew a moment's unease when he failed to spot his henchman anywhere along the wall.

A moment later he stumbled headlong on something . . . a human body.

An oath twisted through the rustler's mouth as he drew a gun and came to his knees. He knew the location of the other victims who had been lost during the afternoon; no man had died at this spot.

He drew a sulphur match from the hatband of his sombrero and thumbed it into flame to dispel the dense blackness.

The dead man was Cloyd Cutler. A high-caliber bullet had drilled his forehead dead center and torn out the back of his skull.

Snarling a Spanish curse, Petrie flipped the match aside and got to his feet, a new anger seething through his blood. Sally Millermile had done this thing, of course; had killed Cutler from the shelter of the fired house and then had quit her impossible position, taking her chances on his mercy.

Petrie made a circuit of the burning ruins, keeping a gun palmed, although he was positive no human being could be alive in that smoking pyre.

He passed the oblong shadow of the gaunt fireplace chimney, which stood like a gravestone over Millermile's dreams, and his thumb eared back the knurled hammer of his Colt as he approached the hayshed where he had left Sally Millermile.

Had he not taken the precaution of tying her hand and foot, Petrie knew she would have escaped into the trackless jungle of Texas thickets by now.

The glow of the ebbing fire fell through a compost window in the shed, revealing the shapes of the stalls and the figure in the ragged gingham dress, propped up in a seated position on the pile of straw.

Halting in the doorway, hefting the six-gun in his hand, Quinto Petrie stood looking down on Sally Millermile, meeting the strike of her eyes, noting the calm, unruffled composure of her features.

"I found Cutler out there," he said hoarsely. "I was a fool to have spoken of marriage to you, you murdering witch! Before I am through with you, you will wish you had died in that fire with the others."

The oily click of a gunhammer coming to full cock brought Petrie wheeling around to face the stalls.

The shaft of ruddy firelight revealed the tall figure of Tuss Ramont there, chap-clad legs braced wide, a Colt held with its muzzle waist high.

"I tallied Cutler," the Diamond X puncher said softly. "Now I'm giving you the chance you didn't give Benj Random last spring. Benj was my brother, Quinto."

The explosion of their guns merged, the founting gunsmoke from flaming muzzles met half way to blend and mushroom in the shuttering firelight.

To Sally Millermile, watching helplessly from the side, it seemed an eternity before Petrie's knees buckled, before the first gout of blood seeped from the bullet hole punched through his scarred nose.

Timed with the thump of the border-hopper's body on the earthen floor, Ramont thrust his fuming gun into leather, a gun with one carefully hoarded shot to spare.

He stooped to untie Sally's lariat bonds, and when her arms came free they reached for the cowpuncher's head and drew him close for a timeless interval.

"Wherever you go, I am yours, Tuss," she whispered. "Until today, this was home to me. But now it's for you to say."

They stepped out of the hayshed in time to see the moonrise touch the broad leagues of Adrian Millermile's brasada range with silver, and Tuss Ramont's thoughts shifted far afield, remembering how Colonel Diamond had offered him Benj Random's foremanship on the syndicate payroll if he came back from this brasada manhunt with the news that Quinto Petrie's reign of border terror was over and done with.

"The homestead is precious land, with Texans buried in it," he told her. "I don't think we'll need to ride away from here to find our hearts' desire."

SPELLDOWN AT KILLER'S CREEK

Ian's right fist swung. . . .

"In this country, cattle are branded plain . . . an' a man where it don't show—till you see him through gunsmoke!"

By JOHN H. HOLLAND

IT TOOK a day and a night and another half day to get from Ian Reagan's ranch by buckboard in to Killer's Creek, but the way Ian had it figured, he'd be at the depot in time to meet the train.

He'd be standing on the platform and she'd step down into the sun, pert and pretty as you please. He'd know her right off. And he'd go up to her and take off his hat and bow. He'd say, "Afternoon, Miss Purvis. I'm Ian Reagan, your intended," and she'd smile.

Or maybe she'd be nervous, coming all that way from Boston.

So it wouldn't hurt to mention Cousin Emmy. Then she'd know him sure. And then she'd smile and then Ian could take her by the elbow and Uncle Billy'd get

her bags. They'd go hunt them up the Parson and there wouldn't be any mixup. Ian knew he'd know her. He had her letter in his shirt, the one where she told what she was like, that he'd got the week before. The blue one, addressed in precise, looping letters to Ian Reagan, Esq. that he'd read and read again, surrounded by the smell of lavender. Ian fumbled in his shirt and pulled the letter out.

Uncle Billy shifted on the buckboard seat.

"You gonna read that again?"

"Just the part where it says what she's like."

"I could tell you that," said Uncle Billy. "I seen a Boston woman once in Texas. Prim and putterin' and talked down her nose. Always tuttin' around that they wasn't nothin' done her way."

Ian didn't bother with an answer. He opened the thumbed-over envelope and pulled out the crisp sheets of onion skin.

And he would have read from where she took her pen in hand, clear through to where she was his most devoted friend, but Uncle Billy wouldn't have it.

"Read it out loud."

"Can't do that," said Ian. "It's to me. You don't know her."

"Neither do you." said Uncle Billy. "And I ain't fixin' to look all over the deepo for no Boston schoolmarm, without I know what she looks like."

Ian could see he had a point. So he folded back the first two sheets that were just to him and started at the part where she said what she was like.

"I have studied your West," Ian read aloud, "and I know from your excellent letters that I shan't find the life as hard and lonely as you say. I am a strong and capable woman, easily entertained, and I find that simpler pleasures and society suffice. I know I shall enjoy the spelling bees you speak of. . . ."

Uncle Billy let go a long stream of tobacco juice that was fine and flashing in the sun. "Sounds like I said. Where's she tell what she looks like?"

"She don't," said Ian, folding the letter. "But Cousin Emmy wrote she's got brown hair and gray eyes and stands just an inch shorter than she does."

"How tall's your Cousin Emma?"

Ian shrugged. "I don't know. Last I saw her, she was nine."

"That don't help," said Uncle Billy, rubbing the lump his twist made in his cheek. Then he cupped his chin in his hand and drove along one-handed, rocking against Ian as the buckboard jolted across the uneven prairie. He sat that way for some time before he straightened up and slapped Ian on the knee. "Cheer up. We can spot her. I'll try spellin' Massachewsets out loud and she'll be the one that gets her hackles up."

Ian laughed some and felt better. He'd been worried, but Uncle Billy had made the whole thing lie easier on his mind.

Spotting her right off and wondering what she'd be like, a kind of mail-order wife. Wanting to be married, all right, but scared to death of getting married and wondering all along if he'd ought, with things the way they stood. No telling how a Boston girl would take to a range war. And a woman on the place wouldn't stop Cletus Clevenger.

He was hungry, Clevenger. Hungry for range and drunk on power. He was the biggest man in the basin and he wanted to be bigger. Only he couldn't. Not without Ian's water. So he'd threatened Ian with war.

Called him a nester, and once there'd even been sniping from up on the rise above the water hole. But nothing you could put your finger on. A sort of behind-your-back range war, the left-handed kind, just like Clevenger. And that was strange when you thought of Clevenger's power. Ian wondered if it was the time to be marrying. Especially a girl from Boston.

"It'll be tough on her, Uncle Billy."

Uncle Billy shook his head.

"Women ain't so all-fired tender as they like to make you think."

Ian hoped so.

But at eleven the next morning, when they topped the rise just outside of Killer's Creek, Ian's heart sank. They'd be late. The train had just pulled into the depot.

Uncle Billy snapped the reins and Ian hung on. They raced down the rise into Killer's Creek, charging along the single street toward the depot. Tom Masters, the sheriff, yelled out from his office as they flashed past, but Ian urged Uncle Billy on. Masters would understand if he knew it was Ian's wedding day. And if he knew Ian was late.

But when they got to the depot, Ian saw that he was lucky too. The only passenger on the platform yet was a fat drummer, and the depot agent was climbing up onto the car to hand down hat boxes and fancy flowered carpet bags. That meant a lady and Ian knew in his heart it would be Miss Permelia Purvis. He jumped out of the buckboard and started across the depot platform.

It was funny, but he couldn't hear a thing. He could see all right. He saw the engine blow a white cloud of steam and he knew there should be a noise, but he couldn't hear. And he couldn't get his eyes to look anywhere but at the door of the passenger car.

There was the corner of the engine tender and the black iron guard rail and the black patch of shadowed door against the sunlit front of the car. And in the door, a fancy flowered bag. Ian ran faster back along the platform.

And the bag lifted and swung through the door and a white hand and then black silk and the station agent stepped through. Ian's heart fell.

He watched as the agent climbed down the steps. He slowed to a walk and looked down along the platform. It was empty. Then he looked back at the coach door.

She stood there, prettier than he'd hoped, frowning slightly into the sun, her deep-red dress catching the sunlight, flashing dark and then light as she caught up her skirt to step down from the car. It was Permelia. It had to be. She had on a poke bonnet and lilacs, kind of blue and silver, danced in the sun on the rim, bouncing lightly as she stepped down the steps.

Ian stopped, watching her.

And when he saw her reach the depot platform and look up toward him, he took a deep breath and would have yelled. Then he remembered how he'd planned it and reached for his hat. He took a step toward her, and the station door burst open and running feet came toward Ian from behind.

"Hold on there, Reagan!"

THE girl turned her head at the sound of the name. She looked at Ian with a puzzled frown and he smiled and hurried toward her. A hard, rough hand clapped him on the shoulder, spinning him around.

"Damn it, Reagan! Hold on when I tell ya!"

And Cletus Clevenger's hard black eyes bored into Ian's. Tom Masters came through the station and walked up beside Clevenger, breathing hard. Clevenger turned toward him.

"Here's your rustler, Masters. Lock him up!"

And Clevenger's blunt fingers dug brutally into Ian's shoulder, shoving him toward Masters.

Ian swung his right arm, high and hard against Clevenger's cheek. He backed away and stood with his arms spread, ready to fight if he had to, but remembering Permelia. He didn't want trouble right there in front of her, first thing off the train.

"Better clear up what you just said,

Clevenger. I come peaceful, but it might not last."

Clevenger curled his lip and spit. "Lock him up, Masters. The Vigilantes'll get him, first thing after dark. Otherwise, he'll slap his brand on everything in town that ain't tied down."

Ian forgot all about Miss Permelia. He leaped for Clevenger's throat. But Masters stepped between and Uncle Billy came running up from the buckboard and caught Ian by the arm. Masters shoved back against Clevenger's chest.

"Take it cool, Cletus," he said. He had a soft voice that went with his square, powerful build and calm ways, and people around Killer's Creek had a way of listening when Tom Masters spoke. But there wasn't any way to keep Clevenger from opening his mouth, worked up like he was.

"He's a dirty, nesting rustler that couldn't call a dog his mother—"

"Shut up, Cletus!"

Tom Masters grabbed Clevenger by the shirt and spun him half sideways. He pointed behind Ian. "There's ladies present."

Ian jerked around.

Miss Permelia stood tensely in the sun, not six feet away. She had a parasol in her hand and she kept twirling the string. You could tell she was nervous from the tight look around her eyes and the thin way she held her mouth. But she tried a smile.

"Is one of you Ian Reagan?"

Ian knew she'd spotted him. And he had a feeling she knew which one of them he was, that she was playing it the way a woman would, trying to smooth things over. He was all for fighting Clevenger on the spot, now that she knew, but he took off his hat and bowed to her.

"I am, ma'am. Miss Purvis. And this is Uncle Billy, my top hand. If you'll show him where to get your bags—"

She turned gracefully, indicating her bags with one hand, but keeping an eye on Clevenger and Masters. "If you have business, Mr. Reagan—"

She left it hanging there, waiting for Ian or Tom Masters to put a name to it, but making it plain that she had business with Ian Reagan and that nothing would stop her from seeing it through. Ian set his hat on his head, pulling it down tight.

"It's not exactly business, Miss Purvis."

"Trouble?"

"He's a lowdown rustler," said Clevenger. "Or tries to be. I found four doctored brands in my gather the day before yesterday."

She turned a slow, withering glance on Clevenger. It shut him up, but he stood his ground.

"You have proof?" she asked.

"He does, ma'am," said Masters. "On the hoof down at my office."

"Now wait a minute. Wait just a minute," said Uncle Billy. "You got proof on the hoof, that means it had to be done. And Ian ain't no rustler. He's straight as a ketch rope with a calf on the end. He—"

"Be quiet, Uncle Billy," said Ian. "Hear what they got to say." Ian knew he hadn't been rustling Cletus Clevenger's cattle. And he knew Uncle Billy couldn't have done it either. There hadn't been a day that they'd been apart. The only question there could be about whose cattle were whose would be mavericks Ian had thrown his loop on last fall. And the longest rope was the law of the range. It was his right as much as Clevenger's to throw his brand on anything without a mark on its hide. Ian turned to Tom Masters. "Show me."

Masters nodded toward Miss Permelia. "The lady?"

"She's Miss Permelia Purvis. From Boston. My intended."

"Oh," said Masters. "Well if she'll

be kind enough to wait while you step down to the jail. . . ."

"I will not," said Miss Permelia. "I'll go with you."

For a minute there, Masters lost his calm. He lowered his head and cleared his throat, embarrassed.

"If you say so, Ma'am."

And right then a hard knot of fear tightened on Ian's stomach. If Tom Masters was embarrassed, he must believe that Ian was guilty. And that meant that Clevenger must have pretty good proof. But the thing was, Ian couldn't figure how a man would do it.

Ian's brand was the Krazy Kat, Clevenger's was the Big I Bar. And for the life of him, Ian couldn't see any way to doctor the Clevenger brand into a Krazy Kat. But if it was a good enough job to make Tom Masters lose his calm, it looked to Ian like he was in a tight. He turned to Uncle Billy.

"Get Miss Permelia's bags and bring the buckboard down to the jail." Then Ian took her by the elbow and spoke to Tom. "All right, Masters. Let's go see."

But down at the jail, there wasn't a lot to see. Just four yearlings and one of Clevenger's hands, hunkered down in the shade, throwing rocks at the cattle to keep them bunched. And they all wore the Krazy Kat. Ian stopped and looked them over.

"Those are mine, Tom."

"Look 'em over close, Reagan," said Clevenger. "Then say they weren't mine a week ago."

Ian went over by the jail and found a stick that would do for a prod. Holding it in his right hand, he moved gingerly in toward the red-eyed, rangy beef. And in close he could see that they'd once been branded Big I Bar. And he looked them over good. All four of them. Then he whacked the last one on the rump and walked back to Masters and Clevenger and the girl.

"I don't get it, Tom," said Ian.

"Gimme that stick," growled Clevenger, snatching the prod from Ian's hand. "I'll show you how you done it."

Left-handed, Clevenger drew a Big I Bar in the heavy, fine dust and looked up at Ian. "My brand, right?"

Ian nodded. He could see from looking at the brands on the cattle how it had been done. But it wouldn't hurt to let Clevenger play it out. Ian watched him while he drew the top prong on the letter "K", starting at the top and curling down and in toward the big letter "I".

Then Clevenger started the bottom prong, moving out and down from the big letter "I". It finished out a workable likeness of the letter "K". Just like on the stock, if the prod in Clevenger's left hand had been a running iron. Then Clevenger scratched in the letter "A", high above the "K" and the bar. He worked the bar into a "T" with a long downward stroke. Then he looked up at Ian.

"That's how you done it," Clevenger said, pointing to the brand.

Ian shook his head. "That's the way it was done. Anyone could see that with half a look. But I didn't do it."

Clevenger threw the stick aside. He spit down on the brand in the dust and erased it with the toe of his boot.

"You done it, all right. Who else would go around slapping your brand on my cattle?"

"You would," said Ian.

Clevenger stiffened. His straight black eyebrows flattened down over his hard eyes and he backed a step away and stood spread-legged, facing Ian. Both of his hands crawled up to the lapels of his work coat and hung there.

"Give a reason, Reagan."

Ian heard Clevenger's cowhand stand up, back in the shade, and move on soft-set boots somewhere out of the line of fire. That made it clear to Ian that

Clevenger had a hideaway tucked under his right arm. Tom Masters had laid down the law about carrying guns in Killer's Creek, and Ian and Uncle Billy had left theirs at the ranch. So it was going to be a one-sided gunfight. Ian knew he couldn't count on Tom Masters.

Tom was older than he had been. And there wasn't any doubt that Clevenger could beat them both, once he had the hideaway in his hand. He'd probably throw down on Tom first and take his time about Ian. It would be a bad play. But Ian had started it. He'd give Clevenger his reason and, if he let go of that lapel, Ian would jump at his middle. Ian dug in with his heels.

"All the reason you'd need is my water hole. Get me locked up and hanged for rustlin' and you'd get my water. Right?"

CLEVENGER'S left thumb picked up and away from his lapel. Ian jerked, getting ready to jump, but Clevenger changed his mind. His hand stayed put, up there on the front of his coat. But his eyes narrowed.

"That needs provin', Reagan."

Ian stood there, facing Clevenger, trying to figure how he'd prove it. He knew from the way Clevenger had acted that he was right. But it needed proving, the way Clevenger said. Ian couldn't see how he'd do it. And he saw that if he didn't, he wouldn't be helping himself any. Masters wasn't thick. He'd probably figure there wasn't a better way in the world to keep in the clear if you had a rustling charge thrown at you than to have a story all cooked that threw the charge right back. Ian knew that Masters would figure it that way. He wouldn't take sides until the time came to judge. He'd let them make their play.

Masters would go right on standing there, his arms at his sides, relaxed and calm if it cost him his life. Ian could see that. And he could see he'd have to prove it now. Clevenger was going gun happy. He wouldn't make but one more pass at the hideaway before he got up nerve enough to shoot. Ian looked the setup over, placing everybody in his mind.

Miss Permelia stood to Ian's left and Clevenger right out ahead, six feet away. Masters was over on Ian's right and Clevenger's cowhand somewhere behind by the jail. Uncle Billy was coming down the street in the buckboard. And that was bad.

Clevenger'd get worried and swing around. That would put Miss Permelia in the line of fire. Ian saw that now was the time and he got set to jump.

But Miss Permelia walked between Clevenger and Ian, across to Tom Masters. She had her parasol up, using it like a pointer. You could see she didn't know what she walked between. She had her mind on the doctored brand.

"I have proof," she said, walking over to Masters and jabbing the parasol into the "K" on the rump of one of the cattle. "Look at that word. Mr. Reagan wouldn't do that. And you just now saw the other man . . ."

Masters turned cooly, putting his back to Clevenger, bending to look close at the "K" on the doctored brand. He looked for a long time, not saying a word.

Clevenger moved out to one side where he could keep an eye on Ian and set up a better shot at Master's back, putting Miss Permelia right in the line of fire. And Uncle Billy drove up in the buckboard and stopped. Ian tensed.

There wasn't a sound until Masters spoke.

"The burn *is* deeper at the top of the "K," he said. "And gets lighter goin' in toward the "I." That's backwards from the way I'd do it. And I'm right-handed. Just like Reagan."

Clevenger's hand flashed under his coat. He had the gun half out before Ian could get his jump started and Ian saw he

meant to cut Sheriff Masters down.

Ian jumped over into the line of fire.

Then he threw his weight in toward Clevenger, trying to knock his gun hand high, catching him by the wrist. But he missed.

Springing high into the air, trying to cover Miss Permelia and Tom Masters with his body, Ian swung wildly with his right arm. He felt the tips of his fingers brush past the gun.

Then there was the flash and the smoke burning in his eyes. The searing heat and the burning snake of flame tearing angrily up his arm. Then the hum of the slug, right past his ear, buzzing like an angry hornet.

Ian fell against Clevenger.

They tumbled together into the dust and Ian tried to get the gun out of Clevenger's left hand. But the burning wound along his arm made it hard to close his fingers. And the gun muzzle pressed hard against Ian's ribs.

Twisting violently, he tried to squirm away, catching Clevenger under the chin with his left hand and wrenching him over onto his back so the gun wouldn't go off pointed at Miss Permelia.

He caught Clevenger's legs between both of his and clamped together, hard. Then he dug his fingers into Clevenger's throat. Clevenger choked once, gasping for breath and gave a final kick. Ian hung on.

But then the hackles rose on the back of his neck.

Clevenger's gun poked Ian in the back. And there wasn't a thing he could do. His bad right arm wouldn't move. And he couldn't roll away to his left. That would bring the gun in line with Miss Permelia.

Trying desperately to move his right arm, his breath pounding in his chest, Ian rolled frantically to his right, waiting for the gun to slam its slug against his back.

But nothing happened.

Not from the gun. A bit of flowered cloth flashed past Ian's eyes and there was the crack of something hard against bony knuckles and a flinch and a cry from Clevenger, loud and ringing in Ian's ear. Then another flutter of the flowered cloth and a returning swish and the crack of the wooden-handled parasol against Clevenger's hand again. Clevenger howled loudly.

The gun fell away from Ian's back.

Then Uncle Billy's crooked old ankles showed in front of Ian and Tom Masters' calm voice came from above.

"Let him up, Reagan."

Ian gave a final sharp squeeze to Clevenger's throat. Then he let go and rolled off to his left.

He sat up in the dust and grabbed his right arm. He looked up through the sharp pain at Miss Permelia.

She looked once at the blood seeping through Ian's fingers and turned and walked over to the buckboard. She opened one of her carpet bags and pulled out a medicine bottle and an undershirt. She walked back toward Ian, ripping it to strips.

Uncle Billy prodded the toe of his boot into Clevenger's scalp, not too gently, and Clevenger sat up, holding his head. Tom Masters walked around front and stuck his gun down where Clevenger could see it and Uncle Billy hauled him roughly up to his feet.

Masters waved the gun toward the jail.

"Over there. To your left, Clevenger."

And when they'd gone, Miss Permelia settled down beside Ian and began dressing his arm. She worked silently, her lips in a thin, soft line and her face just the least bit pale with worry.

She had a gentle look to her eyes and once, there, when Ian tried to say how smart he thought she was, she shushed him. She wouldn't let him say a word all the time Masters spent telling Clevenger's

cowhand to drift, and she finished the bandage just as Tom and Uncle Billy came up from behind. They paused to admire her work.

"That's a right smart job, Ma'am." said Masters. "A smarter job of arm doctorin' than Clevenger did doctorin' up them brands. And you just out from Boston, too. There's some lived here all their lives wouldn't have seen that "K" was doctored by a man with a runnin' iron in his left hand. Smart, ma'am. Right smart."

Miss Permelia looked up at Masters, a puzzled frown wrinkling the smooth white skin on her forehead.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"Why about them burns bein' deep at the top, the way a left handed man would do it," said Masters. "You pointed that out."

Miss Permelia didn't understand. She puzzled it for a minute, then she shrugged it off.

"I'm sure that's all very true," she said, "but you gentlemen didn't understand me. I saw at once Mr. Reagan hadn't tampered with that cow. He writes excellent letters. He wouldn't spell cat with a *K*."

Uncle Billy danced a jig and giggled, lost in glee. Then, holding his sides to catch his breath, he pointed a finger at Ian.

"I told ya," he gasped. "I told ya how she'd be. She's after you for spellin' fore you're even married."

Miss Permelia caught some of Uncle Billy's laughter in her eyes, but when she turned to Ian, it was plain enough she didn't understand. Ian took her hand in his and squeezed it gently, laughing at her bewilderment.

"Never you mind," he said. "You go right ahead and correct our spellin' any time."

(Continued from page 66)

Mister Shawnessy kept on running. Feeney, screaming like a banshee, sprinkled the slope with lead. When his gun went empty he sat there with his red hair waving in the morning breeze and took time to reload disdainfully.

It was Davenport's mercenaries he shot at. Not to kill, this time. It had never been to kill—Feeney knew it had been burnt out of him by the look in old Diamond Jack's face. Fighting was no good when it ceased to be fun. He knew that now.

So he shot to score and skin and scare Davenport's empty-bellies, and they saw Gil Britton and Davenport himself piled up in the grass, and ran for it. The old, scrubby man blazed away with his rusty gun, but he was the last to fire at the redhead.

Feeney chased the Davenport nondescripts to the river, peppering them harmlessly. Tobacco and coffee failed to keep their nerve up, with Davenport and Britton dead. They had hide to save, and they saved it.

For some reason, Feeney made excuses when he came back to Diamond Jack. For some reason, he didn't want Diamond Jack to know what had showed so plainly in his eyes.

"My damn horse is a cowhorse!" Feeney yelled. "I'd have killed you, Jack, if he hadn't run. Next time we meet, though, I will."

"Next time," Diamond Jack grated, "you're boothill bait. You've had too much luck, twice in a row."

Feeney yelled back at him, but it was all wind. Jack never would fight again. Well, let him keep one thing whole—his pride. So long as Feeney himself knew, he didn't care what Jack believed.

"He'll make a good neighbor," Feeney told himself. "I think I'll settle down here myself. I'll need someone to quarrel with when my own old age comes."

(Continued from page 78)

of a thousand dollars, to compensate for his agony, and then dismissed. An hour later, just before he slipped forever from the bright aura of public notice, Berdue was seen quietly operating a crooked small time gambling pitch. Just as though the months never had passed—just as though he never had met Sam Brannan. And then he never was heard of again.

Brannan's conscience was clear. Brannan was still the strongest voice in the young, violent town.

For twenty years, he remained kingpin, or almost kingpin, in the city's life. And then something happened to him—the thing that had happened to Brigham Young when he sent his invading angels against Brannan's California—the thing that had happened to John Augustus Sutter. The time and the place stopped being Brannan's any more. No reason. No reason except the West, a titan child that used men as toys to grow by, and then discarded them when their use was done.

He was old, he was finished, he had done his work. It was time for him to die, but poor, violent Sam Brannan, who had fought with good and evil and governors, had to fight now with death. His weapon, like that of other baffled men, was a bottle—and he lost.

A confirmed drunkard, his fortune wasted, he wandered down the long trail to Mexico with the remnants of his dream. There, deserted and penniless, he died.

To the northwest, Brigham Young's Utah was a flourishing gem of the wilderness. San Francisco was a boomtown no longer but a city, long done with raw beginnings and Vigilantes. Over them both floated the flag that had so annoyed Sam Brannan, and to whose sturdy sway he had unwittingly given the staunchest days of his life. The past claimed him. Perhaps, after all, that had been his big dream.

(Continued from page 101)

all through the religious ceremony.

Outside it was snowing with that continuing persistence to be found only in the storms at high altitudes—silently and uncompromisingly. And in this saloon, eleven thousand feet above the sea, at the top of the Rocky Mountains, two hundred men, gamblers with adventure, listened to the story of the Prodigal and his return, told in a melodious voice.

They sang *Rock of Ages*, and if it was a bit off-key in spots, no one cared. There were no music critics there. When the benediction had been said, Dick Bradshaw observed, "I think the fatted calf got a damned bad break!"

Then Soapy Smith took up a collection. The proceeds were turned over to Parson Reed. He had his glass of milk with the bunch—who had something else—and returned to his hotel.

After the services were over and play at the tables had been restored, somebody wondered audibly how much money had been taken up in the collection. Somebody suggested that, whatever it was, it wasn't enough, and thought they should double it. Whereupon practical Dan Butler chipped in with, "How in the hell you goin' to double things when you don't know what you're doublin'?"

It was finally agreed that someone would have to steal into the parson's room and swipe his pants containing the money, so they could find out how much it was. Joe Palmer, one of Soapy Smith's partners, was elected chief burglar. He went off with several other conspirators to act as lookouts, and a half hour later came back with Parson Tom's pants.

The collection amounted to $340. They passed the hat again and came up with enough to make the toal $700. There was a further discussion. Would it be best to return the pants, plus the added collection? It was evident that the parson

couldn't go back to Denver without any pants.

It was equally evident that if the pants were returned with the added funds and nothing said about it, the minister would not know that anything had been done to increase his take—and that would spoil the whole evening.

Finally Masterson said, "Let's send the pants back without the money. The parson'll think he's been robbed. Then he'll set up a holler. Let's hear him. He's got a fine voice."

So Joe Palmer, as he put it, "unburgled" the parson's pants. And on Monday morning Bat Masterson's prophecy came true. There was a crowd waiting in the dining room when Reed went down to breakfast, with fire in his eye.

In the words of Dick Bradshaw, "He lets out a holler and makes a few short sayin's about honor among thieves."

They calmed him down and took him down to Bat's place to talk it over. Bat stood behind the bar, smiling a welcome.

"They've been telling me that somebody robbed you last night, Parson Reed," he observed.

"Well, at least they didn't lie to you," replied the parson. "I don't believe my sermon last night did much good."

So Bat told him what they had done—and why. "We didn't want to wake you up—so we did the next best thing—we stole your pants!"

Parson Reed took the money Masterson handed him and mopped his forehead. "Mr. Masterson—" he began.

"Oh, call me Bat, same as all my friends do."

"All right—then I'm Tom to all you folks. And Bat, will you please ask Dan there to ask the boys—all of 'em—to—well, it'll sort of let my conscience down easy if Dan asks 'em what they'll have. This is on me."

(Continued from page 7)

gings of California! And so he sailed eastward, perhaps the only monarch in history who ever seriously tried to earn his keep.

Americans on the golden shore found him an odd, unlikeable fellow. He had lived too long with homage. Few of the miners had the time or the inclination to humor him, and after the first ripple of wonder at his story, what he most aroused was resentment. When he disappeared completely one night, there was little doubt that he had been murdered.

Albert Morrison
Portland, Oregon

Let's get some sidelights now on one of the strangest areas of our country:

Dear Editor:

Two hundred seventy feet below sea level, in California, lies the unfriendliest stretch of land ever hit by emigrants or goldseekers. When they gave the name Death Valley to that million and a half acres, there were no alternate suggestions. The scorching desert stretch had been a graveyard for too many men and beasts.

Strangest thing to end its days in Death Valley, however, wasn't a creature at all. It was a railroad. When the old Tonopah and Tidewater, which had carried bullion from Goldfield, Nevada, during the boom, went the way of all ghosts, Death Valley claimed it, in the person of the perennially newsworthy Death Valley Scotty. Scotty bought sixty miles of the old road, had it ripped up, and brought it into the desert. The rails were used to reinforce the 3-foot-thick walls of his home there.

Though Scotty seems to be the first white man on record to make himself completely at home in the sun-cursed valley, an even stranger settlement is that of the mountain sheep. Shaggy, sturdy, and obviously close relatives of the Rocky Mountain breed who hug the altitudes so near at hand and so high above, they have been a puzzler to observers since the time of the first settlers. What they prefer about an area to which they seem at first glance incredibly unfit, no one knows.

Carson Caldwell
Yuma, Arizona

We read a lot about the pioneers who made it across the continent, but here is a story of two of the many who didn't:

Dear Editor:

One of the difficult duties facing the first pioneers was the burial of those who died en route. The problem was an especially poignant one when parents were left

with the bodies of little children. A tragedy of the plains, and its solution, came to light some years ago when archaeologists, exploring an ancient Indian burial mound, came upon two tiny skeletons in rotting coffins. By their bone formation, the scientists recognized the remains as those of a white boy and girl aged two and five respectively.

The striking thing was the choice of burial ground—an Indian site. There, the emigrants knew, the children's bodies would not be desecrated while the redman lorded the plains. And then they pushed on.

Dan Roberts
Davenport, Iowa

You'll have to admit it's unusual when the public becomes outraged because a murderer is sent to jail!

Dear Editor:

Nobody wrote a song about John Kelly at the time. But they did sign their names to a petition for his pardon, seven thousand of them, grizzled Colorado silver miners, bartenders, respectable citizens. They loved John Kelley in Creede. He was the man who shot the man who shot Jesse James, and when he was sentenced to twenty years in prison for it, Colorado was outraged.

The trouble was, young Bob Ford had became a somebody as soon as he put a bullet through Jesse James' back. He was detested, he was outcast—but he was feared, too. He swaggered through the West for ten years after his epic shot, bragging that nobody dared to stand in his way.

But he pushed his luck too far. One winter, while prospecting in Creede, Ford missed the diamond engagement ring he had bought in Pueblo for his girl. He accused Kelley, a fellow prospector, of stealing it, and swore he was going to get him. Kelley, as impressed with the James legend as anyone else, tried to stay out of Ford's way, but Ford woldn't let him. It came to a showdown—and Kelley shot Ford through the throat.

The swaggering bully was gone, and a grateful populace refused to be satisfied with the sentence meted out to Kelley. They agitated till they got a Governor's pardon for him, and later, in Texas, another town made him a marshal.

Mort Wagner
Amarillo, Texas

Which brings us right to the end of the trail for this issue, friends. Be with us next time, though, for the exciting windup of *Vengeance Valley* and more true stories from the fabulous Old West.

—THE EDITORS

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