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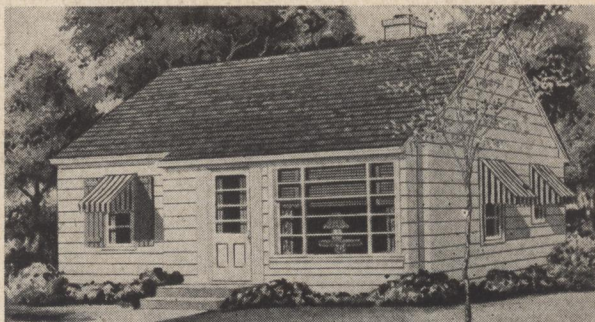
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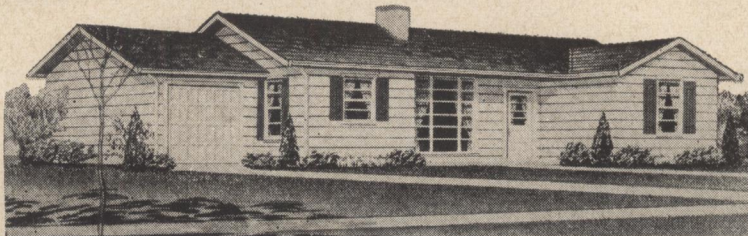


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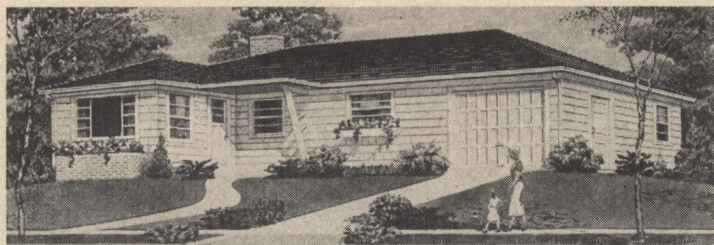
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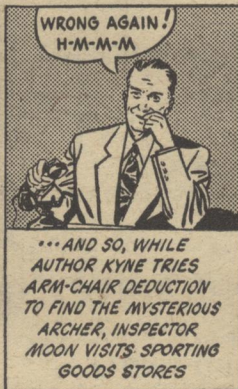




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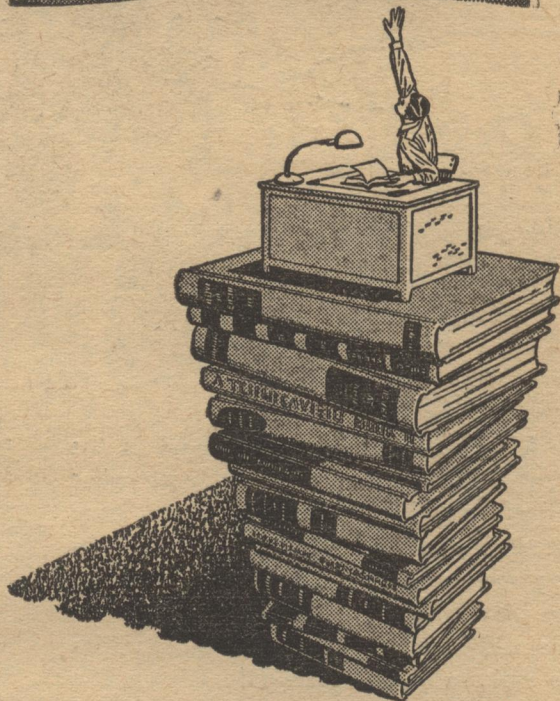
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# ● ON THE TRAIL ●



**A** SLICKED-up dude came in the other day wanting to know what all this Western business was about. He said he thought there was nothing special about poking cows, and that we were making a lot out of nothing when we said it took not just a man but a hero to make a place in the Old West. The boys around here were somewhat riled about it, but we pointed out that all the dude had to do was to ask you gents who have been talking it over in our sessions on the trail. The facts that you've turned up about the history of the West are the basis for the fiction and the legends about the men—each one was at least a man and a half, to our way of thinking—who made the country.

Thanks to you, we soon had the dude convinced. Last time we saw him, he was prizing spurs. Just to hammer the point home, here's this month's correspondence from you readers.

And now, meet the laziest, meanest, most all-out ornery bronc that ever lived:

Dear Editor:

The most famous horse in the history of the rodeo was a lazy, mean, man-hating bronc that still threw 'em off at the ripe

age of 29, and rejoiced in the name of Will James. Useless to say he was no kin to Will James, the cowboy author, but James the Human was the original owner of James the Horse.

And for eleven years, while other and better horseflesh grew tame and tired and old in the service of men, James the Horse did nothing but eat—and balk. He refused to carry a man or any other load. He was a red-eyed, no good ingrate, and led a full life with a rodeo.

Here, for five years, shattering all equine Methusaleh records, the miserable horse followed his simple philosophy—namely, that he was born to be idle, and would break his neck proving it if he had to. Will James was seventeen years old before any rider managed to stay on him for as long as a minute and a half.

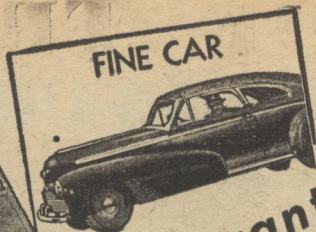
Maybe his keepers thought he was weakening at last. Sorry for an old fellow whose whole generation, with the exception of himself, had gone ultimately West at last, they gave him a little rest. Just what he needed.

At twenty-one, and twenty-two, Will James' no-rider record had sagged to 90%. The crowds loved him. He loved the crowds. Just so they didn't ride him. Horses died. Men died. Will James was rounding out the third decade of a life in which he had always successfully defended his right to do nothing, when disaster struck. They retired him.

He was condemned to spend the rest of his days in a sunny pasture, fed and respected. No one tried to ride him any more. He was twenty-nine. He had won his last argument. He was Will James, the ever Untamed.

(Continued on page 128)





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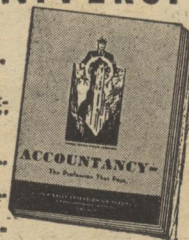
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# *Texan* REACH OR DIE!



## A Novel by FRANK BONHAM

### ● CHAPTER ONE ●

#### One Man's Range

**C**HANCE finished posting night guards on the herd and rode to the campfire. It burned ruddily under a flinty slant of rocks. He slung out of the saddle and stretched, turning his face to the sky in a yawn. He inspected the blue enamel coffepot and found a mire of grounds at the bottom.

Almost straddling the fire as he drank, he stood tall to gaze down the hills that





---

*"We'll give you a horse that can run . . . a man that can fight . . .  
and a land that is—Texas. If that ain't enough, mister, there's a  
range that is greener—on the far side of hell!"*

---

Chance and Pete Lara rode up to find the body. . . .





sloughed off in easy rolls to the west. A lanky East Texan, he wore a buckskin shirt and old cavalry breeches from which the yellow slashes had been removed, leaving stripes of darker blue. Rawboned and brown, Chance's face looked as though there was not a smile in it.

In a low notch beyond the hills, he saw the flash of a river, a red-bronze curl in the sunset. Beyond the river was Mexico, and in Mexico there were hungry soldiers, and generals with gold to spend on beef. Tom Chance could almost hear the clink of coins in his saddlebags. He was three hundred miles from home with this measly longhorned herd of his. In a week's time—less, with luck—he would be shut of it.

Finishing the coffee, Chance found a currycomb and dandy-brush and worked on his pony. He tended the horse with almost shamefaced affection, a little rope horse which was his sole pride. He gave it a slap and let it move out on its picket, and something about the moment made him think of the girl who a few hours before had given him permission to bed his small trail-herd on the bench above her family's cabin.

In sudden decision, Chance removed his Stetson, ran the dandy-brush through his thick, dark hair a few times, and carried saddle and blanket back to the horse. She'd been a pert and pigtailed little trick, he thought, and maybe she wouldn't mind a stray puncher for supper.

He was tightening the cinch, a knee against the fender, when some riders came over the craggy pass behind the fire. Chance stood quietly, then slipped his carbine from the saddle boot and waited. There were three of them lunging down the slope through the rocks. He threw a greasewood branch on the fire and the light blazed up.

Casual, dark-skinned men in heavy brushpopper clothing, they pulled in and touched their hatbrims in quiet salute. They were Americans, he saw, wearing

thick bullhide chaps and linsey-woolsey coats. One of them said, "*Noches!* Smelled your coffee clean over the hog-back, friend."

Chance said slowly, "Wait a spell and I'll dump in some makin's."

They observed him add coarse grounds and water from a canvas waterbag, leaning on the swells of their saddles with their hats tilted back. The man who had spoken was as dark as any Mexican, with close-set black eyes full of sharpness. He wore a cone-peaked sombrero, and a gold earring in the shape of a cross dangled from his left ear. He had a brash, self-confident look.

"I'm Lafe Morgan," the rider said.

Chance looked up. "Liddy Golden mentioned you."

Smiling, the rancher glanced at a companion, an old man with a dirty campaign hat and a beard the color of an old rug. "What'd she say?" he asked.

"Said I'd probably run into you, but not to be ascairt," Chance smiled.

Morgan considered this, then he dismounted and pushed a branch with his foot. "They're big talkers, those Golden's," he said.

Chance stirred the coffee with a stick. "That's what they said about you. But you don't look like a man it'd be hard to get along with."

"I ain't," Morgan assured him. "Especially men that are just passing through."

"I'll probably just pass through." Chance looked up, dropping the stick in the fire. "Cain't rightly say, though. I'm taking this herd to Mexico, if the sign looks right."

Morgan chuckled. "Mexico, eh? What part?"

"Closest part."

The old man cupped an ear, glancing at Morgan. He wore a shirt without a collar, and above his beard were gaunt, knob-like cheekbones. "What's he say?" he demanded.



"He says he's taking these cows to Mexico! My ramrod, Chance," he said. "Deaf Scott. Other feller's Jess Banta."

Scott's laughter rattled in his throat. "Mexico, eh? Well, good luck. On'y you won't make it."

Chance poured the half-steeped coffee. He left the tin cups on the ground. They helped themselves. "Why not?" he asked.

"Because if the Federals don't git you, the customs men will. The duty's sky high. More'n a cow's worth."

Chance snapped, "Yes, and they told me I couldn't bust those cows out of the brush, either, but I did. I was plumb sick of cowpunching for other men. Then I tamed them down to where they'd trail. And here I am."

"Congratulations," Morgan drawled. "Now, listen. I can handle them cows, if you want to sell them. For a fee."

"You mean I'd pay you to cross them?"

"That's right. I'd give the Mexes a little present to let them cross, and you could give me one."

"Just like you were a Mex too, eh?"

Morgan regarded him narrowly. "Suit yourself. Or I'll buy them outright. What'll you do if you don't make it across?"

Chance knew enough about this man, from his conversation with the Goldenes, to know his vulnerable points. He glanced about him. "Well, Andy Golden don't seem to be overstocked. I might throw in with him."

Morgan's features stiffened. "One thing you ain't going to do," he said tersely, "is go pardners with that outfit! One of their kind is enough."

"I'm not, eh? I may even decide to marry the girl and have twenty kids just like her and me."

Morgan strode back to his horse. He mounted, the others joining him. The cross in the rancher's ear glinted in the dying sunlight. "You'll learn when you're well off, Chance. You'll learn!"

Chance laughed.

IN THE windy darkness, Tom Chance rode down to the cabin on the crest of the hills. He observed the yellow glow of the oiled rawhide panes, and the shadow of a girl who moved before one of them. The incense of food drew him like a bugle call. He left his horse at the corral gate and knocked softly on the door. Liddy Golden opened it.

"You're late enough."

"Did I say I'd be back?"

"No, but you looked like a man that might."

Standing there, Chance inhaled the breath of coal-oil lamps and the fragrance of frying meat and *chili con queso*. He pulled off his hat and moved politely into the room. Trying not to stare at the dishes steaming on the table, he glanced at the girl, but again he had to glance away in order not to stare at her.

"Brushed your hair, didn't you?" She smiled. She was a foot shorter than Tom Chance, a dark-haired young woman with a fine figure. He took notice of the dusty-brown texture of her skin and of the way she parted her black hair and wore it in two braids. She wore a long, dark skirt and a deepnecked, brightly colored Mexican blouse.

From a back room came the old man, her grandfather, lugging a huge family Bible. His name was Andy Golden and he was taller than Chance, built and bearded from plans for a patriarch.

He set the Book down and placed himself at the table. "Set down," he told Tom Chance. Liddy began to serve the food.

"I didn't see any of your cows out there," Chance mentioned. "Where do you keep them all?"

"We haven't got any," said Liddy.

Chance frowned. "You said you owned this land. If you've let me bed that herd on somebody else's range—"

"You don't have to have cows just be-



cause you have land, do you?" Andy Golden demanded. In his thorny eyes the firelight glinted.

"I never heard of anybody owning one who didn't own both."

"Well, you've heerd now." Golden began to eat.

Chance rose. "I'm too tired to hooraw, Golden. If you've been ribbing me—"

Liddy laughed. "Let him alone, Grandpop. Sit down, Tom. It's just that we had to sell part of our outfit or lose the whole kit-and-bi'lling. So we sold the cattle and kept the land. That's funny, isn't it? We sold the cattle—and here you come along with a herd and nothing to do with it!"

Slowly, Chance sat down. He took a bite of chili and cheese. His throat muscles clamped, almost incapable of handling anything more civilized than hardtack and boiled screwbeans. He chewed slowly, and said, "I've got a place to put them. Mexico. I heard they're paying fat prices for beef for the rebel armies."

"That what you heerd?" Golden asked.

"Isn't it right? It better be. I didn't come four hundred miles to wash my feet in the *Rio Bravo*."

"Oh, it's right! But the Federals still got river guards along here. You've got to get by them, and I doubt you could do it."

Chance said nothing for a while. "We'll see," he said finally.

Liddy raised a pottery cup of coffee and her eyes studied him. "In case you don't get them across, what do you mean to do?"

"I mean to get them across."

"Where'd you get them, Tom?" Liddy asked. "Most cattle that come through here are rustled. Where'd you rustle yours?"

"In the *brasada*. Wilder'n catamounts till I yoke-tamed them. I paid a feller a dollar a head for all I could bresh out. I finished with eight hundred. He swore it

wasn't possible; cattle had been there for years. Nobody'd wanted to get out of cowpunching quite as much as me before, I reckon. I was a full year at it."

"What's the matter with cowpunching?"

"Nothing, when it's for yourself. Morgan came by to say howdy, by the way. He wanted to buy me out. I said no, I'd got plans."

The old man sucked a tooth. "That all?"

"No. He warned me not to hang around you."

The girl sighed. In the lamplight, her cheek was a soft, creamy curve. Chance thought how it would feel against a man's whiskers. "If it weren't for him," she said, "we might have found a partner a long time ago. So I expect you're scared out, too. Though religious folks would probably think this was ordained. You without land—us without cattle. We could practically go into partnership."

"When I take hold of some land," Chance said slowly, "it will be in New Mexico. Closer to railroads and towns. Maybe I'm a shade like Lafe Morgan. I want to get big, too. That comes from all your ancestors being little. All of a sudden it hits you."

"It hit Morgan," said Andy Golden. "And one of these days, he gets to crowding me any farther, a fifty-seventy slug is going to hit him. He's got his cows sprawled over half of my back range now. He's always bringing down a tax collector or somebody to suck my blood. If it wasn't for him, I'd still be running more than a few milk cows and enough beef for my own needs. He got holt of a note of mine and come down on me like a brass cow. Thought he had us. But I sold the cattle and paid him off."

His weariness driven back by the food, Chance pushed back his chair. "I'm obliged," he said, "but I reckon I'm hell-bent for being a grama-grass cowman."



Down here there ain't much but salt grass and badlands, is there?"

"Not much," said Liddy. "But it's funny, the hold it gets on you. Sleep well, Tom. *Que te vaya bien!*"

"Thanks," Chance said, and he was as certain as anything, as he trudged out, that she thought he would be dragging back the following night, whipped. That was all she knew about him.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Blood River

CHANCE slept until midnight, when he was roused by two of his punchers riding in. Pete Lara kicked out his blanket roll and built the fire up. "Cold, by damn," he complained. He hunkered by the fire to roll a cigarette, a tall and shaggy-haired Mexican who looked like a brigand and was loyal as a tickhound.

Yawning, Chance carried his saddle to where his pony stood in the outer light. "Lafe Morgan rode over," he said.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He talked some, though. Lots of wind in that one."

"Will we trail the cattle tomorrow?"

"We'll talk to some fellers first. I've got to know what I'm going to do before I decide how to go about it."

Slowly, so as not to upset the cattle, Chance drifted out to maintain the lower perimeter of the herd. There were four punchers in his crew, all Mexicans, because Mexicans were cheaper. Time for high priced cowboys when a man had his own *iron* and was beginning to establish himself. Dogeared dreams paraded before Tom Chance . . . his own cut of cattle . . . whitefaces, with a toughening of Brahma blood, the blocky shapes of them drifting over golden New Mexican hills. He imagined a big ranch house with strings of *chili* hanging from the *vigas*, so

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big they would call it *La Casa Grande*. It was a dream like a buffalo coat, warm and with plenty of room for a man to grow inside it.

Chance's palm slapped the saddlehorn in an agony of ambition.

The horse turned its head. Chance glanced about. Nostrils aquiver, the pony took the message the breeze carried. Chance studied the abrupt sagebrush slope climbing away to his right. A mescal sketched itself against the sky, lean as a hall tree. Sharp, elbow-like boulders broke the slope. Something, he fancied, lurked among those boulders. Suddenly a horse whickered from the ridge. A man rose from behind a boulder and fired into the cows.

It was too dark for a man to aim properly. Chance held his horse by will power and the pressure of his knees, holding him while the herd broke like a split-open melon, and the gunman fired twice more and turned to leg it to the ridge.

Chance fired. Longhorns were lunging by him, down the rough slope into a canyon. He heard the man scrambling on, but he could not find the dust puff. He was half blinded by the acrid bloom of his rifle. Moving the horse aside, he gazed until he found the outline of a horse in the *lecheguilla* cresting the slope. He slid from the saddle, placed his boot on the reins and swung the horse. He went up. Sitting his saddle a moment, the gunman gazed down upon the riders loping frantically around the point of the herd, firing revolvers to booger them back from the canyon. Chance squeezed the trigger; the gun leaped. When he could see again, all he could find was the horse. It went along the ridge in crazy, buck-jumping fashion, kicking at the man who dragged by one foot from the right stirrup.

Working for an hour, Chance and his Mexicans let the cattle run their scare out, but when they came into slow, wheeling formation they were back on home ground.

They held them that way until dawn. No one went up to find the gunman and no one slept.

In the pearly pink dawn, toothed with cold, Chance and Pete Lara rode up the ridge and found, a quarter-mile away, the body of a rider. Nearby grazed his horse. The horse was without brand; the only distinguishing marks on the rider had been made by rocks.

They held the horse down until they got the body lashed across the saddle. Chance said dryly, "Pete, we can't let this man go to purgatory without a brand."

They heated a running iron in the breakfast fire and Chance burned into the back of the leather coat an M with a Spear through it. Spear M—Lafe Morgan's brand. Chance ran the horse up the slope.

Later, as he and Pete were preparing to ride to the Mexican village of Paso Roblero, he saw the Goldens, patriarch and granddaughter, riding up. The girl wore a divided leather skirt and a softly tanned doeskin shirt; with her black braids, she looked like a Mexican girl.

"That was the tockwallopin'est chuck I've ate in a long time," Chance told her, smiling.

"Oh, we feed like that all the time," Liddy told him airily. "Sometimes Grandpop hooks a catfish and we have a real fish fry. We heard shots last night," she mentioned.

Andy Golden peered at Chance while the cowboy toed a mesquite branch farther into the fire. Golden wore a decaying Stetson, a leather shirt and a pair of old chaps broken out at the knees and mended with copper wire. He was slowly chewing a big quid of tobacco.

"Loafer wolf ranging too close," said Chance.

"Got them cows on the run, too, didn't he?" said the old man.

"Sure did." Tom hitched up his shell belt. "We'll be getting along. I'll whack up a bargain with some Mex and be back



by nightfall. Be off your land tomorrow."

Golden spat and watched the tobacco nectar sizzle in the fire. "Don't like wolves, eh? Kind of got you on the run, too."

"Look here," Chance said. "There's wolves where I come from, too. I told you I didn't like this range, and I meant it. That's why I'm going on. Not because anybody's thrown the fear into me."

"Oh, we understand that," said Liddy. "We aren't in any hurry for a partner. We wouldn't take the first outfit that came along. He's got to be the right man."

"Uh-huh," Chance said. He watched her bend to warm her hands. Her fingers were slender and her wrists looked too small for a country where you needed a grip. But he liked the light turn of her just the same.

Golden fastened a severe look on him. "Thought you said you were running longhorns."

"I am."

"And some Durhams, too. I seen them as we came by, though your men tried to keep them bunched inside the herd where I wouldn't. Afraid somebody will steal them?"

Chance's eye was cold and gray. "You guessed it, Grandpop. I've got eighty-five head of shorthorns. You know what they cost me? All the money I could save, and win in bunkhouse poker, all over the state of Texas. Twelve years! And I practically stole them, at that. The longhorns will buy me some land somewhere. The shorthorns will stock it for me, or make a start."

Golden turned back to his horse. Chance helped Liddy remount, and had the flash of her smile and of her beautiful dark eyes. He heard the old man say,

"I was going to say, if you decide to winter them here before going on up, this here *tobosa* grass will put on harder flesh, blade for blade, than any grass under the sun. You just think about that, young

fella. You want fat on your steers that will travel to a railroad; not blubber they'll lose the first day."

He spurred the horse back down the ridge. Liddy followed him, with a wave for Tom Chance. After kicking dirt over the fire, Chance and Lara rode off southwest.

THERE was something about this Big Bend country, wild though it was, that made Chance feel as though someone were looking over his shoulder. The range was tough with *tobosa* grass. Durable, Chance knew, and the kind of poorly appearing graze that put good, marbled flesh on a steer. Overhead the sky was clear, with a winter sun. Shadows were bone-hard on the peaks. The ridges reminded Tom of gunrests.

Near the river, arroyos slashed the range. They picked a cow trail that led them to the bottom of a narrow canyon.

Lara, riding in advance, was the first to discover a deep scuff of hoof marks descending a trail on the south wall of the canyon. It crossed a small stream at the base and they followed it to where a side canyon reached the Rio Grande a half mile farther on.

"Pretty good outfit of cows," Chance said. "This fella Morgan must own them. Maybeso if we watch him, we'll see how to git 'em across the river."

Here, between crumbling cliffs of red earth, the Big River flowed soundlessly between coverts of thistle and cottonwood. It was windy and crisp in the canyon.

Two miles upstream they passed a crude sign set against a cliff: THIS IS ANDY GOLDEN'S LAND. A few rods farther along, the cliffs fell back. They entered a wild valley where the river was broken by deltas of sand. On high ground to the west lay the Mexican village of Paso Roblero.

Chance reined in, watching somberly as a herd of longhorn cattle moved



through the sandbars. He discerned the rawhide form of Lafe Morgan, idly swinging a rope. Bearded Deaf Scott loafed along on the flank, and on the yonder bank was the tall rider called Jess Banta, talking with a Mexican in faded gray shirt and pants.

"Gotta see this," Chance winked at Lara. He put the horse into an easy lope through the shallows and came up with Morgan.

Morgan was smoking a twisted cigarette, which he flipped over his pony's ears as the Texan came up. "Down early," he remarked.

"Not too early to find out how it's done."

Morgan turned his glance ahead again. There was a blunt anger in his face.

"I thought I heard shooting last night," Chance told him.

"One of the boys shooting at loafer wolves. Brakes are full of them."

"So's the whole Bend," said Chance. "But they can be handled."

Morgan's dark glance came lazily to Chance, and he said, "They always have been before."

Chance let his horse drag meticulously through the roiled water, watching the cattle hump up the cutbank. He stayed with Morgan as the rancher approached Jess Banta and the Mexican. Morgan raised a dark hand.

"*Qué húbole?*"

"*Bien, bien!*" grinned the Mexican. He was fat and unshaven, wore sandals and coarse gray pants and shirt, and chewed contentedly on a *tortilla* rolled about a core of beans.

"And the wife?" asked Morgan. "And the *niños*?"

"*Todos Bien.* I do not see you lately."

"I keep busy." Morgan observed the last of the cattle surge up the bank. Then he said, "This is *Señor* Tom Chance, Aldama. He wants to ask you something."

The Mexican's gentle dark eyes came to Chance. "*Señor?*"

"I'm bringing some cattle across tomorrow," Chance said. "I want to know what the duty will be."

Aldama smiled. "*Machos*, five dollars. *Hembras*, ten."

"You mean pesos, eh?"

"I mean dollars."

Chance hesitated. He felt anger pulsing in his throat. "The cattle aren't worth much more than that, my friend."

"Then do not bring them to Mexico."

Morgan's stringy features savored it. He grinned at Chance, and Chance said suddenly, "How much is this fella paying?"

"This is his business and mine, *Señor.*"

"And if I bring my cattle across, that'll be mine, *zoqueto.*"

He swung the pony, but the customs man put himself in its way. He was still smiling, still chewing the *tortilla*. "You leave them in *Téjas*, eh?"

"*Maybeso.*"

"So we still be friends. I tell you why there is duty," said Aldama. "Because we do not feed revolutionaries, and that is where those cattle would go."

Chance stared at Morgan. "Where do you think Morgan's are going?"

"That is not my affair, *Señor.*"

"But it is your affair where mine go, eh? You go to hell," Chance told him. "If I can't do business with you, I'll do it in spite of you."

Aldama's soft Mexican syllables had an edge. "*Leesten, Señor.* You think to do business with Cortina, eh? *Está bien!* You drink with rebel coyotes, you hang with them, too."

"Who's Cortina?"

"I think you know pretty good. I think you find him all right. *Buena suerte, Señor.*"

Chance and Pete Lara pushed on across a field toward the village. They saw Jess Banta and Lafe Morgan jog up a crowded



alley and disappear, leaving Deaf Scott to manage the herd with the other punchers. The cattle began to drift off toward a range of sand hills.

The fumes of Chance's banked anger smarted. Lara spoke resignedly. "There is no understanding the ways of God and tax collectors."

"If I'd offered him a bribe—" Chance reflected. "But I couldn't, not with Morgan there." He thought of going back, and then he saw the real shrewdness of Morgan's strategy, because now both he and Aldama had their wounded pride to nurse. Riding into the village, he reflected on the prediction the Goldens had made, that he would never get his herd across the river. He thought of them planning how they would welcome him back, his room ready, maybe, the mail order catalogue open to things they had not been able to afford before they had a partner.

Chance said, "Let's find that Cortina feller."

THE street enticed them on, steep and crooked. In out-of-plumb shacks, the village housed a few hundred backyard farmers, tradesmen, and their families. The ground was uneven, like an old Indian diggings. On high ground above the village gleamed a white-washed church, a weedy cemetery behind it.

Following Lara's instinct, they blundered into a congress of mean buildings near the church. A smithy fumed blue-gray smoke into the chilled air; an open-air market buzzed with black-shawled women and stank of poorly cured leather and decayed vegetables; bloody cuts of beef hummed with flies. Several *cantinas* showed along the cobbled street, and in front of one with a blue door stood several horses. Jess Banta's buckskin mule and the rawboned gray Lafe Morgan rode stood here switching at flies.

They sauntered inside. The *cantina* smelled like sour library paste. The stone floor was dank, a few candles were reflected murkily in dubious looking bottles back of the bar, which was about the length of a horse. Three tables comprised the furniture. At one of them, a youth was belaboring a zither with small leather hammers. The music was soft and toe-tapping, just loud enough to keep them from hearing what Morgan, Banta, and a third man were talking about at the corner table.

The musician hesitated. The men looked around. The strings hummed again and Morgan rose. "You looking for me, Chance?"

"I'm looking for Cortina. Are you Cortina?" he asked the Mexican at the table.

"I am Juan Cortina," the man said. He was small, almost delicate in build, a young man of Tom Chance's age, good looking and yet appearing rugged enough.

Morgan came to Chance. He tapped him on the chest. "Don't think you'll get anywhere trailing me around, cowboy. I could have you jugged right now."

"I'm scared stiff," Chance said. He brushed by him. He sat at the table with Jess Banta and the Mexican. Pete Lara stared at Morgan and Morgan swung around and tossed the *cantinero* a coin. Then the rancher struck a match on the wall and blew out an aroma of cigar smoke and sulphur fumes.

"See that you're back tonight," he told Banta. He pushed the shuttered door out of his way.

"I've got some cattle to sell, *Señor*," Chance said. "Do you want them?"

"I always want cattle."

"I've got bills of sale on them. I reckon," Chance said, "that's more than most of your customers can say."

Banta stopped clinking some coins in his hand. "Meaning us?"

"If the boot fits."



There was a moment tough with ran-  
cor. Then Cortina said, "I have my  
horse in back. We talk about it where the  
air is clean, eh?"

"No use," Banta smiled. "He can't  
cross them."

"Too bad," Cortina smiled. "Maybe we  
butcher them and bring them across in  
rowboats. *Adiós, amigo.*"

Banta was still playing with the coins  
as they went out.

Cortina had mounted a fine rosewood  
bay by the time Chance and Pete Lara  
rode around to the back of the saloon. He  
shook hands with Lara, but said, "We  
talk business better without foreman, I  
think."

Chance hesitated. "All right," he said  
finally. "You start on back to the Golden's  
ranch, Pete. I'll be along directly."

As they rode, flanking some dry hills  
crusted with rocks and sage, Chance said,  
"I've got about eight hundred head to  
sell. All tick-free and healthy. Any cows  
you find ticks on, you can have. How  
much will you pay?"

"Fifteen dollars."

A feeling of mild amazement struck  
Tom. Fifteen a head—twelve thousand  
dollars! "Cash?" he asked.

"As good as cash."

"Nothing's as good as cash."

"Some things are better. First, we get  
the cattle across. I show you something."

Cortina loped up the river trail. The  
dust of Morgan's herd trailed off slowly  
from a point a few miles west. Looking  
back, Chance saw the punchers returning,  
splashing their horses through the river,  
having turned the cattle over to Cortina's  
men.

"So you quarrelled with Aldama," the  
Mexican said. "Well—we go around him.  
Morgan pays him instead of the govern-  
ment. But most of them north of here,  
such as Andy Golden, cross at night, pay-  
ing no one. Morgan has no crossing.  
*Bueno,*" he said crisply. "Bring your

cattle to the saddle, yonder. This is at  
moonrise tomorrow night. We are three  
miles above Paso Roblero. Here my men  
take them over.

"What about the pay?"

Cortina took time to fish out a small  
black cigar, offered one to Chance, and  
light it on Chance's refusal. "I said better  
than cash. I mean silver, from the mines  
of Parral and Torreón. Silver worth  
twice the dollars I could pay."

"Dollars, silver — what's the differ-  
ence?" Chance frowned.

"This is in the shape of plates, diner-  
ware, religious articles. At least, it used  
to have that shape, before my smiths ham-  
mered it down. Booty, as they say."

Chance fought a brief skirmish with  
ethics. Flatware, candlesticks, hairbrushes  
—wrung from luckless *hacendados* by the  
rebels and given Cortina in return for  
beef for the rebel armies. Well, somebody  
would get hold of it, sooner or later, and  
it was as good as pesos.

He said, "All right," and grabbed at  
the saddlehorn. His pony lunged to its  
knees and up again, and Cortina exclaimed  
as Chance profanely spurred the horse and  
quirted it with the reins-ends. Again it  
tried to twist from under him. He was  
down with it, now. He heard the ringing  
echoes of a shot and kicked out of the  
stirrups and rolled away. Cortina swerved  
his horse to find the shelter of a gully.

Chance bellied around on the ground  
behind the gray spears of a *sotol*, his Colt  
prodding blindly before him. He heard  
Cortina's voice.

"Lie still, *Señor!* It was from the sand  
hills."

He fired, the bullet *zinging* over Tom's  
head. Then a long moment drew out, and  
on the tail of it a soft rush of hoofs came  
from somewhere in the dunes. They re-  
mained as they were. Overhead, the sky  
was faintly tinged with the beginnings of  
sunset. A moist chill came up from the  
river. A breeze played with the dry



threads of the cactus spears, waving them.

Cortina rode back. He was tight with undersurface emotions. "Let us recover the saddle, *Señor*. I have more horses than a man could wear out in a lifetime. One of them is yours."

Chance, tight-lipped, got the saddle off the pony. It had been a fine brush horse, trained to the rope. It was the kind of horse he would not lose without telling someone about it.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Bullet Law

**C**ORTINA furnished him with a half-trained bronc of indeterminate bloodliness. He had ridden halfway to the village when a *vaquero* rode up behind him.

"Pardons, *Señor*. It is that the *patrón* says there is no deal."

"Why not?"

"He does not say. He says only there is no deal."

Chance grunted. "What kind—never mind. *Gracias*," he said. He rode ahead. His eyes were dull with fury. So the deal, probably the only one he could negotiate in a month of hunting, had fallen through. That was all the bullet was expected to accomplish. To frighten Cortina out of dealing with him.

He discovered Jess Banta's buckskin mule still before the *cantina*. He laid a hand on its hide and found it moist. The mule had a gloss it had not had before a brush went over it, combing out the lather and dust. It had run hard.

Chance raised his voice. "Banta!"

Banta sauntered into the doorway. "Howdy, cowboy." The light was poor; candles within the saloon limned his lank form, a Colt hanging deep on his right thigh. He had a cigarette in the hand that held the door open.



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly; unkempt, and : : : Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."



Hair looks better...  
scalp feels better...  
when you check Dry Scalp

HE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you. Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff : : : keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair : : : and it's economical, too!

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on CBS Wednesday nights.



"Come out here." Chance stood between the animals, his hands hanging loosely.

Banta regarded him an instant before he left the doorway. "You got back in a helluva hurry," Chance said.

Banta caught his thumbs in the corners of his pockets. "Back from where?" he asked easily.

Chance put out one hand and ran it over the hide of the mule. "Spur welts," he said.

Banta's eyes wavered. "Is it any of your damned business if—"

The Texan's hand moved in, bunching as he swung. The blow splatted against Banta's face, turning him and making him grab at the neck of Chance's horse. Shying, the horse caused him to go to his knees. But in an instant he was rising, an oath in his mouth, lunging at Tom Chance. Chance caught Banta's wrist and slugged at his face. Wildness possessed Banta. He surged in, his fingers driving for Chance's throat. They closed, and suddenly probing claws were deep in the cords of Tom's neck, shutting off his wind. Chance clubbed at the sweat-slicked face before him, but Banta was too insanely angry to feel pain. Chance got his arms about the puncher's neck and they writhed to the ground. The iron hands never left his throat.

Three men came from the *cantina* and stood silently on the walk. A lean hound nosed at them and a brood of delighted boys collected. Chance was hardly aware of these things. He tried to pry a thumb beneath Jess Banta's fingers, but the flesh of his throat and of Banta's hands seemed to have welded together. He slugged again at the man's face, seeing blood on the taut features, the glint of his teeth and eyes, and then he felt something hard under his thigh and knew it was one of their guns.

Chance's fingers closed on the gun. He tugged it from beneath his leg and got the heavy frame in his palm. The gun rose

and slashed down. Banta's face distorted, his eyes squeezing shut. Chance chopped again. The cowboy's hands slackened.

Pulling free, Tom arose and looked down at him. Banta was not quite unconscious. He moved dumbly on the ground, his legs drawn up and his fingers scraping over the cobbles. Chance looked at the watching Mexicans. "Do you know this man?" he asked them.

"Sí," The *cantinero* watched him guardedly.

"Drag him inside. Give him a drink and put him on his mule when he can ride." Chance found a fifty-cent piece and flipped it. He rode out of the village.

Lara had built a small fire beside the trail. Chance found him here. They ate hardtack and sardines from the Texan's saddlebag, afterward rolling in their blankets beside the fire. In the clear, cold morning they rode on to the Golden ranch.

"Let the cattle move out," Tom Chance said tersely. "Let 'em have the range."

The Mexican's eyes were quizzical.

"We'll stay a few days," Tom said. "Maybe a month."

Lara's black eyes roved the range with its arroyos and fang-like peaks. "Is good land. Is better than lots." The easy contentment of his people softened his face.

"Worse than a lot, too," snapped Chance.

When he rode into the windy ranchyard, Liddy was boiling clothes in a copper tub and her grandfather was butchering a young steer. Liddy waved a stick at him. "Any shirts you want washed? Throw them in."

"I've got a rancher I'd like to throw in." Chance swung down. He walked to the fire and watched her poke the wash. Hospitality, he discovered, was easier accepted before a prideful refusal. "Well," he said, "if you can still stand me around . . . I mean, not as a pardner, but on a cash rent basis—"

Liddy dropped the stick and threw her



arms around his neck. Her lips pressed his cheek hard and were gone, and then she clapped her hands. "Tom, I prayed—For your good, too, I mean. Because it *is* good range, and we *are* good people, and we need a partner. You will stay this winter? You won't leave us before spring?"

There was a beseeching quality in her face that made him ashamed, as though he were doing them a favor, instead of their helping him. The wind had roughed her hair and colored her cheeks. She had dimples, he discovered, and lashes as dark as her eyes.

"I'll stay, Liddy," he said. "It ain't New Mexico, and the grass ain't grama by a long ways, but—I'll stay till the spring winds blow the roof off the range."

They fixed him a room off the smithy, in what had been a feed shed. Grimly he installed the small treasure of his cowboy life—an alarm clock, a few patent medicines, a steel mirror and a razor strop. He set out strychnine for the rats and made his bed on the rawhide cot. He lay down and stared at the riprap ceiling, and a bit of dried mud fell in his eye.

*Just like cowpunching, he thought. A hole-in-the-wall to share with the rats, and beholden for that.*

A ringing clamor, shattering sleep and the rosy-dawn stillness, brought Chance up on his cot, stupid with sleep. Iron shimmers of sound vibrated through the room. Then he knew it was the music of the triangle he had seen hanging by the kitchen door, and he heard Andy Golden shout, "Come and git it, or I'll throw it away!"

He went into the warm reek of frying meat and potatoes in the kitchen. The rancher was already eating. "Set!" he commanded. "Liddy, you don't have to incinerate that beef to make it fit to eat."

"Green beef'll scour you, Grandpop," Liddy said calmly. She brought a steaming plate of food to Chance and took her

own place. "You're going into a work jag. As sure as anything you're fixing to work."

Chance opened his case knife. "Don't know what he's going to work on. These cows of mine will find their way to grass without being led."

"Chance," said Golden, "I've been holdin' back on you. I do have a herd. Near as many cows as you have. When they cleaned me out on the others, I held these in blind canyons and the brakes. I've been afeard to bring them out. Morgan's *pelados* would have run them clean to Mexico. But I reckon you must have the Injun sign on him, or he wouldn't have left you stay here this long."

"Branded?"

"All but the increase. We'll get at that now, and move the critters down to where they won't have to eat cactus. I've had two goatherds to keep track of them."

Chance speculated. "I don't want them intermarrying with those shorthorns of mine. But we can team up on the rest and split the increase next spring. Deal?"

"Deal," said Golden.

"How long will you be gone?" Liddy demanded.

"Six-seven days. They're up under Bob's Ridge. Chance, I'll keep you heatin' irons till you prove you can rassle a calf."

**G**RINNING, Chance went to roll his blankets. Liddy came to the shack in a few minutes, bringing a brown paper wallet tied with a rawhide thong. "Some saddle chuck," she said. "Hope you like pricklypear jelly."

"That's kind of you, Liddy. But you're all kind people down here, except when your name's Morgan."

Liddy winced. "Count on it, Tom—my name will never be Morgan. Though for a spell, there, Lafe thought it might be. His feelings must have been hurt, because right after I ran him off for the last time, our troubles commenced."



Chance tugged at one of her pigtails. "You're a hopeful sort of woman. You won't find any other prospects except Mexicans down here, and you don't want all your kids to be bullfighters, do you?"

"Just so they fight them with ropes and branding irons," said Liddy. "It's wonderful, what you've done for Grandpop. He's been scared to claim his own shadow."

Chance pulled on the pigtail, and she came with it. He saw in the gloom the soft shadow of lashes on her cheeks; he saw again the tucks of her dimples and the sweet gravity of her face. He bent suddenly to kiss her, but what he kissed were her fingers, rising between them. Liddy laughed, retrieved her braid, and moved back.

"I said I'd been reared, didn't I?"

"You don't have to be backward just to prove you've been reared," he declared.

"Try it again sometime, Tom," she smiled. "I just wanted to prove you aren't handing out all the favors."

Deep in the raw, red gashes of the badlands bordering his range, Andy Golden had kept his outlaw herd hidden. They started the *rodeo* near the river. Golden knew all the spots where the cattle would be hiding—the salt licks, the springs and thickets. In with his own Chain brand cattle they discovered a quantity of Morgan's Spear M animals. For five days they combed the brush and the gaunt *barrancas*. Golden had his Mexicans drag trusses of wild hay to a stone corral in a blind canyon. Here they fed a lusty army of weaners, while the cows bawled around the barrier. Sixty of Morgan's calves found their way into this corral.

When the weaning was finished, they started the cows toward the home pastures. Golden and Tom turned out the steer calves on fresh graze.

Then, driving the day herd of Morgan's cows, bereft of their offspring, Tom and

the old man moved along the border between the Spear M and Golden's land until they struck the ridge above the cabin. Golden halted to gaze down the crumpled foothills. He struck the saddlehorn.

"By God!" he said. "You and me, Chance—if you was to stay, we could be what Morgan thinks he's going to be. Big! Cattle from here to Marathon! A bunkhouse like a hotel. But I'm too old to do it alone."

The midday air was warm with sun and sage. Distantly the river flashed, and a hawk tilted on a cold river of air. Something of what Golden and even Lafe Morgan must have felt touched Chance . . . a feeling that the strength of the country was going into him—that a man able to receive such strength could ride any horse or tame any range ever fashioned.

He said doubtfully, "I know what you mean, Andy. But—I don't know . . . come spring, maybe I can tell."

They pushed on. A rider in a dirty campaign hat, wearing a beard the color of dirty rope, moved into their trail from a notch of rocks. Deaf Scott, Morgan's ramrod, sat there while the cows shied around him. He was smoking a crooked brown cigarette.

"Heerd you were branding cows, Golden," he shouted.

"Calves. Other fellers brand cows. I'm not that clever with a running iron."

"Lafe figured I better get over here and rep."

"Saved you the trouble. Them's all the cows you had."

Scott's eyes estimated the herd. "Wouldn't make better'n eighty. Where's the calves?"

"Not a bachelor bull in my herd, Scott, and my cows are plumb jealous. Your cows didn't ketch."

"Didn't, eh?" Scott returned hoarsely. "And them packing bag like Jerseys!"

"Coyotes are bad this season, too. Maybe they were ate."



"Or maybe they're gonna be ate." In his dirty beard, Scott's mouth was like a barely noticeable scar. His glance flickered to Chance. "Morgan wants to talk with you, friend. He'll be working near Saddlebag Meadow tomorrow."

"Tell him I'll be working on one of Miss Liddy's pies tomorrow. Hasn't he the guts to come looking for me himself? Or is this for Jess Banta?"

Deaf Scott drew on the cigarette. He spat the cigarette out with the smoke. "This is for you," he said. He turned his horse and rode after the cows.

Pete Lara had dropped the mother herd and gone on down to check on the Durhams. They were in the cabin when he returned at dusk. Golden was preparing a cauterizing agent for cactus wounds. The cabin throbbed with the fragrance of son-of-a-gun stew, and Tom sat musing over a tally book as the Mexican knocked at the door. Lara stood there gravely, his sombrero against his belly.

"*Patrón*," he said.

Chance came halfway off the rawhide chair. "What's the matter, Pete?"

"The shorthorns. *Se fueron!* They take themselves away. I do not find the men we left. I find couple of empty *tequila* bottles."

Chance was on his feet with everyone staring at him, and himself staring at Lara. A rush of blood to his head stupefied him. Then his belly felt suddenly cold and

empty, and he sat down. "Well, we might have guessed where he'd hit me," he said. "All right, Pete. Have some chuck and get on back to the herd. We'll watch things tonight. Tomorrow we'll track them."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Death Ride

**T**OMORROW was a cold word. Tomorrow could be anything, almost, except better. Chance fed himself the most dilute mixture of hope.

And then in the morning it came to him what had really happened to the cattle. It was cheering, though to contemplate the idea was like holding a firecracker in his teeth. Lara came into the yard as he was scrubbing up. In the corral, horses moved stiffly over a rind of frost.

"The tracks walk southeast," he said. "Maybe they double, but they start toward Morgan's."

"Where'd you think they'd gone?" Chance asked. "Dodge City?"

Chance ate a rousing breakfast of saddle-blanket pancakes, eggs, fried spuds and stewed apricots. Breakfast over, he rolled a cigarette.

"I reckon I know why Morgan took those cattle," he said. "I think he wanted to be sure I'd come and talk to him. I think they'll be in Saddlebag Meadow."



## "Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whiskey buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to Calvert. I did. Elementary!"



Listening, Liddy quietly stirred coffee in a pottery cup while her grandfather peered at the Texan. "And that sorta brings you folks into it," Chance told them. "Because he's going to make it right for me to get along, either with a trail-dowry or a scare. I seem to be a kind of bad luck charm for you. Everything I touch turns to brass."

Liddy said, "You don't have to go farther on our account, Tom. We were licked before you came. This is the first time in a year that we've had anything but flies in the corral."

"I thought I'd give you the chance to back out, anyhow. I'd be obliged for another of those prickly pear sandwiches to take along, Miss Liddy. And you might fix up one for Lafe, too—with the thorns left on."

But when he went outside, the girl and the old man followed him. Chance shook his head. "Can't have you along, Liddy. Andy'll guide me."

"Grandpop," Liddy said, "will stay with the cattle, where he belongs. I'll guide you. Besides, there won't be any trouble if I come along. I've got the Injun sign on Lafe Morgan."

Chance argued, but Liddy said, "You don't know the way there, and you won't find out, unless you do it my way."

Chance gave up.

They followed the tracks to a craggy *rincon* toothed with red peaks. At this altitude, frost lingered beneath the junipers and piñons. Jets of steam puffed from the ponies' nostrils. But there was water, and as they crested a divide between two ridges, Chance looked down on a golden mountain meadow. A stream sparkled between skeletal ranks of trees. Cattle drifted on the tawny grass, thickset cattle without much breadth of horn. Chance moved in the saddle. He saw four riders, only one of whom he could be positive of recognizing—Lafe Morgan on his rawboned gray.

He turned it over in his mind. Even if he hit hard and quick, dropping Morgan and driving the others off, there would still be the long push home, through *barrancas* designed for breaking Durham bones, with a vengeance crew coming behind.

"You think you know him, do you?" he asked. "What do you think he'll do if I go down?"

"Kill you. But not if I go down, too. He wouldn't touch me; he'd be afraid to. And if he touches you he'll have to touch me. Come along."

She rode boldly through the saddle and onto the trail, switch-backing to the foot of the slope. Chance followed her, the wind pouring coldly over his back. Morgan looked up. He whistled to the others. Alerted, they watched Chance and Liddy come on. Chance made another try.

"Go on back, Liddy. You've showed yourself. Watch it from the ridge, where you can get away."

Liddy rode straight on. Morgan let his horse walk forward; they met on the dry yellow grass under a leafless cottonwood. Unshaven, the rancher's face was spined with stubble; it was a rutted face with the close grain of oak. He quirked his mouth in a raffish grin.

"You're a hard man to git next to, Chance."

"Not when you fool with my cattle."

"That's what I figgered. Now you've found them, what are you going to do with them?"

"That's easy. What I'm trying to decide is what to do with you."

Morgan grinned. "I reckon Jess will he'p you out there."

Liddy screamed. Chance ducked, but the rope came from a clump of black brush flanking the creek behind him. Morgan had placed him like a decoy on a pond; Banta merely stood up and made his throw. The rope settled over Chance's shoulders and shrank about him. As the horse began to pitch, he bounced out of



the saddle. Liddy was trying to draw the little buggy gun she carried under her knee, but Morgan lunged to her side and caught her about the shoulders. He wrenched the gun from her and threw it in the creek.

She began to hammer at his face with her fists, and Morgan, ducking, complained, "Now Miss Liddy! Ow! Now, then!"

Chance said dryly, "I reckon it's kind of late for getting our dander up, Liddy. This jasper has a gun in my ear."

Liddy looked. She began to cry. Morgan touched his cheekbone. In his face was a blunt anger.

"You best be getting on back," he said shortly. "I don't want to harm you. Deaf will see you to the ridge, and then I don't want to see no more of you. I won't hurt you, but I'll kill your horse, and it's a long walk back."

"I'm going to stay here," Liddy said. Her eyes miserably watched Deaf Scott and two other men rack across the creek to approach.

"Miss Liddy, I ain't going to hurt your man," Morgan said with gentle irony. "I reckon he's getting all the lovin' I never got, but you see, I don't have a purty East Texas drawl like he has. I'm just going to convince him that this ain't no proper place for an ambitious man like him. Then you can have him back."

Again Chance told her, "Go on, girl. If I don't come back, sell my herd, put it all into gun wages and have Pete stomp out the Spear M like a tarantula."

Liddy clung to it. "Yes, and Lafe knows I'd just do it, too! We'll have the Texas Rangers down here, on top of everything else."

"Liddy," grinned Morgan, "your grandpop don't want the Rangers here no more than I do, the wetbacking old son!"

Liddy turned her pony. Then she swung back, staring down at Tom with tears in her eyes. "Tom, I—I'll—"

"You bet you will," Jess Banta snapped. He raised his Colt from Chance's ear and fired it. The horse pitched away and broke into a run. The warm muzzle returned to Chance's ear. They heard the hooves slow, finally.

"Let 'im up," Morgan said.

ONE of the punchers came leading a shorthorn steer by a rope. Morgan twirled Chance's hat on the barrel of his rifle.

"Sometimes you remind me of a Kansas cyclone, Chance," he said. "You came in with a hell of a roar, but you go out the same way."

"Maybe I'll take a few ranchers with me, too. What do you want?"

"Well, like I said, I want to convince you there ain't room for a downright ambitious man here."

"You're ambitious. And you're here."

"Because I make my own room as I go along. Both of us can't do that, do you see?"

"No, I don't. You're the irresistible force, I reckon, but I'm the immovable object."

"You shore ain't an irresistible object," Morgan agreed. He looked up, watching Liddy's pony amble through the saddle with Deaf Scott flicking a rope-end at its rump. His eyes took slow pleasure. "Miss Liddy can blame herself for me being ambitious," he said. "She told me once I'd never be any more than a grizzly bear in a saddle. That I was a blank cartridge; a lot of noise without anything behind it. I've showed her! And damned if I don't like being somebody!"

Chance looked him over. "Who are you, by the way?"

"I'm just about to be somebody. Maybe you'll hear about me, up yonder in New Mexico. Because one of these days the Bend ain't going to be big enough to hold me. I'm growing, Chance. And I ain't going to stop growing."



Banta, his face still lumpy with his beating, moved back and allowed Chance to rise. "You're right you ain't," he said. "But this fella's just about got his growth."

"What's the big crop down here?" Chance asked suddenly. "Stolen cattle or Mexican war loot?"

Morgan let the hat drop from his gun-barrel. The ring of the muzzle was silver where the browning had been rubbed off. "Glad you brought that up. What did you do with it?"

"With what?"

Banta struck him on the shoulder blade with the sharp sight of his gun. Chance's knees bent. He made an involuntary move toward his empty holster.

"With the silver for my herd!" Morgan snapped, stung by unpleasant recollection. "Where is it?"

It was still the stuff of guesswork, but Chance glimpsed what was wrong with Morgan. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Did Juan Cortina renege on his word to you, too? Maybe I was lucky. He took your cattle and kept the pay that he got for them, eh?"

Morgan's dark fox's eyes scrutinized him. "I don't figger it was Cortina. Him and me have been doing business ever since the revolution started. I figger it was somebody that watched him deliver the stuff and then moved in on it. Get a rope, Jess," he snapped suddenly.

An ancient fear began to shake in Tom Chance. "Thought you weren't going to hurt Miss Liddy's man, Lafe. You reckon it will be so quick it won't hurt me at all, eh?"

"I ain't goin' to hang you," Morgan said mildly. "I'm just going to make a little proposition. Bring the steer up, dammit!"

Banta and two others attempted to lift Chance onto the steer. His body suddenly bunched itself and straightened like a corset stay. His bootheel punched one of the

*vaqueros* in the chest. The puncher stumbled down the cutbank of the stream, and Chance landed wriggling on the ground, but came in a rising crawl at Banta. Banta's boot lashed at his head. Chance ducked, but as he did so the other cowboy landed on his back, throwing him to the hard earth.

The carbine blasted. Through the smut of black powder smoke Lafe Morgan shouted, "We can end this right now, Chance, if you want it!"

Chance came up slowly and waited with his head lowered, a worm of blood crawling down his chin from his lower lip. He wiped the blood from his chin. Then he turned to look at the Shorthorn. He said, "Hold him," and when the punchers laid hold of the steer he swung Tom across it, bareback style. Quickly Banta stepped in and caught Chance's feet in a figure-eight loop beneath the steer's belly. They tied his hands behind him.

Morgan stepped around and kicked Chance's Colt into the creek. "By the time that steer shrinks enough that you can shuck the rope off him," he observed, "you'll want no more of this range. We done that to a Mex rustler, once, and he was eating cutlets off the back of the cow's neck before the critter wandered into Paso Roblero. It was six days anyway, warn't it, Jess?"

Chance said, "I'll kill you for this. So help me."

Morgan's head tilted and he watched a buzzard rock on a high draft of air. "I doubt it," he said. "I think you'll drag your tail out of here and forget about it. But nobody likes fellers ranging around saying they're going to kill him. I'm going to make you the best proposition anybody ever made a greenhorn. I'm going to give you back your cows and let you move along."

"For what?"

"For moving along. You favor the girl, too, don't you? All right, take her with



you. Marry her. Raise your damned cows and kids in New Mexico or someplace. Just leave me the old man. I can deal with him. Like he used to deal with me before I got big.

"How'd he use to deal with you?"

Bitter recollection fumed in Morgan's eyes. "Little scrounging tricks, like if a cattle buyer was through he'd steer him off of me by saying I had anthrax in my herd. Or dragging a truss of rattleweed across good bottomland of mine, so's I'd have to pull my cattle off it till I got the damned stuff roused out. I can deal with Andy Golden," he said. The big man was almost shaking.

Tom Chance saw him clearly. He saw an aggressive but inept rancher blaming his troubles on everyone else. He saw him sinking into debt and beginning to buy and sell wet cattle to make up his losses. Then he pictured him in tight new boots going to pay court to a girl who couldn't help smiling at him. That, he suspected, was the beginning of the Lafe Morgan who was going to own the Big Bend. It was a pathetic beginning, but a rattlesnake was no less dangerous for having buck teeth.

"Now that I think it over," Chance said, "I reckon I'll do like you say. Cut me loose."

Morgan blinked, seeing then the ridiculousness of this last chance he was giving him. "No," he said. "You'd turn right

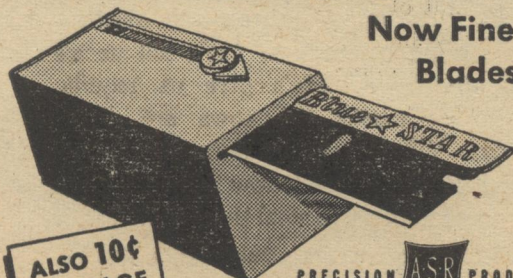
around and come back. I reckon a man just has to find some things out for himself." He stepped in close and threw a loop of manila over the steer's back. He caught the free end and took a battered mule-bell from his chaps pocket. Slipping this over the rope, he pulled the loop tight. The steer commenced snorting and kicking at the bell. Banta loosed a wild cowboy yell. As the steer started across the meadow in a chain of lunging pitches, Chance's neck snapped like a whip. He tried to get a grip in the animal's loose hide, but his fingers could not hold it. Guns cracked and he heard the impact of slugs against the earth. The steer rocked through a small arroyo and bucked on across the field.

Hoofs came pounding along, then, and a knotted rope-end hammered twice at the steer's rump and once at Chance's back. He winced, his mouth tightening on a curse, and then ducked as the animal went through a gray tangle of brush. Dry twigs slashed his face. Whooping and swinging their ropes, Morgan's punchers flogged the pitching steer on. A canyon at the south end of the rincon seemed to be the destination.

Reaching it, the punchers sent the Shorthorn down a gravelly slope into a rock-and brush-strangled gully which passed under a peak and out of the ring of hills. They fired after the steer as it bucked in terror off down the *barranca*.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

## Shoot—or Die!

CHANCE reflected, as he rode, on ambition and women. Take either element out of this setup, and he would not now, as sundown slunk in with spined air and bloody sky, be riding down a dry canyon on the back of an exhausted steer.

Had his own ambition not driven him into this back alley of Texas—had it not clashed with Lafe Morgan's with the tearing crash of two wagons colliding on a hillside—then he might have sold his cows for a few hundred dollars and ridden on to New Mexico. And if Morgan's stud-horse romancing had not been gelded by a girl's ridicule, things still, more than likely, could have been resolved.

He spent so much time on low ground, as the steer blundered along, that he could not tell for sure where he was. The mule-bell tinkled, but the Shorthorn was too worn out now to kick at it. It stumbled over rocks the size of a biscuit. It stopped at the merest clump of brush, and Chance had to twist his spur-rowels into its belly to make it shove through.

Darkness came, and then moonlight. He saw a white crust of frost on the grass. The bell sounded like the chiming of icicles. Chance realized suddenly, *I could freeze to death*. With scarcely more covering than a leather jacket and chaps, he was fit only for high noon.

Sitting there, he felt the dull poison of discouragement entering his body. He slumped, his chin on his chest. He could not control the brute's direction. He could not keep it moving after it decided to stop. He experienced an enormous rage against Lafe Morgan.

Suddenly he sniffed. Mingling with the sweet fragrance of dry grasses he detected a taste of woodsmoke. Then there came to him what sounded like the tinkle of a

guitar. His eyes raised haggardly. Ice in the creek? The night was an impenetrable fog his eyes and ears tried to pierce. He heard it again, like a plucked metallic thread. Suddenly he squeezed his legs, rowelling the steer until it grunted. He dug with his spurs, and the animal lurched around and finally moved forward. Chance spurred harder. The Shorthorn stumped along a few yards. The bell rang. Chance lurched around until it jangled loudly and the steer bucked on.

Down the canyon there was sudden and complete silence. A few moments later, he passed a sand kink in the arroyo and saw a small fire burning. Two saddle horses were in view, but he saw no riders. Coffee bubbled in a can on the fire.

A small man stepped from a slot in the rutted red bank. He held a rifle and his sombrero rested on the back of his head. A guitar hung on a string around his neck. "Patrón!" he said. "Patroncito! Is you, no?"

"Is me," Chance declared. "And this is one of the steers you run off and let Morgan have. Cut me loose, Casoose, or by heaven, I'll haunt you every night of your life!"

Casoose Morales came on a run. Behind him hurried another puncher, old Vincente. They had been good and faithful servants until they had run afoul of two bottles of *tequila*. They cut him loose, babbling apologies, stroking his grooved wrists. Chance took one step and sank down, his legs paralyzed.

Casoose kept doffing his hat and replacing it. "The *hombre*, Scott—*El Sordo*—comes night before last. He's tell us we work too hard. He's give us *tequila*. When we awake the cows are gone! *Caráy!* What is to be done but follow them? But when we follow them there are too many herders to steal them back."

Vicente squatted to rub Tom's ankles. "But we cannot go back, either, or you would cut us off the ears, no?"



"Probably. Maybe you'd like to know why I'm riding a steer," Chance said. "It ain't really a roping steer, you know. I found the cows, too, only I thought I was big enough to take them."

"No, no! There were eight—ten—" Casoose shrank his shoulders and spread his fingers.

"Anyway five. Get me some coffee," Chance said. "Then put out the fire and pull your saddles back in the brush. Just a chance I might be followed. Vincente, I'll take your hog-leg."

They seemed dubious about arming him. He shrugged. "*Lo que es pasado*—" Vincente gave him his cedar-handled Colt. "Now listen," Chance said. "I've got a lot of resting to do. Wake me up at sunrise."

He bedded down in saddle blankets and was almost immediately asleep.

A lean hand, stiff with cold, awoke him at dawn. The Mexicans had made coffee again; they had a few rawhide-tough *tortillas* from the village. Chance chewed in silence, letting sharpness come back to him. It was surprising that Morgan had not shot him and let it go at that. That he had not was either a tribute to his fear of Liddy Golden, or to his conviction that no East Texan was man enough to stand up to Lafe Morgan.

Chance knew one who was. The Mexicans squatted by the small fire, warming their fingers. "Casoose," Chance said, "I'll take your horse and rifle. That will leave you two a Colt, a carbine and a horse. Ride back to the ranch and tell Pete to bring me some chuck, and when he comes, to move easy like. And to bring my bedroll."

"You leave your cattle, then?"

"I won't leave anything but a hide on a fence. Now, tell him I'll be in the rocks on the south bank of that little creek we followed the day we went to Paso Roblero. I'll wait for him there as long as I can. You two take turns riding. And tell Pete

to shake a leg. I'd take one of you, too, but I can't be slowed down by a man afoot."

Afterwards, he carefully extinguished and scattered the fire. For warmth, he made a slit in a doubled blanket and pulled it over his head like a poncho. Then he rode out.

There was a small wet beach where the creek and the river joined. Above, the cliff scaled back in great blocks of dark stone tufted with golden grass. At the top, he found a veining of ragged gullies all debouching into the canyon. In a creosote tangle he settled himself in such a way that he could see the river, north and south. He spread his blankets here, to lie on while he watched. Picketing the horse in a gully nearby, he crawled into the thicket and lay on his belly gazing into the broad canyon of the river. Insects rattled in the brush and there was the medicinal smell of sage and the occasional call of a bird, but that was all.

Morgan's fear was going to bring about the thing he had greatly feared. In his anxiety he had charged Tom with lifting Cortina's booty payment for his last herd. So Chance knew that until the silver was delivered, the cache would be the hub of his universe.

The cache might be anywhere. But it would not be on Andy Golden's land. It would be on Morgan's, and it would be near the river. Chance figured he could wait until Morgan came to get it.

The day wore out. Stiffness began to leave his legs. Birds swam in the deep blue ocean of the sky, and cold winds brought tears to his eyes. Then night was closing in again, and not a rider had shown on either side of the river. He watered his horse at a mossy seep, afterward letting it graze on its picket. And now a bobolink whistled, and Chance raised his head. The bird called again; in a thicket below, he found it. It was Pete Lara, with a packhorse.



LARA brought the animal up. Sunset was dying when he reached the cliff. The shaggy, muddy-skinned man inspected Chance with concern. "Is it well?"

"It's going to be. They won't rawhide any other cowpunchers when I'm finished. You'd best get on back."

Lara threw his blankets on the ground. "I bring my things too."

"Knew you would," Tom smiled. He rustled food from the sack Pete had brought. "How's Liddy?"

"Mad, I guess. The old one wouldn't let her come. He's stay to guard the herd."

They built a fire in the gully, the smoke dissolving into the night. In its orange glow they warmed themselves. They arranged Pete's blankets near Tom's, and the night began.

Daybreak came with a small singing of birds and a pink-and-gold sky. Tom watched a file of burros appear up the canyon, coming from the village. Their tiny hoofs made a faint clatter. In back of them rode two horsemen. Crossing the beach, they found a trail across the broken face of the cliff. Chance nodded at Lara. They moved to where they could see the riders dismounting. The Mexican *vaqueros* were half-hidden from above by their sombreros. Leaving their horses, they followed the burros along the catwalk trail.

Presently Chance and Lara moved along the cap of the bluff. They had a more distant view of the burros a half mile ahead, working delicately along an invisible cliff-side trail. Lara was impatient.

"Maybe they meet them down the canyon. Maybe we lose them, eh?"

"Why wouldn't they meet on the beach, then, if they're making rendezvous? I figure there's a cache down there. They'll be back, and pretty soon Morgan will be along."

In about an hour the Mexicans reappeared, minus the burros. They mounted,

crossed the beach and moved at a jog out of sight. Chance pointed down the canyon.

"They left a fire burning. Smoke signal, maybe." Rubbing the sideplate of his rifle, Chance said, "Grab some food. We're going down."

With their blankets worn infantry style, they clambered down the bluff to the trail. For a moment Tom stood warily, listening, searching the canyon. Then he made a decision and strode ahead.

They discovered why the horses had been left behind. Only burros could traverse such a trail as this. It climbed and fell and tilted. It descended to the water's edge and moved for fifty feet under six inches of muddy water. Then it mounted again.

After two turns, the river was bottled in a stony corridor only forty feet wide, sunless and cold, a ruffianly wind marauding through it. In the silence, they suddenly heard the bray of a donkey. Chance slowed down. He checked his gun again; he looked up and saw a small fire fuming aloft. The Mexicans had lighted it and left it burning. He set the hammer back and slipped ahead.

The burros stood on a tilted ledge which formed part of a high and shallow cave. Being Mexicans, the *vaqueros* had not bothered to unload the animals. Pulling at gaunt goatees of grass among the rocks, the burros waited patiently under the cumbersome *aparejos*.

Chance said, "Watch the trail." He strode to one of the burros. Slashing away a cover, he dredged up a chunk of tarnished silver. It had once, apparently, been part of a dinner service; portions of crests could be seen, and traces of engraving. The silver was heavy, purer than sterling. He decided the packs would do for a barricade. Laboriously unloading them, he placed the burros in a line a rifle-length back in the cave. "*Venga!*" he called.



Lara ran up. They spread the blankets on the hard stone and lay behind the packs. They chewed tortillas and smoked cigarettes.

Chance muttered bitterly, "Wait, wait, wait! I never done so much waitin' in my life."

But while he waited he thought. Insidiously, in a perverse way, the country had made its peace with him. He liked its loneliness, its wildness, the kind of flesh it put on cattle. He liked its sunsets, staining the sky like wine. He liked its nights. And he knew all these likes were little gifts Liddy Golden had given him. She had given them to him by her own enthusiasm. And in the way of a soldier anticipating an attack, he wished he could make her hear him.

He would say, *It ain't me that's done the favor, Liddy, it's you. I could have trailed those cattle to hell and back, looking for that bluejoint that puts everything but ketchup on a beefcow. I could have wound up with a parcel of sorefooted cattle and nothing to show for it, because that dream of mine was floating ninety miles off the ground. But you put a big rock under it.*

*You're the best thing that ever happened to the state of Texas, Liddy, he would say. You're the best thing that ever happened to me. I'd like to go back to you. I sure would.*

Just before dark, then, when the sky

above was like spilled burgundy, and the burros were humping against the cold, bootheels thumped briskly into hearing.

Pete writhed into position with the barrel of his carbine between two packs. "*Vien Aqui!*" he whispered.

Lafe Morgan came first, swinging his rifle like a walking stick, a lank figure hurrying along the face of the bluff. Back of him came Jess Banta, and then Deaf Scott. Morgan pulled up, taking the barrel of his rifle in his left hand.

"Look at that!" he snarled. "Damned if they didn't unload them critters for us to load up again!"

"It ain't like a Mex to unload a critter, though, is it?" Banta pointed out.

They came ahead. Scott caught a burro's lead-rope. Banta went for another, and Morgan retrieved the third. There was some rearing back by the animals. Morgan slapped his burro on the side of its coffin-shaped head with his gun butt. Then he dragged it toward the rawhide cases.

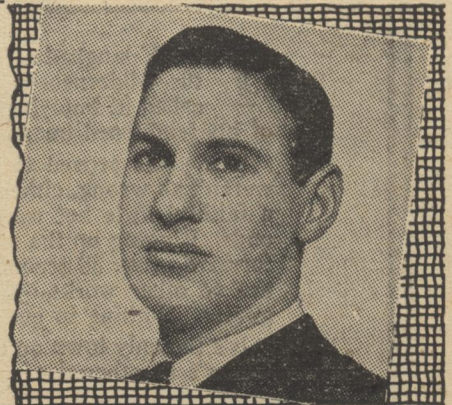
"I don't know why we had to do it tonight," Banta complained. "Somebody's going to land on his rump on the rocks before we get out of here."

Morgan growled testily, "You ain't worth a damn for headwork, Jess, and you never will be. Not while you're lazy as a forty-year-old herd bull. One thing you'll learn, if you last, is that you only get ahead by hitting first and hitting hard. Here's

## REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly is lighter, smoother, milder."

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twenty thousand dollars, silver, and you'd wait till tomorrow!"

"I can't understand a man like that. For stolen cows, at that."

Banta said something under his breath, and then he stopped and looked at Morgan, and both of them looked at Scott. Their manner said, "Who said that?" It was not Scott, because the old man was too deaf to have heard what they were talking about.

"Ride *this* steer, Morgan. Now, ride it clean!" Tom Chance called. He came to his knees behind the packs with the single-shot at his shoulder. Morgan yelled a curse that the canyon walls bounced back. He was down on his belly trying to get his gun to his shoulder. Flame spat dark red from the cave. His body started and came forward in a crawl, and slumped against the rock.

Standing there rigidly, Jess Banta received Lara's bullet high in the chest. He went back with the impact of it. Then he tried to square off to raise his gun, but the life was out of him. His boots slipped on the pebbles, and they saw him go down and slide back over the ledge into the river.

Deaf Scott's revolver blasted twice, but not at the cave. His lead went into a burro; then he shouldered it down and flopped behind it. He began pouring shots into the cave. Silver jangled and stirred inside the saddle packs. Chance firmed

his lips and brought his Colt into line. Through the murk of powdersmoke he fired again and again.

The old man was quiet, now. The canyon ceased to shout. The smoke was bitter as old pipe dottle. Tom spat, and turning his head reaching to punch his Mexican in the shoulder.

"What's the word, pardner?"

"Ueno! Damn, she was one noisy business, hey?"

"She was. But she's quiet now. Maybe she'll stay quiet."

"Maybe." Lara sounded dubious. "Well, we get out of here and to the ranch before dark?"

"I reckon we'll start. Nobody's going to bother this silver of ours. Half of it will make you just about the richest *vaquero* in Texas, eh? I reckon you earned your share. I'm going to put two-thirds of it in a bank for you, and every month they'll give you enough for food and liquor and triflin' money. You can blow the rest."

Lara's eyes received it incredulously. Then he grinned and rubbed his cheek against the stock of the gun. "I think maybe I stay around this country. I build a place in the village and get married. I'll be the richest man in town, hey?"

But Chance only smiled, thinking of his own plans, and the girl who was the hub of them.

---

THEY laughed at John Colter, frontiersman, when he came out of the wilderness with reports of Yellowstone. Colter's Hell, they called it, implying that the hot springs and geysers were figments of his frightened imagination.

The years proved Colter was right—but those who laughed at him weren't all wrong, either. Settlers took advantage of one of the geysers, a faithful little hot water spring that erupted regularly every 38 seconds. Rigging up the town clock over it, they fixed the hands to move forward every 38 seconds, whenever the geyser propelled them. There are no other works—just the lever connecting the clock face and the geyser. Nothing to get out of order. Nothing to take care of.

It's the only town on earth to get its time straight from hell, whether Colter's or otherwise!

—Ray Lewis



# Hell-River Gundown

By **GEORGE C. APPELL**

*Desperate, battered, they made their last stand in that bullet-torn dusk . . . their guns thundering their final message, "You've taught us to kill—now learn how to die!"*



"Keep firing!" Gales shouted. . . .

**T**HE afternoon was well down on them when they first struck the tracks of the agent's wagon slicing the sand, and the captain ordered a halt because he wanted to consider the narrow trenches left by the wheels and

judge the approximate weight of the load. There had been a wind that afternoon, where there had been no wind for weeks; it lurched all around the clock, a drunken, unseen thing, and it soothed the sun-lashed faces of the thirty-two troopers,



the second lieutenant, and the captain.

He turned from his inspection of the tracks and gazed the length of the standing column, eyeing it as if he'd never seen it before. He was icy-eyed, this Captain Gales, and thin in the hip and lean of shoulder. There was something about him of a drawn blade, untarnished by the years, uncorroded by weather, unchipped by shock. The column was pointing due west now, where during the day it had been leaning south. But the agent's wagon tracks had changed all that, and by twilight they would raise the issue camp on the upper reaches of Wounded Woman's in the foothills. Saddle girths were laced with white, hat brims touched noses, and the faded blue of uniforms was coated to Confederate gray with the alkali that silted everything except eyeballs and the insides of mouths.

The captain faced sharp about to his left. "What does that sign mean to you, Mr. Gales?"

Knowland Gales looked from his father to the double ruts in the sand, his anger-packed eyes stung to swollenness by flying grit and the merciless sabering of the sun. He lifted his eyes slowly. "A wagon passed this way."

"Mr. Gales?"

"This way . . . sir."

"Team?" They sat saddles sixteen paces from the guidon; their words were lost on the dying wind, and flung down the empty purple distances to eternal silence.

"A couple of horses, I'd say, sir."

"A team of mules." The captain's voice came like the splitting of a shingle. "Hauling a light wagon with steel rims—overloaded." He lay a grimy finger to his nose, bent it over his nostrils, and pulled. "You don't haul issue beef in a rig—so what could have weighed that wagon down?"

Knowland Gales let the breath go out of him. He had to curb-bit his temper, he

had to ride it, rein it, hold it down. "It's been a contention of mine—sir—that it would be easier to have the Indians come in to the posts for issue."

Captain Gales tilted his head closer, as if he hadn't heard clearly. "In to the posts? How—on foot?" He sniffed and spat and forced his bootheels down in order to stretch his leg muscles. "The Indians have been dismounted since early summer, if you'll recall. The Cheyennes that Mr. Watchorn is responsible for lost all their ponies when Mackenzie ran them down after the Custer thing. So it's necessary to deliver to them, out to issue camps." His next question was uttered with the lifelessness of contempt in it. "Do you see any pony tracks, Mr. Gales?"

"No, sir, I do not see any pony tracks." He took a deep, lung-cracking breath, and released it slowly.

What difference does it make if the wagon's overloaded? Who cares if the agent passed this way with a team of mules—that's his job, isn't it? The job of the Army is to fight Indians, fight renegades, protect freight caravans and trappers. At least, during four years of confinement in, about, and around the balconied gray quadrangle of the Academy, that general idea had been fostered. And the old man's letters—one every six months—had indicated something like that. *We were attached to the Black Hills expedition this year, and I wish I could describe it to you. The band played every night, the President's son told some fine stories, and three times we were attacked. Each time, we stood them off, and only lost two people—a civilian engineer and a contract veterinarian. I hope you'll be ordered West when. . . .*

"Mr. Gales, even if pony tracks had been made, they would have vanished in this drift underfoot. There has been no rain for three and a half weeks. So we cannot conclude definitely that no mount-



ed Indians are out. But we can conclude that a short while ago—say, less than four hours—an overloaded wagon rolled this way. It is now four o'clock. It doesn't get dark until nine, so we have time to follow the tracks to the issue camp and inspect it before nightfall. Is my analysis clear to you?"

"Your analysis is quite clear to me, sir." *But you'll never hear mine! You'll never see yourself as a bitter old man, a superannuated antique from another day, commanding what? Commanding a one-troop post in the middle of nowhere—a captain still! After thirty years in the Army. Playing games with your imagination. Pretending that great things are happening. Wagon ruts. Mules. Four hours. If we ever got into trouble, I'd fan your mossy skull with a pistol butt and assume command.*

"You see, Mr. Gales, some Cheyennes have been seen with weapons, and they are not supposed to have weapons, no more than they are supposed to possess ponies. We rely on trapper's reports a great deal. Someone is ferrying weapons out to the Cheyennes."

"And the Captain assumes that the agent is doing it?"

"I assume nothing." Gales lifted an arm and slung it forward and moved out at a walk. Ahead, far ahead on the edge of the world, gouts of purple cloud were growing and coming together and thickening; they smothered the pale sun and shadowed the burnt yellow bunchgrass, and above them was a bronze hardness that showed no crimson, no orange, no warmth.

"If I may ask the Captain a question?" Knowland Gales was furious; anger roweled his brain and tattered his temper and made his palms prickly hotly. "If the Captain's attitude is that I am still a child—why did he send for me?"

Gales eyed his son without turning his face, and saw softness there. He saw soft-

ness in the jawline, on the cheekbone, in the sun-split, unlined mouth. And he knew, as he'd known for a month now, that Knowland had not yet had to batter any barriers aside, that they'd all been removed for him, and that consequently he hadn't the stamina necessary for full manhood. Knowland, so far, would see only the trees, and not comprehend the size of the forest he was in. "I did not send for you. You were posted to my command from the pool at Jefferson Barracks, and I had nothing to do with it. Mr. Gales, ride at the tail of the column and check for ragged intervals. A loose column is a limp column."

**A**N HOUR later, five horse miles further and well within sight of the hills, Gales led off-course toward some cottonwoods that were grey-brown in the deepening twilight, and that whispered restlessly under the light shove of the breeze. He rode slowly around them, pulling the column after him; he leaned for off his damp saddle once, hearing the breeze in the limbs. And then he straightened and spurred to a trot through the sudden coolness. Wounded Woman's Creek was just ahead, and not far along it was the issue camp toward which the wheel tracks led.

Elnathan Watchorn saw them filing toward him up the west bank of the creek bottoms, and he did three things simultaneously: he signalled his breech-clouted Cheyennes to tote the bales and wooden crates out of sight in the rocks, he unfolded his camp chair in the shadow of the spring wagon, and he sat down and crossed his legs. He could afford patience, now. The last delivery had been accomplished, the last exchange made, and the weather was coming in wet. He lighted a Cuban twist and watched the smoke dip away on the wind; he watched it disappear over the canoes, and he smiled. Soon he would be enjoying the permanent



comfort of retirement back in the States.

The column approached the issue camp, horses damp to the hocks from the sluggish current in the shallow creek bed. Gales dismounted and handed the bridle to his striker. He stood a moment without speaking to the agent, trying to keep the disgust from his face. Elnathan Watchorn was a man with nervous eyes and a mouth that dragged sourly at the corners. He was a man who had the limestain, woodsmoke smell of many Indian camps, and whose Prince Albert shone from long wear.

He waved his cheroot. "What brings the captain out so far? This is Indian land."

"It is a habit of mine never to answer useless questions, Mr. Watchorn. Your charges are well?" Gales eyed the six-tepee camp, the smouldering cookfires, the almost-naked men with bearclaw bracelets and taut muscles. He saw no paint kits, no weapons, no feathers. "You're in the canoe business?"

"Those are mountain bateaux, more'n canoes." The agent's eyes narrowed on the half dozen bark-and-pitch craft. "My charges have to get around someway."

"In a dry trickle like this?"

"More water in the hills, mister. Lakes full of fish."

"I am Captain Gales, not Mr. Gales."

The agent recrossed his legs and sighed. "Bless my pontifical soul, sir, but I don't know mules from majors. Peace is all I seek, and I don't like the Army around. It makes me shudder."

"I should think it would." Gales tasted his sarcasm with his tongue. "Mr. Gales! Pass the word to dismount, unbit and water." He faced the agent again. "I fail to observe weapons in this camp—on the Cheyennes."

"Weapons!" Elnathan Watchorn's eyes sprang alight. "Bless me, sir, Captain, but my only weapon is the Lord. What is your church?"

Gales regarded him at impudent length. "Standing orders from Department are to keep them dismounted and unarmed, except for such implements as may be necessary to maintaining their livelihood. Fishing spears, Mr. Watchorn, and arrows in season. They had weapons on the Little Big Horn and demonstrated that they could use them. I am a back-slidden Presbyterian, I intend to remain one, and I intend to ascertain what you had or have in that wagon."

Mr. Watchorn rose and snapped his cheroot into the creek bed. "This camp is under my jurisdiction, not yours. There are twelve men who came here for issue, and they'll get it." His voice shrilled upward. "They are unarmed, and on foot." He swallowed creakily, fingers twitching. "I suggest, sir, that you join me in holy prayer for their souls." Then his eyes pounced at Knowland Gales as he came up from the bottoms.

Knowland ignored him. "Sir, if I may have a moment?" They walked past the rump-high horses and past the shored canoes and stopped by a heat-split cedar. "Captain—we can do it now. It'll be easy."

"Do it?" Gales' thin brows arched politely.

"Smash their camp to pieces—remove their mobility! Burn the canoes." Knowland clapped his gloves together in approval of his plan.

"Why, Mr. Gales?"

Impatience wrenched Knowland's young mouth aside and open. "He's a crook—anyone could tell it! He defied you, didn't he? That's reason enough to blast him."

"What you will eventually come to understand, Mr. Gales, is that we are here to watch the Indians and report upon them for the Indian Bureau. We are not out here to fight them." A man's secondary instinct is to better his son, after begetting him, and Gales felt it deep in



him and he felt, too, its rising futility. "We only fight in the event of attack. You will remember that."

Knowland was staring at his father's moss-green shoulder threads, and there were symbols in his eyes and Gales recognized them. *No wonder you're still a captain, you're a yellow old man, petty, vain, and blustering. You bluff to a point, then retreat on a technicality. I'm requesting transfer. . . .*

"Mr. Gales, mind reading is a bad habit, like talking too much. I recommend that you train your mind in observation, in estimation, and in decision. They're prime military virtues."

"I made a decision! This can be a war camp in the passage of a shot! Make it a war camp—make 'em attack!"

"And I rejected your decision. Rather—and Watchorn should hear me say this—God rejected it for me. He knows somewhat more than I do, and he has presented me with several signs and symbols—enough to cause my decision, which is to withdraw. Patience is another virtue, but you won't learn it for some time."

"Virtue! Patience . . . or cowardice?"

"Mount the detail, Mr. Gales. I will inform the agent that we're pulling east, back to the post. I'll tell him his camp is clean. Move out."

It's not in the statistics, it can't be found there. For no two men measure alike nor think alike nor—in the cellars

of their souls—live alike. The crucible that had forged Gales was four thousand years old. It was Thermopylae and Agincourt and Hastings and Austerlitz and Jena, it was Saratoga and Gettysburg. It was a way of life that was both a heritage and a curse, and it demanded much and returned little. It was riding out destiny, trudging down the years alert and unflinching. Never flinching—at circumstance, at opposition, and particularly at self. Beyond those things, there isn't anything else. There doesn't have to be.

YOU could smell them as they fled away from that issue camp and plodded east across the wet trace of Wounded Woman Creek and took up the march across the twilight. They were the musk of horsehides and limp leather. They were the sour stench of flannel a week unwashed. And they were the acid of sullen resentment at crawling this far to spend ten minutes with a second rate agent in a third rate camp.

Knowland Gales could feel that resentment in the men who rode ahead of him, and it was directed at the man who led them all. It was a brittle thing that stood to snap at one unnecessary command, one unexplainable move.

And the captain knew it, and honed them softly, as a man will gently strop his favorite razor. Easily, persistently,

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silently. Sharpening it, testing it, preparing it to cut. A surgeon with a scalpel. A smith with molten iron.

They dismounted and led for ten minutes, through the moonless, scud-topped night. They mounted and trotted for five; they walked again for thirty, and they halted for fifteen. Lead, trot, walk, halt. Lurch east in the chill dark. Sharper, sharper, more cutting, resentment softening to a hard, usable core.

"When do we bivouac—his heart's in his butt."

"In the cavalry, bub, yuh walk f'r yuh pay."

Mounted now, and pressing through the ground mists.

—*You're quitting, Captain God. Watchorn faced you down, and in the presence of the people you're here to watch. Watch and report on! You're a mockery of yourself, of your profession, of the memory of your wife, my mother. You're a disgrace and you know it, and you're afraid to test what's left of you under fire. I'm ashamed of you . . .*

—*Don't wag yourself by the tail, boy. You'll learn, after awhile, if you don't break first. It's woefully easy to break out here. You have to spy on your soul to see when it's coming, so you can punch it. It takes more than a gold shoulder-strap and textbooks. Your mother knew that, and she knew it well. She wouldn't like you tonight, but she'd understand you. I think I do.*

—*She's dead, damn you. And you're staining her memory. You're the one who should have died, not her. You're putting in time and taking out pay, thinking it balances. You ought to quit now, while you're still alive, before you do something horrible. Before you knock it off balance . . .*

—*Steady, boy. Steady, now. It won't be long. Don't break.*

And then Gales was stabbing his arm right, south, and the column jack-knifed

away from the east and took up the new course, the course that paralleled Wounded Woman's down to its junction with the Republican, and led all the way to Texas and the Line and Mexico.

The sergeant flanking the guidon wanted to know if they were going down to fight Apaches and Comanches, and someone muttered that it didn't make much difference. And the sergeant groped for a compass he didn't have, mock-alarming the guidon.

Gales' voice was the snapping of sticks. "Your tongues are at attention!"

Resentment again, but only a very little. The core was forming, was becoming a cutting edge. The honer knew his job, and he knew it well. He circled them into the cottonwoods by the creek and ordered a dry camp.

Knowland left his horse on a pin and stamped past the dismounting column and breathed, "Dry camp? These men need a hot meal." Didn't the book say that? Didn't the book explicitly state that whenever possible, the men will be fed and fed warmly and turned to rest? It said that the good commander knows when to rest his men, just as he knows when to commit them or relieve them. It said all that.

"Dry camp, Mr. Gales. They'll break out airtights and use only their canteen water. They will not refill from the creek. *Is it necessary to tell you that the creek is full of alkali, and that alkali results in diarrhea, and that men with diarrhea are not fit for the field?* "Two sentries, four hours each. No perimeter necessary. The men will get as much sleep as—" he broke off, hearing the far, dull slam of thunder from east of north. "That's all, Mr. Gales." For the first time in a week, he seemed satisfied.

The rain came as they were burying their ration cans; hot rain laced the night and whispered into the sand and hosed the cottonwoods. It turned them out of



their blankets, cursing and coughing, and it caused Gales to smile under his hat-brim. Wet fingers of moisture trailed across their exposed flesh, tickling their nerves, bringing them full awake and fully conscious of the grumbling in the high, black sky. Thunder exploded nearer, and a trickle of lightning snaked down the night.

Captain Gales decided to strop his razor some more. "Clear the cottonwoods! Perimeter camp one hundred feet out. Pull that picket line east of the grove. And"—to Mr. Gales—"put two men on it. Even troop horses don't like this weather." There was slight chance of lightning striking the trees, but Gales wasn't taking it. He had other plans.

He raised his face to the lash of the weather and murmured, "Thank God." So far, he was reading all the symbols correctly.

The deep, drought-powdered dust was becoming viscous muck that sucked at boots and clutched blankets and held hooves sunk by the weight of the horses; it was slippery under Gales' feet as he picked his way around the grove and found the bank of Wounded Woman's. The current below was urgent and hurried and had a voice of its own. He turned from it and slogged back to the perimeter and nodded to his striker. "Turn in, if you can. I'll sit awhile."

Thunder crashed and echoed in obscene volutions that rolled across the hills like giant wheels bumping the earth. Lightning pitchforked the wet blackness and the rain settled to a steady hum. They could hear the creek, after an hour, flinging itself from the high places on its mad course down the desert to the Republican, Texas, the Line.

Dawn crept west on sodden gray feet, evil with eagerness at what the day would bring.

It brought a cry from the up-creek sentry; it brought Gales on mud-flinging

boots. From the last of the passes in the hills two miles northwest he saw the blunt bow of a bateaux sliding onto the desert, steering into the trough of the creek that was now booming between its banks in its hurry to get southwest.

Gales strung his command along the east bank, using half a mile to do it. He watched them lie flat in the ooze, their clothing hanging like slimy weeds, their unshaven faces set in masks of hard anticipation.

"Mr. Gales—you be the other end of my cutting edge. Post yourself below and—" reverting to the language of written orders—"preclude the possibility of their escape in that direction. Any questions, Mr. Gales?"

"No, sir, there are not." Knowland Gales was asking something with his eyes, but there was no answer for him then. Not at that precise moment; he must live a while longer before he would hear it.

**M**OVE out!" Gales crouched on one knee, letting it bore into the mud, feeling his shinbone and lower thigh go cold to its cling. There were three bateaux in sight, coming fast. And then four, each guided by two men. They were dark men in the sick dawn light, men with the pointed nibs of bear-claws around their arms and necks. Men who paddled little, permitting the swift current to carry them, saving their strength for the long journey south, using the paddles to steer with. Men who had known the mountains and the haunts of trappers. Five in sight, and the first one was five hundred yards up-creek, yawing slightly. The sixth and last shot from the passes and lined out into the current.

Gales' striker, now a messenger, relieved the chattering of his teeth to remark, "They don't seem to have any baggage, sir."

"They haven't—except for a rifle apiece that they didn't have before. Scamper



down to Mr. Gales and tell him they'll see us before they'll see our picket line behind the grove. Tell him to hold fire until fired upon, and pass the word as you go."

The striker scampered.

The leading bateaux was three hundred yards away, and Gales fisted his hand gun, yanked it free and rose to his feet. The bow man caught him, yelled, and dropped his paddle and reached below the gunwales. The stern man swung to, broached for one second, and fought the paddle as the current wheeled him straight on again. The bow man came up with a rifle, cocked it, aimed it, and fired as Gales dropped.

"Let 'em come on! We want 'em all!" Only Gales had been fired upon, and he was a stickler for standing orders.

The bateaux rode past on a zigzag, paddles futile in the steel fiber of the racing current. Gales lay his hand gun across his wrist, aimed one foot ahead of the stern man, and fired. The bow man squeezed off a second shot, and Gales felt its impact burn his leg as he saw the stern man collapse over the near gunwale and stay that way, arms making white water. The craft yawed, broached, and slipped broadside past the waiting rifles. "Speak to 'em!"

The rifles crashed raggedly and someone shouted and the bateaux heeled far over and began taking water. The stern man slid from sight and the bow man seized his rifle and sprang clear and was killed as he broke surface.

"Five on the way!" Gales couldn't feel his flesh wound any longer; feathery exultation had him and was raising him beyond himself. This time he fired twice at the next bateaux and got the bow man. A sleet of bullets whistled over his head from the rifles down the bank, and that bateaux floated past empty and full of holes.

The remaining eight paddlers were

leaping for it, and Gales arm-signalled and shouted and climbed to his feet. He was limping painfully, dragging his left boot, plunging up-creek through the slimy pools of mud; stumbling, recovering, shouting. The Cheyennes were on both sides of the stream, falling, firing, rising and running.

"On foot—come on!" Knowland's voice, loud and angry.

Slime-slick uniforms started passing Gales and he yelled them on, whacked at them as they ran, laughed at them as they tripped. The boiling white fury of a water kill had sparked them to insane, unending speed—a claw-fingered urge to grapple, close and finish.

Two Cheyennes lay spread in the sticky mud, the way they'd fallen. Another was thrashing off a shattered hip; a rifle cracked, and the thrashing ended.

"Faster—keep firing!" Knowland again; and then he was at his father's side, gripping his arm. "All right fath—sir?"

Gales was down on both knees, sobbing, squeezing off the last cartridges in the chamber. "Mr. Gales—I don't recall having detailed you to ambulance service! Get up there and find 'em! Two were across the stream! You cross it!" He leaned on his hands, head swinging, jaws loose. But there was a grin on his mouth, and he held it there for a long time before he found the strength to get up and estimate the direction of the shooting in the rain-swept greyness of the day. The shots became irregular, ticked erratically, and stopped altogether.

Knowland found his father at the picket line, mounted and with his left leg bootless and bandaged with a blanket strip. "Mount 'em up, Mr. Gales! There's work to be done! Horseholders have cinched and bridled! How many casualties, Mr. Gales?"

"None, sir." Knowland was creek water from hatless head to squinching



boots, and all the breath was gone from him, so that he was gasping.

Gales led out at the trot, which would equal the walk in this swamp; he held them to the trot for fifteen minutes, until the horses were shuddering, and then he put them to the walk, pointing north and east. The rain slapped their faces and stung their skin, but it was a helpful rain.

Trot, walk, trot, walk. One halt only. And two hours brought them within sight of the bogged-down spring wagon and Elnathan Watchorn cowering under its canvas.

"Praise be to God, major!" The agent thrust his beard-prickled face over the seat and blinked.

Gales rode sideways up to the wagon and whipped off a glove and smashed it across Elnathan Watchorn's mouth and was delighted to see blood flash from buckle-splintered teeth. "Climb down, you greasy maggot!"

Hands to mouth, eyes clouded with horror, Watchorn lowered himself trembling, to the mud.

"Mr. Gales, have this man tied and slung in back with his fur bales. We'll bring his wagon in for him, along with the evidence."

"Furs?" The question was a bleat.

"That his charges stole from trappers in exchange for guns. Guns to use in Texas with their Comanch' pals. Guns worth—to the Cheyenne—twenty thou-

sand dollars in beaver that I saw in the rocks behind the issue camp, and which are now anchoring this wagon to the mud. Beaver bales are heavier than rifle crates, Mr. Gales. Tie him up."

They made wet camp there, exceedingly wet camp, and used the canvas top of the spring wagon for a kitchen fly. Smoke from the cookfires was hazy.

"I tell you, Mr. Gales, God knows more than man, a fact you must assimilate. He puts a rain-pitch in the wind—especially when it groans through a stand of cottonwoods. He colors the sky, and He gives you the sense of smell that tells you when canoes are newly-calked. Canoes are of no use in three inches of creek water unless rain is expected."

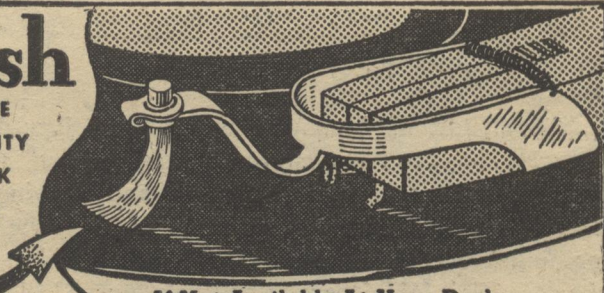
"Did you see the rifles, sir?" Knowland's eyes had the answer to his question now, and they were grateful for it.

"No, I did not. The Cheyennes showed them to me a couple of hours ago, thanks to Mr. Watchorn, who'd had them freighted from Omaha. As we could not attack, we had to be attacked, and cavalry—on the defense—is woesomely weak. Therefore it was necessary to fight on foot, from an ambush of sorts." His eyes never left his son's face. "Last night, I heard a man say that we walk for our pay." He forced his voice low in his throat. "Son, you have to walk before you can ride." And roughly, aloud. "Mr. Gales, take stables!"

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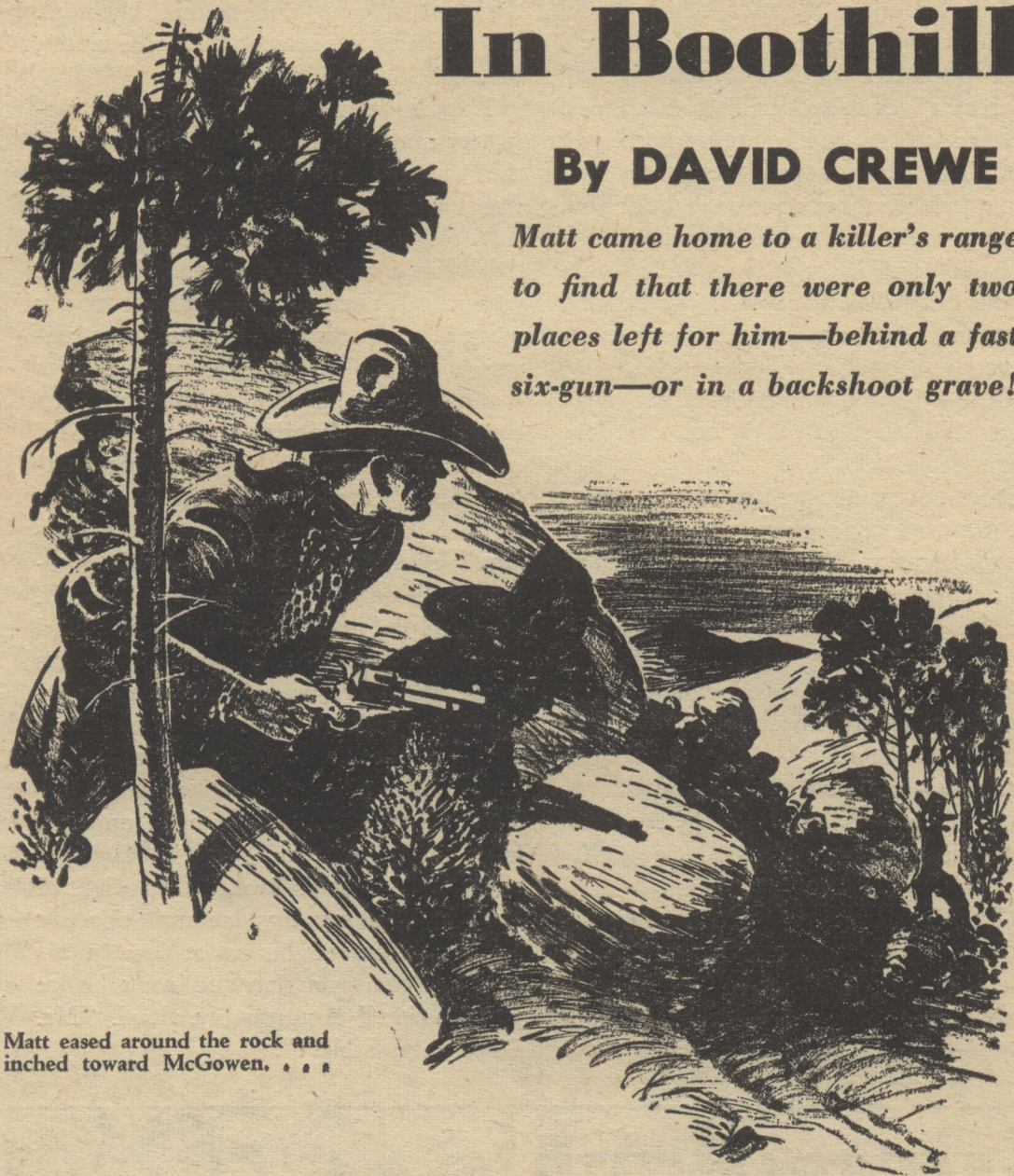
**SAVE YOUR RECORDS!**



# Stake Your Claim In Boothill

By **DAVID CREWE**

*Matt came home to a killer's range to find that there were only two places left for him—behind a fast six-gun—or in a backshoot grave!*



Matt eased around the rock and inched toward McGowen. . . .

**S**O GEORGE Halloway was killed by the storm—or anyway that was what the grand jury decided—and Abel McGowen didn't have to stand trial for murder. But in those days, right after the Civil War, there wasn't any law in Texas to speak of, and every man was more or less a law unto himself. So the

jury decided it would be a waste of time and money convicting McGowen and having him killed, when they knew that sooner or later Matt Halloway, George's older brother, would come riding into Cold Creek and do the job for them.

It was one summer day about three months later that he came in from the out-



country, riding a rugged little dun-colored gelding that kept switching his head back and forth, not missing anything, as if he had picked up the habit from a long association with the man in the saddle. Matt Halloway hadn't changed much, although it had been more than five years since anyone had seen him. He was a tall, saddle-lean man, gaunt of face, with pale blue eyes that seemed to have shutters drawn behind them so that you never knew what was going on in his mind. He rode straight through town, looking at nothing, his long-barreled Cavalry Colt tied down low on his thigh in an unaffected, businesslike way. He headed the gelding straight out into the flat country, and after about an hour's ride he came to the McGowen ranch house, a rambling building of log and sod, as massive and impressive as the man who owned it. Matt carefully skirted the house and came up behind the corrals to where he would be most likely to find the man he was looking for. He dropped stiffly down from the saddle, and for a moment he stood there rubbing his horse's nose, thoughtfully, as if he were getting something settled in his mind once and for all. Actually, he was trying to calm the rage in his brain, and the grief in his chest.

Matt Halloway was a product of his time, a curious age that permitted a man to be an outlaw in one county and a peace officer in another. He was not all good, nor all bad; he had known both sides in the past few years. When he had been just a kid, Cold Creek was on the Indian frontier, and a man's life expectancy depended on how well he could use a gun. It was judged that Matt Halloway would outlive most men—and he had.

The Halloways had a small ranch over to the west, at the foot of the Comanche hills. Matt and George had been born there, and their Ma and Pa had died there. Matt Halloway looked up at the angry

sun—and three months ago his brother had died there, too.

They said George had been riding herd that night over on Indian Bluff when the storm came up. He had been riding a spooky colt, according to the jury, that had become excited by the lightning and thunder and the downpour of rain that made the narrow trail on the edge of the bluff slick and deadly. It was no surprise—according to the jury again—that the horse made a wrong lunge that sent both animal and rider to their death at the bottom of the bluff.

But they never explained the bloody furrow across the horse's shoulder that could only have been made by a rifle bullet, nor the tracks that they found up on the high ground where the shot must have come from. It was those tracks that had brought Matt Halloway to Cold Creek again. They had been made by an unshod horse, and Abel McGowen was the only man on the range who kept his herds down in the flat country, making it unnecessary for him to shoe his mounts, as did all the other ranchers.

It had all begun a long time ago, the friendship that had been between the four of them—Matt, George, Abel McGowen and Jessica Miller. In those days Jessica had ridden like a boy, as wild and as rough as any of them. It was later, when she began to grow up, that a strangeness began to grow between them—and later still that the three boys discovered that they were in love with her.

Something happened to them then. They were still friendly, but they were no longer friends. Even the strong bond between Matt and his brother had become strained, for it was taken for granted among the ranchers that it was George Halloway that Jessica favored and that some day she would marry. It had been a shock to Cold Creek when it was announced that Jessica Miller would marry Abel McGowen.



Some people speculated that she did it because Abel's father was holding a pile of old man Miller's notes, and some guessed it was because Abel was heir to the biggest ranch in the country, and the Halloway boys didn't have anything but a little two-horse spread up in the hills—but whatever the reason, people knew there would be bitterness and likely bloodshed before it was over.

But Matt fooled them on that turn. He left Cold Creek shortly afterwards, knowing that he could never get Jessica out of his mind, and the next best thing was to get her out of his sight, along with Abel McGowen, before he did something he would be sorry for later. He had tried to get George to come with him, but the strong-headed pup had refused, angry and bitter in disappointment.

"I reckon I'll stay," he had said tightly. "I don't know why Jessica married Abel McGowen, but I do know one thing—she doesn't love him. She loves me and some day she'll want me to come to her." And he had added grimly, "I aim to be close by when that day comes."

One thing the incident had done was to bring the two brothers closer together than they had ever been before. It was reluctantly that Matt had left the kid alone, for in his mind he had known that some day it would narrow down until there wouldn't be room in Cold Creek for both a Halloway and a McGowen.

THE day the kid had spoken of must have come. It was common knowledge that there had been a big row the day before the kid had been killed. Abel McGowen had caught George Halloway on his property and had threatened to kill him if he didn't leave Jessica alone. Unconsciously, Matt saw to the hang of his .44. He hadn't thought McGowen would do it the way he had—in the dark, from ambush.

Matt heard the small, quick sound of

boots behind him and he wheeled suddenly, the thought flashing through his mind that if he were shot he wanted to get it in front, not bushwhacked from behind, the way his brother had been killed. A man stepped out of a barn then, grinning. It wasn't McGowen.

The man laughed easily. "Stranger," he said, "you're as touchy a *hombre* as I've seen in many a day."

Matt stood rigid, feeling a thumping in his chest. He wondered if the man would have laughed if he had known how close he had just been to death.

"I'm sorry," Matt said tightly. "I thought it was . . . somebody else."

"Somebody like Abel McGowen?" the man grinned.

Matt stared, not knowing what to say to that. The man had a young, almost boyish face, but his eyes said he was old enough to be a man. His clothes were just riding clothes, but a little better than the ordinary cowboy could afford, so Matt guessed that he must be one of McGowen's top hands. A mop of brassy red hair fell into his eyes as he pushed his hat back.

"You're Matt Halloway," the man said, still smiling slightly. "I'm Bert Luckman, McGowen's *segundo*. If you've got anything on your mind, we'd better go into the barn to talk."

Matt started, amazed at the man's coolness. "How did you know I was Halloway?" he asked.

The grin widened. "We've been kind of expecting you around here. Who else would you be?" He jerked his thumb behind him. "Do you want to go into the barn? You make an awful good target where you're standing."

Curiosity alone was enough to make Matt say, "All right. You walk in front."

The red-haired Bert Luckman led the way. When they got inside the barn he turned around, keeping his hand carefully away from his gun. "You don't be-



lieve in taking chances, do you, Halloway?" he said.

"That's how I got to be thirty years old, by not taking chances."

Luckman laughed softly. Then his face got serious. He said, "Thirty years will be your limit if you stay in Cold Creek."

"Is that your notion or McGowen's?"

The *segundo* shrugged. "I'm just a hired hand, but there are certain things I don't go for much. I hear you've got a reputation with guns, but that's not going to help you much around Cold Creek."

"Do you mean," Matt said grimly, "that I'm apt to get it from behind, the way my brother got it?"

Luckman hesitated a moment. At last he said, "I've been with McGowen for four years. I worked up from line rider to *segundo*, so I can't complain. But like I said, there are some things I can't stomach. Just let it go at that."

The man might as well have come out and said it. If Matt didn't get out of Cold Creek, McGowen would get him, the way he got his brother. Matt studied the *segundo* carefully, wondering why he was taking the trouble to warn him. He had nothing to gain and everything to lose if McGowen found out. Maybe, as Luckman had said, there were some things that he couldn't stomach.

"It was a fool's play," Luckman said, "coming out here the way you did. If anything had happened to you there'd

never be a word said, because you're on McGowen's property."

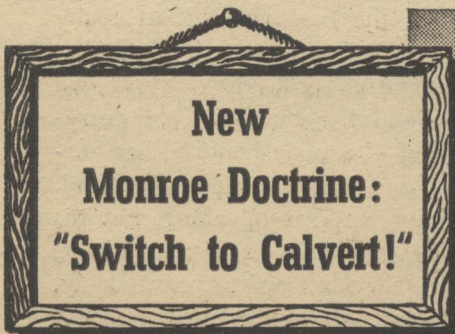
Matt said carefully, "I'm wondering why something *hasn't* happened to me, if, like you say, you were expecting me."

"Maybe it's because McGowen's in El Paso on business." The *segundo* smiled wearily. "And somehow I never got to like killing men." He turned toward the barn door, then paused for a moment to add, "You can take the north trail to town and likely nobody will see you. If you're smart, you'll keep on riding."

Suddenly Matt was alone, feeling slightly foolish. It had been a hotheaded trick that some kid would pull, going after a man on his own spread. A fool's play, as Luckman had called it. He could probably thank McGowen's *segundo* that he was still alive.

Matt walked to the front of the barn and looked up toward the ranch house. Jessica would be up there probably, but he tried not to let himself think of that. And out there somewhere on the range would be McGowen's riders, more than likely with orders to shoot him on sight. Well, there was only one thing to do now. Go to town and wait for McGowen to come back from El Paso. Matt Halloway thought of his brother and his mind grew dark. He could wait.

It was two days later that Matt heard that Abel McGowen was back again. The town seemed to be holding its breath, be-



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



cause it was only a question of time now, and sooner or later the two of them would come together. Matt thought the time had come when, the next day, Bert Luckman hunted him out in the Cold Creek Saloon. The *segundo* came up to the bar where Matt was standing and said, "I had you pegged for a smart man, but I guess I was wrong. You're still in town."

Matt only looked at him.

"You've got company," the *segundo* said. "Down at the Traveler's Hotel, waiting for you."

Matt Halloway stiffened and became suddenly conscious of the gun at his side. "Thanks," he said tightly. He was glad the waiting was over.

OUTSIDE, he walked up the plank walk toward the hotel, carefully watching windows and roofs across the street. This could be another fool's play on his part, meeting McGowen on his chosen ground—but it was better than waiting, his mind growing numb with bitterness. He half expected a rifle to appear from some hidden place and blaze in the hot afternoon. But nothing happened. Business in Cold Creek went on as usual, buckboards and wagons pulling on and off the dusty street, horsemen hitching their mounts at the rail, giving him only curious glances as he got closer to the hotel.

That struck Matt as being strange. If McGowen had been seen coming into town, the streets would have been deserted by now. People could smell a gunfight an hour away. But there was no sign of uneasiness. Matt moved up to the front of the hotel, a two-story plank building with a small cubbyhole at the bottom of the stairs that passed for a lobby. He kicked the door open with his boot, knowing that he was framed in the light, ready to jump either way if a bullet came smashing out of the gloom.

But no bullet came. A voice said,

"Matt?" A voice that he had been hearing in his mind for longer than he liked to remember.

Matt Halloway felt the tenseness rush out of him, leaving him limp. His gun arm relaxed at his side, and after a while he began to breathe again. He said, "Jessica!"

She hadn't changed much in the years that he had been away. She was as beautiful as he remembered, her eyes clear, with a straight, man's way of looking at you. Seeing her, it was easy to understand how three men had fallen in love with her. Matt Halloway came inside then, pushing all expression from his face, dropping the shutters behind his eyes. He said evenly, "Your *segundo* said you wanted to see me." There was nothing in his voice that told how much he had missed her.

"Is that all you've got to say, Matt?" she asked.

What else could he say to Abel McGowen's wife? She went on without waiting for an answer, her face suddenly serious. "Matt, I know why you came back to Cold Creek. And I know what you're thinking about George, but none of the things you've heard is the truth."

Matt said flatly, "Why didn't Abel come himself, if he's got nothing to hide?"

Her eyes flashed with unexpected anger. "Because he's hotheaded, the same as you, and I wouldn't let him come!" Suddenly her voice went down. "Matt, go away before it's too late!"

Then, for the first time, Matt really knew why she had married McGowen instead of himself or George. It was in her voice, and her eyes, and in everything she did—because she loved her husband. Perhaps, in the back of his mind, Matt had known that all along, but his fool's pride wouldn't let him admit it, even to himself. He stood there woodenly, a strange sort of hopelessness washing over him. But even then he knew that it wasn't going to change anything.



He said, "I'm sorry, Jessica. It's between me and Abel now."

He turned and walked quickly out of the lobby before she could answer. He went to the end of the block and saw Bert Luckman bring a buckboard around to the front and pick Jessica up. And, as the buckboard moved through the dusty street and onto the flatlands beyond, Matt Halloway wished sorely that there could be another way.

The next day he went out to the ranch, the little spread his father had started. There was nobody to take care of it now. The fences and corrals were already beginning to sag for want of repairs, and the barn door was standing open, the livestock gone. He walked aimlessly around the place, touching things with his hands, and seeing his brother every place he looked. Then Matt knew that there could be no other way to even things. Sooner or later, Abel McGowen would come after him the way he had come after George—and when he did, Matt would be ready.

So he stayed on at the ranch after that, waiting. He didn't try to fix the place up or to round up the Halloway cattle that had strayed. He just wanted to be there, close to things, so he wouldn't forget why he had come back to Cold Creek. It was a ghost ranch now—the ghosts of cattle that used to be up in the hills, of his Pa and Ma here in the house, and his brother all around him. Here Matt Halloway wouldn't forget.

He had been at the ranch for almost a week when the rider came up from the flatlands, headed for the Halloway ranch house. Matt went out into the front yard and squinted in the bright sun, his gun buckled and tied down, just in case this was what he had been waiting for. But it wasn't. Matt caught a glimpse of brassy red hair that told him it was McGowen's *segundo* again, Bert Luckman. He pulled around to the side of the house and grinned slightly at Matt's curious eyes.

"For a man that doesn't have any business in this fight," Luckman said, "I'm sure asking for a lot of trouble by coming up here. But there's something I thought you ought to know." He turned in his saddle, uneasily, as if he half expected to see McGowen behind him. "You're in trouble, mister," he said to Matt. "Abel found out that you talked with his wife."

For a moment Matt said nothing, thinking that it was working out the same way it had before—except this time he was on the business end of McGowen's wrath instead of George. Absently, he wondered why the *segundo* was going to so much trouble to warn him.

Luckman must have seen the question on his face, for he said, "I figure he's coming after you tonight. Last night he rode up this way and found out that you've got a habit of riding up into the hills around sundown. Today I saw him putting on a saddle holster for his carbine. I guess you can figure out the rest." He paused for a long moment before he went on. Then he said, "I'm telling you this because I've been carrying something around inside me for a long time. If I told another man what I'm telling you, maybe he would still be alive." Bert Luckman jerked his horse around and added, "The man was your brother."

Matt Halloway stood dumbly as Luckman spurred his horse out of the yard and down to the flatlands, and the words drummed over and over in his head. *If I had told another man what I'm telling you, maybe he would still be alive.*

THAT day at dusk, as the last traces of a bloody sun were being blotted out by the darkness coming on, Matt Halloway rode up into the hills as McGowen was expecting him to do. He rode stiffly, his brain filled with cold anger and hate. At last he reached a feathery summit, and when he looked back the land was dark. He held his horse motion-



less, listening for some sound to come out of the blackness. If Bert Luckman had guessed right, the waiting was almost over.

Matt moved his horse down into a shallow valley, watching every rock and bush that was big enough to hide a man and a carbine. Then he heard the sound that he had been waiting for—the sound of a horse moving light-footed in the night, an unshod horse stepping carefully on the sharp rocks of the hills. Matt dropped lightly from the saddle, sending his horse away with a slap across the rump. Back in the east, a white moon had edged out from behind a bank of clouds and poured pale light on the hills.

"Matt?"

The voice called from down below, somewhere in the deep shadows.

Matt pressed against a big rock, breathing quickly. At last the waiting was over. He called back tightly, "It's me, Abel." He laughed and the sound was harsh in his own ears. "This is the showdown, Abel. We're going to see if you can shoot a man in the belly as well as in the back."

"Matt, you fool, I didn't come up here to kill you."

Matt heard that laugh again—his laugh. "You didn't kill George either, I suppose."

"I haven't killed anybody, but I think I know who did."

The voice was still coming from the darkness. Matt couldn't tell where. McGowen was off his horse now, killing time, jockeying for position, just as Matt was doing.

"Matt, listen to me."

Matt eased around the rock and inched down toward McGowen's voice. "It had better be good, Abel," he said, "because I'm coming after you."

"If you want the man that killed your brother," McGowen said, "you'd better watch out for my *segundo*, Bert Luckman."

"You'll have to do better than that, Abel. Luckman was the one that put me onto you. He told me you'd be coming after me tonight, the same as you came after George."

"Matt!" McGowen's voice was beginning to get desperate. "I'm trying to tell you that he planned it that way. He told me the same thing—that you were coming after me tonight. He wants us to kill each other."

Matt Halloway said nothing. He was through talking. He inched forward in the darkness, his gun out.

Over to the right somewhere, McGowen's horse rustled a bush. Abel said, "He may be here now, Matt, over there in the darkness somewhere, watching us. He wants us both dead. Do you know why?"

Matt thought he spotted McGowen's voice up ahead of him, coming from behind a heap of boulders and brush. He said, "you might as well come out, Abel, I know where you are now."

McGowen didn't seem to hear him. "He's an ambitious man, Matt. He worked up from rider to *segundo*, and now he wants my whole spread. That was the reason he killed George. He planned to kill me too, but first he had to get George out of the way. He figured it wouldn't do any good to kill me if your brother was still around ready to marry the widow."

McGowen was trying, but it wasn't working. Matt moved forward some more, keeping in the shadows.

"He planned all along for it to happen just like this," McGowen said desperately. "When he killed George, he knew that it would look like I did it. He knew that you would come back to even things up and we would end up this way, dead, up here in the hills, and nobody to ask questions. I should have added everything up before now—those hoof marks up on Indian Bluff where George was killed—they were



made by one of our horses all right, but not mine. Luckman's."

Even now, in the midst of Matt's grief and anger, there was another feeling of disappointment. Disappointment in Abel McGowen, a man who had been his friend once, trying to lay his killing off onto somebody else. The moon came out with sudden brightness and sprayed white light on the land. With a feeling of sickness, Matt stepped out into the open, suddenly not caring much one way or the other how it came out.

He said flatly, "All right, Abel, are you coming out or are you going to shoot from behind that rock?"

McGowen said, "I don't have a gun. I didn't come here to kill you. I came here to warn you about Luckman."

Matt Halloway had only one idea when he came back to Cold Creek—to even the score for his brother by killing McGowen. But now the hard drive of revenge had burnt itself out. He felt empty and sick of the world. The moon came down with a new brightness, and Matt felt naked there in the open, waiting for McGowen's rifle to open up the way it had that night in the storm. It was quiet now. McGowen had had his say and there was nothing to do but wait. Over to Matt's left, McGowen's horse pawed the earth nervously. For an instant Matt froze. Then, suddenly, he leaped back into the shadows, his gun sweeping the area to the right of him.

It had been instinct at first that had made him jump, but quickly his mind grasped what was wrong. Only a moment ago he had heard McGowen's horse on his right. Now the animal was on his left. It was impossible for a horse to move that quietly and that quickly. It could only mean that the first sound hadn't been the horse at all—it could only mean that McGowen had been telling the truth.

Matt's shout was startling in the pale night. "Luckman, if you're over there, come out!"

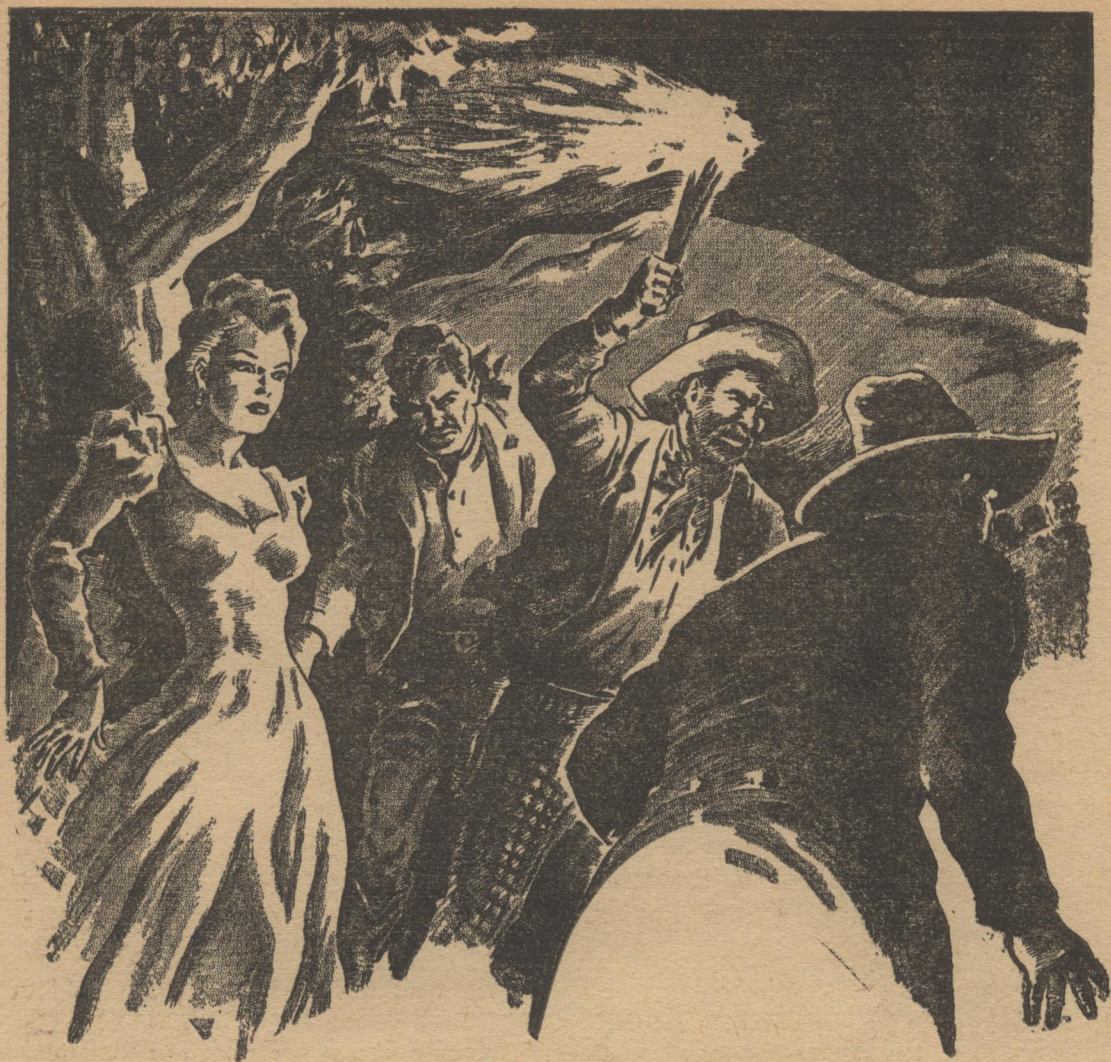
Before the echoes could bounce off the hills a sudden form reared up in the darkness.

Bright orange flame spit at the night and Matt felt the bullet smash into the rock beside his head even before he heard the sound of the rifle. Almost immediately Matt's .44 roared. As he brought the hammer back for the second time everything fell into place. McGowen had been telling the truth. He didn't have a gun. If he had had a gun, Luckman would have fired at him first, because he was closer. But the way things were, he could kill McGowen at his leisure, after he had finished with Matt. The *segundo* had it all figured out—the way he had figured everything, from George's death on down—but sometimes the best of plans don't work out the way you figure.

Luckman's didn't. Matt's second shot slammed the shapeless form back into the darkness. And then the night was quiet again, with only the echoes rebounding from hill to hill to break the stillness. Then, after a great while, Abel McGowen came out into the moonlight. Matt looked at the man who had once been his friend—the man who, only a moment ago, he had been bent on killing. He searched in his mind for something to say to McGowen. But there wasn't anything he could say.

The next day the townspeople watched the lean, gaunt-faced man riding out of Cold Creek again, on his rugged little dun-colored gelding, and they reckoned among themselves that justice had been done. About the only kind of justice Texas had in those days. He headed north toward the out-country, those queer blue eyes looking straight ahead, and maybe one or two people noticed that there was something about him that hadn't been there before. There was a great sadness on his face, and a kind of wisdom that comes from making a lot of mistakes. And he wasn't wearing a gun.





# PARSON OF SATAN'S CREEK

By PAUL CRAIG

## CHAPTER ONE

### Helldown Law

**T**HE wind slatted her long summer skirts against her legs as she came down the path. Cameron paused, laced hands capping the end of the crowbar.

He expected her to pass by, but she

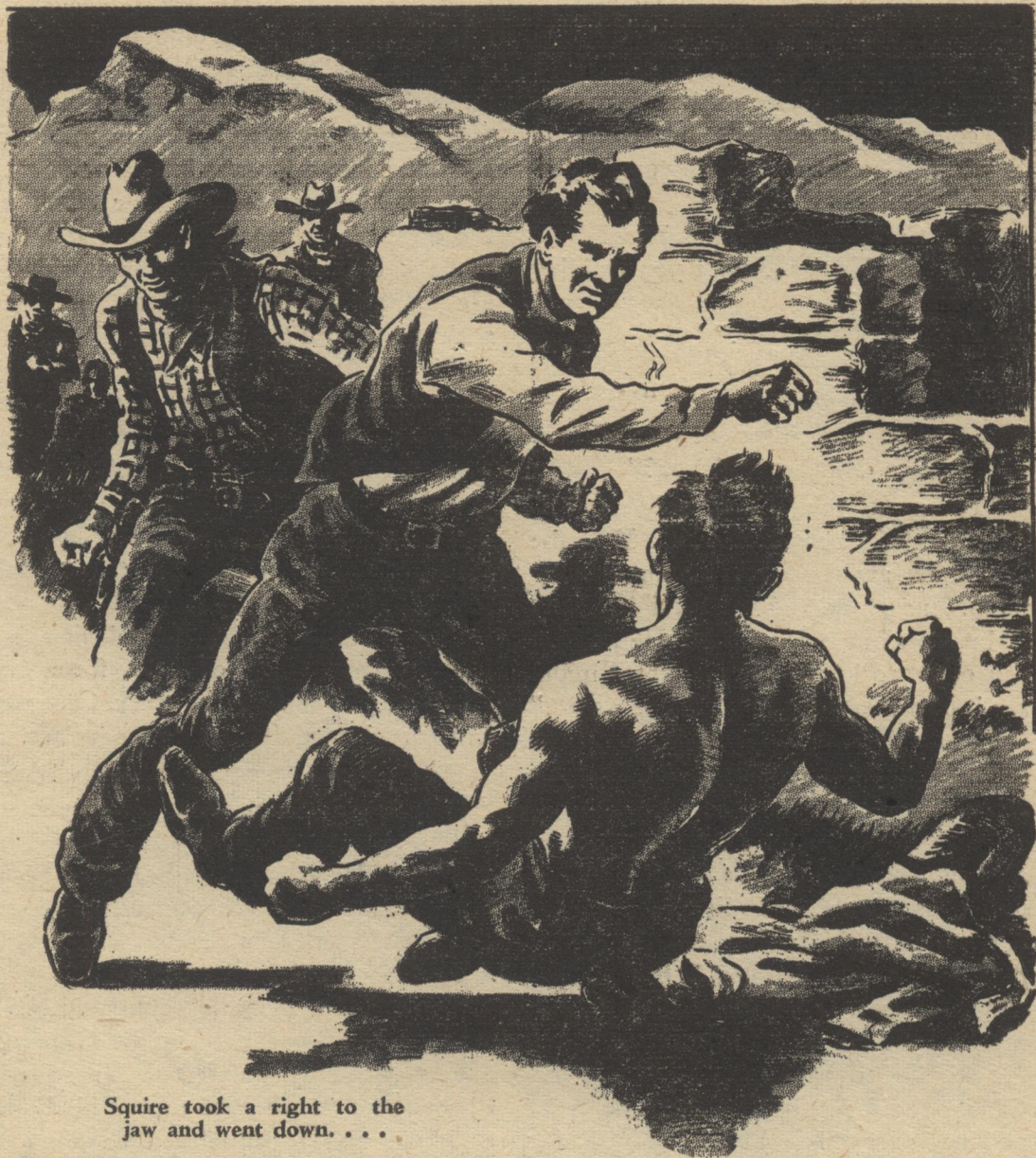
stopped on the path above and turned. She carried a tiger lily she had picked in the woods between this gulch and camp. Its color was hers, Cameron thought, and its wildness. He smiled, to which she responded. He saw she was pleased at the encounter, wanted to speak.

Cameron waited.

The girl looked at the lily, twisting it



*Alone he breasted the devil's town, built a church on the devil's street and when the guns tolled his final hour—said his prayers with a bullet!*



Squire took a right to the jaw and went down. . . .

thoughtfully in her fingers. She said, "They say you're building a church."

"I am," said Cameron.

"Who for?"

"Pass Creek. This town."

She wrinkled her nose, and he liked the quality of youth it brought into her face. "You mean this ugly camp. It's no town.

It won't ever be. You didn't understand. I mean what organization is foolish enough to build a stone church in Pass Creek? Who's going to preach?"

"Why," Cameron said, and decided against donning his shirt at this juncture, "it's just a church." Her voice was beautiful; he wondered if she could be persuaded



to sing in the choir. She had music, for it tumbled even into her light talk. "I aim to be its minister."

"You mean nobody's backing you?"

"Why, yes. God is."

"Well," the girl said and thought a moment. "A preacher came here last year. He couldn't get anybody interested, so he left. It'll be the same with you, Reverend—"

"Just Cameron. You sing, miss?"

"I'm Lily Names. Aren't you building it for anybody?"

"Yes. For Pass Creek."

Lily Names frowned.

Cameron thought a moment. "Names—then you're the singer at the Palace. Jaffe's place. Did he send you?"

"To warn you," said Lily Names. "Dexter Jaffe runs this camp. He's the boss here, and he doesn't want competition. In fact, he and the Almighty can't do business in the same place. He thought you ought to know. He thought I might put it over in a nicer way than he would."

"I hear he's a rough man," Cameron said. "What does he want to warn me about?" •

"That it would be easier for you to give up and go, like the other preacher did. Pass Creek won't live long. While it does, Jaffe thinks he can make bigger profits than the Lord could. Be stubborn and you'll see, Cameron. I have the impression you *are* a stubborn man."

"I'd like to have you in the choir," Cameron said. She was unhappy, he knew, and not over this errand. It lay deeper than that, and he found himself curious about it.

"Me?" Lily Names' eyes widened, then she laughed at him. "You haven't picked up much gossip."

"About your being Dex Jaffe's girl? Yes. But it's your voice I'm interested in."

Lily gave him a look of wonder and walked up the path.

Cameron was quarrying rock at the bluff west of camp, where some exploring miner had blundered against the earth's obstructing mockery. He loaded his heavy cart, prying the rocks onto its low, flat bed. He was sweating heavily when he finished, the raised dust laying a muddy film over his exposed flesh. He laced his shoulders into a harness he had made and took up the cart tongue. The climb to the crest of the small slope brought the tendons of his neck into rough ridges. He topped the rise, eased and plodded patiently toward the town.

His building site lay under some old maples at the south edge of camp. The walls had been raised to his beltline, true as dies, showing the location of windows and doors. In the center of the starting structure lay a white-crueted box in which he mixed mortar. The ground was trampled and whitely dusted between the box and a pile of sacked lime. A Chinaman's yoke lay close by, for water had to be carried from the creek. Cameron had carted sand from the same place.

He unloaded the rock in a steady labor. Sweat rolled from him, and he squinted against the smoky sun, which stood at its zenith. He grew aware of hunger then, the pleasant appetite of a man with hard and useful work behind.

A rider passed along the trail that angled in from the wild countryside. He made a huge figure in the saddle, Cameron saw, slack and disinterested. He seemed about to go on when he turned his horse and rode up. He stared at the walls and the chalk lines they followed with precision, and his mouth worked in a soundless mutter.

He grunted something intended for a greeting. "What's that going to be—a jail?" The dull stiffness of his face cracked slightly in a mirth that was nowhere else revealed.

"A church," said Cameron. Through the rough clothing he could detect the



muscle slabb'd on this fellow's shoulders and thighs. The same rigid power re-appeared in the stubbled face. He looked into the staring eyes and was disturbed. Something poured from them that was morbid and searching, something that drove this man. Cameron smiled. "I'm Cameron. A newcomer."

The fellow studied him. "You picked a poor place to come. They call me Squire. Muleshoe Gulch. Got me a starveout claim and a bellyache from workin' it. You're staking yourself a worse one, Parson."

"Just Cameron. I need a man of your heft. I've got some rocks too heavy for a man to throw up by himself. If you'll help—"

Squire swept his stare from Cameron to the starting church. He thought for a long moment. Then he spat toward the structure, swung his horse and rode off.

Cameron frowned at the receding, blocky shape, then stared beyond. A tall, slim figure came along the trail. Cameron smiled with pleasure. It was Cynthia, daughter of the woman with whom he boarded, bringing his lunch. He watched her step aside to let Squire pass, holding her gaze to the ground. He saw Squire twist in the saddle afterward to stare back at her and remembered the flat pro-fanity of the man's dull eyes.

Cynthia smiled as she came up. "Your walls are no higher than yesterday, Ralph Cameron. You've been sleeping in the shade."

"I've been hauling rock. Tomorrow I'll build more wall. If you brought enough to eat, I'm starved."

She held forth the basket, smiling with the satisfaction of a woman who has foreseen such demands. "You're foolish. If this camp deserved a church, it would help build it."

"I ask help where I see a chance for it."

"And usually you don't get it. Do you think you'll get a congregation?"

Cameron grinned. "A pair of ears makes

a congregation. And you'll be there." He accepted the basket, seated himself on a rock and looked at his lunch. He added, "A place of worship has the power to fill itself."

"Did you ever test that in a gold camp like Pass Creek?"

"No," Cameron admitted. "But I've been in places like this."

"I can't imagine a man panning dust just to stake a thing like this. Around here they have different ideas about what it's good for. Ralph, in another five years this'll be a ghost camp."

Cameron shook his head. "That idea's wrong. Settlement's going on in the valleys. By the time the miners have cleared out of the gulches, the homesteaders will be rooted on the bottoms. Pass Creek won't die. If it has a heart, it'll grow. I aim to give it a heart."

Cynthia smiled, and it was rich vitality drifting over a plain face. "I hope you're right, but I think you're wrong. I've never seen the likes of you. A man with dreams in his eyes and fight in his jaw. You'll need that combination more than once if you stick."

"Saw you step wide of Squire."

"A practice that pays." The girl grimaced. "And you'd better watch out for him, Ralph, now that he's seen the size of you. He killed a man in a fight a while back. Picked it over nothing. And I saw him take a good look at you."

"I asked his help. He wasn't in the notion."

"Don't give him his chance. The other fellow had just hit camp. Squire kept at him."

"I'm a peaceful man," said Cameron.

Cynthia looked at him closely. "I wonder," she said and started for home.

CAMERON kept thinking of Lily Names and the message she had brought from Jaffe. He had learned of the political situation in this



town, information volunteered by a number of people who had tried to discourage him. Dexter Jaffe owned and operated the big Palace, which proffered whisky, gaming and company to the thousands of diggers scouring the environs of Pass Creek. He had the controlling interest in half a dozen enterprises feeding on the loose-handed mining activity. Gold drew men to Pass Creek, but it was Jaffe who said who could stay and do business.

Until Lily Names had put it so, Cameron hadn't thought of himself as entering business as Jaffe's competitor. But Jaffe had seen it that way and sent his warning. So Cameron, that evening, went down into the camp.

He found Jaffe at the Palace. He encountered a man who surprised him, for Jaffe was young enough to be attractive to a Lily Names and old enough for handsome grayness at the temples, a color which also flecked his neat moustache. Jaffe greeted Cameron with guarded amiability and took him into a small office spaced off the main barroom.

Seated, Jaffe shrugged and looked full into Cameron's eyes. "Lily tells me she didn't register with you."

"She registered."

Jaffe grinned. "Let's put it this way. She failed to make the point I wanted her to."

"Not exactly. I came down to ask you why you object to a church."

"It's not the church. It's the crusade you'll start."

Cameron took that apart in his mind. He grinned a little when Jaffe helped himself to a cigar from a humidor, looked uncertain, then shoved the container across the desk. Cameron selected a cigar and accepted a light.

"No," he said, "I don't suppose I'd start a crusade."

"Then why a church?"

"Let's say that I look upon it as an institution. A place of worship, which is

something that lifts from a man to his Maker. Certainly worship's not shoving ideas down anybody's throat, Jaffe."

"Then how do you make any headway?" Jaffe asked.

"There's no headway to be made. There's fulfillment to be found."

"I'll be damned," Jaffe said. "Excuse that, Reverend—"

"Just Cameron."

"A dreamer," Jaffe said. "Laudable but ridiculous. All right, you won't use a sledgehammer. But whip up fervor, and there'll be those who'll want to. I've seen it happen. So you're out. Sorry, but that's final."

Cameron watched him. He knew what Lily Names saw in this man; there was dimension to him. And a deep torment, as in Lily, its twists only faint glints in the man's brown eyes. Jaffe had taken a turn that was bad for him, somewhere, and probably didn't realize it.

Rising, Cameron said, "You've got a good mind, Jaffe, a driving mind. But you're not using it. Why don't you? See this town the way it'll be in twenty years and help me build it."

Jaffe laughed. "In ten years the brush will have Pass Creek back."

"You're wrong. Maybe you haven't noticed the settler movement. That's going to be the lifeblood of this frontier. Put in with me and you'll see."

"You mean you'd do business with the devil?"

"No, with the Jaffe who could help build a town."

Jaffe dropped his barely started cigar into a cuspidor and shifted restlessly in the chair. "I don't want you here, Cameron. Hold a service somewhere Sunday and consider that you've done your duty to Pass Creek. Then get out. By Monday."

"That, I take it, is a deadline."

"You could call it that."

Cameron was frowning when he walked



out the door. He paused in the main room, looking about, knowing he hoped to discover Lily Names. She was nowhere to be seen, though other girls had appeared and the evening's activity was getting under way. Men were watching him, and Cameron knew it was with disapproval. He understood that and was troubled by it. They expected to be heckled over their morals and the prospect stirred uneasiness in them. He didn't want that. What he had to offer had to carry its own attraction or was lost on a man. What he wanted from them at this juncture was forbearance.

Moonlight splashed the camp when Cameron emerged onto the ragged plank walk. The problem Jaffe had posed made a weight in his mind. Walking back to his boarding place, he swung suddenly and turned off toward the creek and church site, wanting the quiet atmosphere in which to think it out. He pulled up short as he approached the place. He saw a figure darting away from there toward the concealing brush and called, "Lily!"

She stopped and turned toward him. She held herself erect as he came up, and the moonlight glinted markedly about her eyes. Softly Cameron said, "Tears on so beautiful a night, Lily?"

"All right, but they're my tears," Lily said, and her voice was rough. "And what's back of them's mine too, Cameron. Sorry you caught me here. I was just

walking and saw the place and came over."

"What made you cry?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you've got a foolish, foolish dream, too. It won't come out for you, Cameron. Jaffe's involved, and he'll see that it won't."

"You were crying because of your dream, not mine," Cameron said. He respected her privacy, yet was powerfully drawn. He waited, as he had the first time he saw her, strongly hoping it would come out now.

She turned and walked back to the church site, and Cameron followed. After a heavy silence, she said, "Would it seem strange to you that I'd like to be married in a church? Like the one you think you're going to build. That's why I say we're a pair of fanciful idiots, Cameron."

"To Jaffe?"

"Who else?"

"What's against it?"

"Dexter Jaffe."

"Why?"

"Come easy, go easy. That's the basic business principle in these parts, Cameron."

"Ah," Cameron said. "That's rather an old story."

"It keeps on happening. You do what's wanted of you, and it costs you what you want. Dex Jaffe would never admit it, but he's an idealist. He lives and operates on the level of Pass Creek. But

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the main parts of himself he keeps to himself."

She paused, listening, and Cameron turned half about. There had been movement in the brush to the right, just beyond the church wall.

A figure emerged then, and abruptly Lily called, "Shad Squire, you get out of here!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Fight or Die!

SQUIRE vaulted lightly over the high wall. He came on at a rocking pace, and Cameron realized he was half drunk. He paused his own length away from Cameron, facing him. He said, "So our new parson ain't above romancing our best girl."

"You'd better go, Squire," Cameron said. A warning bell rang loudly in his mind—what Cynthia had said, *He's seen the size of you. You'd better watch out for him . . .* This man had recently killed another with his fists, crushing a jaw, destroying a brain. Softly he added, "We'll overlook the slur to the lady if you'll go on about your business."

A grin crawled over Squire's heavy face, graven and wicked in the moonlight.

"Shag," Lily said, with a control that surprised Cameron, "I've told you your conceit's put you on the wrong track. I'm not impressed by your strength. I'm not attracted to it. I thought I got it through your head after you beat that poor fellow to death."

"Seen you sneak off," Squire grunted. "Never guessed it was to meet our new parson. It's once you plain surprised me, Lily."

"This isn't the first time you've followed me, Shag. If you ever try to waylay me, Jaffe'll kill you. With a gun, which'll bring you down to his size." She spoke patiently, trying to get hold of Squire's

slow mind. "You go on now, and we'll forget it, like Cameron says."

"Got to take me a look at this man," Squire answered. "Got to see what he's got that draws you. I aim to take him apart and find out."

A wave of futility ran over Cameron. He stepped aside as Squire charged, throwing his frock coat back from his shoulders and wriggling out of it. He let the garment drop as Squire swung around. Lily let out a short sound that was a started and arrested scream. Cameron stepped forward into Squire's drive. He bent to take the collision and sank his fist into the man's belly.

He sprang out of Squire's grunting clasp. Squire came on, driving his balled hands. Cameron took a blow in the pit of the stomach that drove breath and command from him. He went down, and it was then that Lily dropped restraint and screamed.

Cameron saw Squire sail flatly upon him and rolled aside, face digging into the churned dust of his building site. He got to his knees, but his head was too heavy to lift. Then something came to him, a tremendous urge to pit himself against this raw brutality. He shoved up just as the man got to a stand.

Squire grunted, "Cameron, you're a specimen. Never figured you to be so quick. But I'll slow you, and when I get hands on you, something's going to break!"

Cameron was surprised at the challenge that ripped from him. "Come on, Squire, and bring your best."

He stood up under the assault; he drove Squire back. He saw and seized a chance to smash his knuckles on the man's throat. He heard Lily call, "Here—here!" and knew her cry had caught attention in the camp, was bringing someone. But Cameron had no desire for help; power had risen in him, calmness, the ability to think again. Squire's forte was his blunt,



brutal drive. Maybe he had the stamina to feed it indefinitely, and maybe not.

Cameron had fought with his hands, though never for his life. Some of that early sport had left memory patterns in his nerves and muscles. Sometimes he could evade Squire's wild rushes. Again he had to take their full impact and each time they devastated his strength and intelligence. He felt the warm gush of blood from his nose piling over crushed lips; he pulled the dusty air into heaving lungs.

He knew that men had arrived from the camp, that others were coming on the run. They halted to watch in stark curiosity, for Cameron was holding his man. They offered no help; they didn't root for either one. Cameron understood this in dejection. Popular or not, they probably considered Squire to be rendering a service in running the preacher out of camp or killing him off.

Seeming to sense this grudging support, Squire ripped out, "Boys, I caught the parson playing fiddle-de-dee with Jaffe's girl. Somebody go tell Jaffe what a favor I'm going to do him. Somebody—"

Cameron dropped him with a fist that caught the man's blunt chin. Squire's head shot back and he sat down hard. Wind mixed into a groan and gushed from his mouth. He canted slowly onto an elbow, fear trapped on his glistening face, but Cameron stood off.

"Don't play the fool, parson!" somebody yelled. "Kill him while you got the chance!"

This faint show of partiality seemed to energize Shag Squire. He skidded his legs, shoved his knees, and came to a bearlike crouch. In that stance he moved forward. Cameron stood solid and coolly struck at the man's face. He took the impetus of Squire's shoulder in his belly, knew anguish and went back. A fragment of rock turned under his heel and he was down.

He expected to be stomped and got his arms over his face. In the next instant he saw Squire straighten above him, saw the man's huge arms push up. Squire grasped a boulder the size of a man's head. He shoved it high, intending to bring it down in a crushing throw, Cameron moved in a gray consciousness of desperation, rocking to a sitting position, then onto his knees. The stone bounced off his back, flattening and paralyzing him in the dust.

He took the weight of Squire's stomping heels on the back of his head. In the second of contact he came up with the last of his power. He grabbed Squire's legs and pushed, carrying the man off balance and upward. Cameron staggered to a stand, lifting his foe in deadweight. He began to turn, treading the dust rhythmically with his boots. It straightened Squire, and the man let out a steady bellow. Then Cameron bent and let go, felt the weight lift from his shoulders, saw Squire make a hard, flat impact on the earth.

Cameron's tortured breathing seemed to quit him; a stitch in his side kept him from standing straight. No sound came from the watchers for a long moment. But Shag Squire failed to rise.

Then somebody said, "Parson, you've bought yourself a piece of Pass Creek."

But revulsion and nausea had hit Ralph Cameron. He swung in a groggy lurch and started toward the camp.

His walls were a mockery. When at noon Cynthia brought his lunch she observed him closely and said, "Ralph, you look miserable. Don't you realize what you've done for yourself in this camp? It's willing to tell Jaffe to go hang and accept a fighting parson."

"There's no such thing," Cameron said.

Cynthia shook her head. "It goes deeper than that battered face. What's troubling you?"

"There's dignity in a man," Cameron said.

"In Shag Squire?"



"Yes."

"He would have killed you, if he could."

"Yes."

"You would have let him?"

"No."

Cynthia shrugged and was about to go when two men came down the trail from camp. They were husky, friendly looking, swinging along in confident strides. The pair tipped hats to the girl, and one said, "Just hit camp to celebrate, parson, and got a better notion. Heard about you and Squire. Anything we can do to help you?"

"Why, thanks, boys," Cameron said. "But there's nothing. Thanks, anyhow."

When the men had gone, Cynthia looked at him in deep puzzlement. "That would have started a fashion that would have got the church built in jig time, Ralph Cameron."

"I want no help because I whipped a man."

The girl smiled then. "Fighter and dreamer. How badly they're tangled in you, Ralph. Yet somehow I hope the dreamer wins."

Cameron got a horse at the camp livery in late afternoon and rode out. Muleshoe Gulch, he had been told, was some three miles up the creek. He passed the dug-out relics of many a claim on his way, with a couple still being worked. He turned finally along a fork and presently came upon a digging, in the center of which stood a combined tent and pole lean-to. Smoke rose from a tin chimney, and as Cameron rode up, Shag Squire appeared at the tent flaps.

His eyes narrowed and he stepped out boldly when he recognized the visitor.

"Squire," Cameron said, "I came up to eat a meal with you."

Squire's face was marked as badly as Cameron's, but no worse. Again the thing about him that had first disturbed Cameron poured from his eyes.

He said, "Cameron, get out of here. I'm coming into camp again one of these

days. When I do, we'll settle her for fair. Not here. When I do it, I want the people who seen you lick me see you die."

"We have no quarrel, Squire."

"I hate the sight of you. That's quarrel enough. Ride out of here."

"I won't fight you again," Cameron said.

"Then I'll run you outta camp for a yellow dog. Ride, Cameron, before I get my gun and put a hole in your belly!"

Cameron rode off, unhurried, his back turned squarely toward this man. The sun made a final fall below the foothills when he reached Pass Creek. He put up the horse, regretting that the camp streets already were filling with miners from the nearby gulches. They watched him, with interest and respect and a hesitant readiness to be friendly. Cameron brought brusqueness onto his features, feeling cheapened by this admiration.

He was passing the hotel when Dexter Jaffe rose from a roundback chair on the veranda and held up a signaling finger. Cameron waited on the walk until the man came down the steps.

JAFFE wore a smile. "It was fortunate that you showed up where you did when you did. Squire might have harmed Lily. The fool thinks a woman ought to be ready to go to the man with the most fighting prowess."

"Sometimes women do," Cameron said. He studied the face before him. Though bland and creased into studied mirth, there was a faint tic in the underlid of the left eye. This man was feeling stresses greater than he wanted to show.

Jaffe nodded. "Right. Everything else being equal. Which requirement appears to be met in the man who whipped Squire last night."

Cameron pulled back his shoulders. Then he eased. Here was jealousy, raw and flogging. He said, "Lily tell you how I happened onto her last night? She had been crying. At my church. It



seems she'd like to be married in it. That'd be a fine thing, Jaffe."

"My affair, Cameron."

"Certainly."

"You realize it's Saturday, don't you? I'm grateful for your service to me, but what I said about Monday stands." Jaffe turned and ascended the steps.

At the supper table that evening, Cynthia said, "Would you like to hold services tomorrow, Ralph? I could get the word around. With the drawing power you've won, you could use the porch and fill the yard and street."

Cameron shook his head. "I'll pull no one to church to see a curiosity."

"Maybe you're too stubborn. Things get around. Everybody knows Jaffe's given you a deadline. If he backs down, he's through here. He won't. Yet you could get the camp behind you. Nobody likes a high-handed man, which Jaffe certainly has been. You could end his rule, and perhaps that would justify the means."

"Expediency never does the work of principle," Cameron said. "Cheapness never proves quality."

Mrs. Davies, like Cynthia but gray, quieter, said, "I think you're right, Ralph. You're not trying to put over a few noisy camp meetings. You want to build a church and a town. That takes principle, and principle takes patience."

"And patience takes the belly for it," Cynthia said.

"Cynthia!"

"That's what they call it hereabouts. And Ralph's got it." Cynthia smiled at Cameron, who felt his pulses stir. "I was hoping he'd turn down my suggestion."

Cameron rose early on Monday morning, with tension placing a tight clamp across his shoulders but with his mind resolved. After a full breakfast he went at once to the building site. The rock he had carted lay ready to heighten his walls. The mortar he had mixed late Saturday was ready to use. He set to work.

Around eleven, a man came down from the camp whom Cameron recognized as one of the storekeepers. The merchant studied the fresh, damp work on the walls; he studied Cameron.

"Thought you ought to know, parson. Shag Squire wants an audience, and he's sent out word. He'll be in camp tonight."

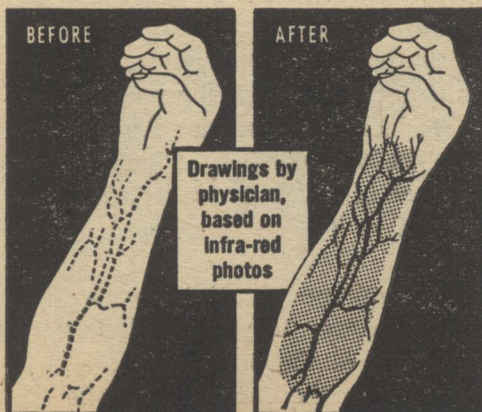
"Thanks," Cameron said.

The man shifted his weight, cleared his throat. "With Jaffe's deadline, that puts it up to you, parson. You aim to take on both?"

"No."

"Well, can't say I blame you. But I thought I'd tell you you'd get backing if you decided to run them two out, instead."

"Why, I didn't say anything about running," Cameron said. "I'm building a church. I mean to finish it. I mean to be its minister."



## HOW SLOAN'S LINIMENT AIDS MUSCULAR PAINS

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The storekeeper grinned. "Good. Then let's have a meeting over to my place and figure this thing out."

"Thanks," Cameron said, "but it'll have to work itself out." He hoisted a rock from ground to wall.

Shag Squire rode past the site in late afternoon, not looking at the church and Cameron, not ready until conditions were right to salve his wounded vanity. Cameron glanced at him briefly, thinking of midnight, when Dexter Jaffe's deadline would have passed. Later he saw an inordinate number of miners steaming in from the gulches. After supper, Cynthia followed Cameron to the front porch. He had bathed, dressed in clean clothing and picked up his hat. For a moment she stood before him, her face lifted, her eyes searching deeply into his.

"Ralph, I wish I had your certainty. You could get this camp behind you and maybe make it the place you dream about. Alone, you'll have to meet Squire and whip him again. Then you'll have Jaffe."

"What will he do?"

"Order you to leave camp or face him in a gunfight. He's done that before. He's always won. Fairly, maybe, if it's fair to force something at which you're an expert. Ralph, can't you compromise this once?"

"No," Cameron said.

She sighed and smiled in deep sadness. "I guess I'm glad you said that." She rose swiftly to her toes. Her lips touched his. Then she whirled and disappeared into the house.

Cameron walked easily down the shaded side street and came onto the main thoroughfare. He was settled, though without a plan, his serenity rising from his faith in the resolution of the situations that faced him by the hand of a higher power. He was thinking as he walked of Cynthia's claim that dreamer and fighter were at war in him. He conceded the truth of it, feeling the weight of sadness,

for he had a strong urge to meet with defiance both men pitted against him. His hands itched, his muscles wanted action. He forced this out of himself in gruff disapproval and headed toward the hotel.

At this hour, after supper, the broad, shady porch was well occupied. The occupants of the roundback chairs rested in feigned torpor, yet Ralph Cameron realized the veiled attention he drew as he came up the steps. He idly sought a vacant place and took it, picking up the battered newspaper that lay on the seat. He crossed his legs, leaned back and opened the paper, and to all outward appearances, lost himself in its aged contents.

He sensed the keyed-up preoccupation about him, but Pass Creek was keeping out of it. Cameron recalled its offer of backing and was grateful, but he liked its forbearance better. He had made that wish clear. And now he stood to vindicate his judgment or be shamed and further cheapened before the town.

He was a little surprised when, just after dark, Shag Squire came out of the hotel. It was too dark for reading now, and Cameron held the folded newspaper in his lap. He glanced briefly at Squire but said nothing. The man must have known or sensed his presence, for he turned his face with its blunt stare.

"I'll be over to the Palace, Cameron."

Cameron shrugged. This wasn't enough of an audience. Shag Squire wanted the conditions to be exactly right when he redeemed his reputation in this camp, or made his try. Cameron felt the recklessness that had carried him into the first fight rising hot and boundless in him. He had a moment in which he nearly abandoned himself to it, then he climbed on top again.

Lily Names emerged shortly thereafter, probably on her way to work at Jaffe's place. She crossed the porch hurriedly, without looking at the dozen males who



watched her in quickened interest. If she was aware of Cameron, she gave no sign. She dropped lightly down the steps and turned into the street's obscurity. Glancing briefly at the horses racked before the building fronts, Cameron knew that Pass Creek had drawn heavily this night upon its environs.

Then something burst in Ralph Cameron without warning, an utter impatience and rebellion against his restraint. He rose and left the porch, aware from the stiffening postures that the others there would follow close behind. He moved in a long, swift stride down the street, a feeling of freedom in him, the surging hunger for a decision. He brushed his shoulders against the batwings of the Palace and went in.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Hanging Party

HE WAS not surprised at its smoky, intent congestion. He made a swift study of the long bar, the empty stage at the end of the room, the crowded tables and the piano in the corner below the stage. He saw Shag Squire at the end of the bar, drinking alone, his shoulders hunched thickly and elbows planted on the mahogany. His eyes narrowed when he saw Jaffe and Lily at a table in a front corner. Only these two boldly watched him come in.

Cameron cut to his left, picking his way through the crowded chairs around tables that stood in cones of smoky yellow light. Lily looked puzzled and reserved as Cameron came up. Jaffe was grinning, not in mirth or friendliness but in a quiet, self-contained savor.

"I guess you couldn't do anything else," Lily said. "Like to join us?"

Cameron glanced at Jaffe. "A man who's undertaken to run me out of town in another three hours?"

"Sit down, Cameron," Jaffe said. "Maybe it won't come to that. Maybe Shag Squire will take care of things. I hope so. Drink?" He reached toward the bottle that stood against the wall, smiling sardonically as he waited for Cameron's reply.

Cameron grinned. "Sure."

Jaffe's eyes widened, but he filled a glass. "I concede it's not for courage, Cameron, so it must be for congeniality. Or to show you're human and your notions are human. I can respect a man even if I hate what he stands for."

"You don't hate it," Cameron said. "You're afraid of it. It makes something deep in you crawl in shame of yourself."

"Worms'll crawl in a man someday," Jaffe said. "That's all I know."

"But you sense more, and it keeps you uneasy."

"Cameron, you're right," Lily said.

"The thing that keeps me uneasy," Jaffe said, "comes from being a human being."

There was a stir of interest. Shag Squire had shoved away from the bar and taken a long, slow look around the room. He had drunk enough to be a little flushed, to have brought a shallow glitter to his dead eyes, but he was steady. He sighted Cameron at Jaffe's table and came across the room. Men shoved from their chairs and moved back hastily, so that a path cleared broadly for Squire.

Squire came to a halt at the table and hooked his thumbs under his belt. He looked at the three people there, swinging his glance with a heavy care. For a moment his gaze met that of Lily Names; Cameron saw trouble cloud for a moment in her eyes, saw the merest blanching in her cheeks.

"Shag, don't you do it," Lily said.

"Told you I would, didn't I? See 'em clear a trail for Shag Squire across this place? When a trail don't clear itself, I clear it. Jaffe, when I'm done with Cameron, you and me're going to mix.



Your way, my way, any way. I'm done with this. It's got to be settled."

Jaffe's eyes had sobered, but his lips still wore a mocking smile. "Why should we mix, Squire?"

Squire pressed his thumbs down on his belt. His eyes glinted. "Your woman come to deal with me this evening. On her own. She come to me finally, Jaffe."

It was baldly spoken, before a hundred listening ears. Cameron saw Jaffe straighten, saw something horrible and touching tinge his eyes. Then, with slow care, Jaffe looked at Lily.

"Well."

Lily was wholly without color, without animation. Then, in a dragging voice, she said, "Go on, Shag. Tell all our secrets."

Squire grinned. "She made her offer. But she tied a pretty string on it. If I laid off Cameron. If I'd get out of the country, she'd marry me. Jaffe, how do you like that?"

There was a bitter twist on Lily's lips as she looked at Dexter Jaffe. "He turned it down. He hates Cameron too much. He's too sure he can handle you and have his way without strings. Now, Squire, I'll do what I threatened if you went ahead with this. I'll tell the rest. After he turned me down, he tried to make me leave town with him. By force. Every man in this room might as well know it."

It brought Jaffe to his feet, and it brought a score of men in closer. Shag Squire frowned.

Jaffe's eyes settled on Lily. "And you conveniently fainted, I presume."

"You know I carry a gun. You gave it to me yourself. It dissuaded the man." Lily smiled at Squire, made the man break gaze.

Now Jaffe swung sharply toward Squire. "Get yourself a gun. You're right. We'll mix it."

"What if I say fists, Jaffe?"

"Then fists." Jaffe pulled up his shoul-

ders and stared disconcertingly at Squire.

"Not now, Jaffe. But I'll be back. It won't be very long."

When the man had pulled off through the watchers, Jaffe looked again at Lily. "Are you as cheap as it sounds?"

"I tried to make a deal with him, if that's cheap."

"So now it's Cameron."

"So now it's a dream in Cameron's head. I hope it comes true! Let them fight again and Squire will kill him. Squire'll go in with that idea. Cameron won't. Cameron's decency will get him killed."

"And Squire'll kill me if he insists on fists. What are you plotting, my pretty? Cameron wouldn't wipe his feet on you."

"Cameron would let her wipe her feet on him," said Cameron. "But I wonder if you're good enough even for that, Jaffe?"

Jaffe turned roughly and walked away.

"I wish you hadn't," Cameron said to Lily Names.

"What—or which?"

"Placed Jaffe between me and Squire."

"He was there anyhow, after what Squire told. I prayed he wouldn't. I had to carry out my counterthreat. And I had a reason. Look at those men."

Cameron turned his head. The customers had drifted back to their previous diversions, but they were quiet and thoughtful. Several knots of them stood about the place engaged in low and earnest talk.

"There's a strange thing on this frontier," Lily said. "We get the ornery screenings of the East along with the rest. But, to a man, they'll fight for a woman's honor."

"So?"

"So they'll take a look at this thing. They bear no love for Jaffe, but they're for him in this. They'll get to thinking. Squire'll make Jaffe fight with his fists. Jaffe's proud enough to do it. He'll get killed. This crowd's thinking about that."



Then Squire'll go after you. They're behind you twice over."

"I don't understand," Cameron said.

"They'll go after Squire in a mob. They'll lynch him or run him out of town. And that, Cameron, is the only possible solution to this horrible thing."

"No," Cameron said, and his voice was sharp. "No, Lily."

"I've done my best," Lily said and rose. "I hope it goes that way, but stop it if you can." She turned toward a door that led backstage.

Cameron looked about. Men were moving out the door, together and separately. Nothing but an intent purpose could take them away from what was going to happen here. Lily had been right.

He wasn't surprised when a man walked up to him. "Parson, we're taking over. A lot of us boys like what you've done here. The way you've went about it. Some of 'em's gone out to take Squire before he smells what's in the wind."

"Then what?"

"A miner's court."

"After that?"

"To my notion, it'll be a hanging. He's already killed a man. He's set on killing another."

Squire was brought in within ten minutes, a surprised and bewildered man patently taken unawares, held by two men and under the gun of a third. He was a captured force of destruction, and everyone knew it. They brought him into the Palace's murky yellow light, and men began to shove chairs and tables into the rough representation of a courtroom.

Cameron knew about miner's courts. Some of them were fair, but many were travesties on justice. His mind filled with the question of whether Shag Squire deserved the harsh punishment he was bound to get.

A man shoved Squire heavily into a chair, and for an instant the prisoner seemed on the point of going berserk. He

subsided, his flat, stolid face sullen and defiant. But there was fear behind the trained mask, Cameron knew, the crawling terror that can come to a man when he finds how widely, how deeply he is hated.

Cameron stepped up to the men congregated about Squire and caught in an argument over rules of procedure.

He said, "The man's entitled to defense. I'd like to serve him."

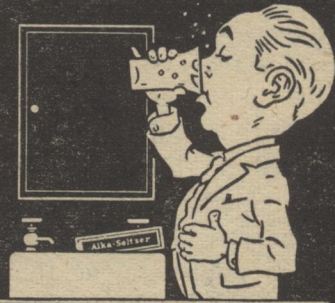
It turned everyone toward him, men who opened their mouths and stared. A miner who had assumed part of the leadership said, "Well, nobody else wants to. That suit you, Squire?"

Shag Squire stared up at Cameron. "Wouldn't you like to see me swing, though!" he said.

"No," Cameron said. "I'd like to see you have another chance, if you're capable of learning a lesson."

"To hell with you," Squire said. "My fists're my defense, and I'll take on any

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two of you that's willing to fight me."

The affair moved swiftly after that, with a judge elected, a prosecutor and jury selected. Dexter Jaffe emerged from his office, eyed the proceedings in glinting interest, then crossed the room to disappear indifferently through the door leading backstage.

It was when he saw a man walk boldly through the batwing doors with a coil of heavy new rope on his arm that Cameron reached his decision. Seated with the spectators and listening to the charges, he rose unobtrusively and slipped through the backstage door. He came into a darkened, narrow hall, a slit of light under a door giving him his bearings. He moved to the door and knocked quietly.

JAFFE came to the door, stared at Cameron, then jerked his head to invite him in. Cameron stepped inside, pushing the door closed behind him. Lily Names was seated in a chair before a small cracked mirror, but not making herself up for her performance. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her face strained, and Cameron knew she had been crying.

Cameron felt the impulse to withdraw, but something held him. He glanced at Jaffe, and for the first time saw uncertainty in the man's eyes. Gruffly, Cameron said, "A poor time to tear into her, Jaffe."

Jaffe pulled up his head; he looked straight at Cameron and smiled with a touch of sadness. "For once I wasn't. You've got a way of saying things that work on a man. Maybe it makes fools out of people, the way I figured it had Lily at first. Now I'm not so sure. Cameron, what would a man like me have to do to deserve a woman like her?"

"Right now there's a big thing, Jaffe."

"Name it."

"Forgive Shag Squire. And help me get him away from those people."

Jaffe's eyes narrowed. "Are you crazy?"

"I didn't think you were too sincere."

Lily rose. "I am, and what you say goes with me, Cameron. Could I help you?"

"Maybe. Could you distract their attention for a couple of minutes?"

"I can try." She glanced into the mirror, lifted a powder puff to her face, then touched up her hair. She went out thoughtfully.

"Cameron, you *are* crazy," Jaffe said. "They're set to hang that man. Cross them and you'll lose all you've done for yourself in this camp."

"Weren't you going to run me out anyhow?"

"I've changed my mind about that. That's only being smart, Parson. With your backing, I'd ruin myself trying it. You're a fool to throw it away."

"I won't establish myself here through hate and violence. Listen!"

Lily's voice came mutedly to them. From the stage, and she was singing. Cameron felt something cold, then warm flush along his spine. It was a religious hymn.

He let himself into the main saloon, saw Lily Names upon the stage, saw a hundred faces turned toward her in surprise. Cameron moved quietly forward, came to a halt besides Shag Squire in the prisoner's chair. In a low voice he said, "Quick, Shag. I'll stick close enough so nobody can shoot."

The court had relied upon hostile numbers to keep Squire subdued, though two men stood close behind his chair. Both were watching Lily, listening, frowning. Cameron knew her words would soften none of them, would not change their minds nor leaven the verdict each mind already had reached. But it had distracted them.

Squire shot from his chair and bolted forward without fully straightening, Cameron moving behind him. It broke the attention Lily held, men swinging around, yelling, cursing in outraged surprise. Squire got through the door. Cameron came through and shoved it shut. He



swung around to see Squire, paused. Beyond him, in the center of the narrow hallway, stood Jaffe with a gun in his hand.

Then Jaffe stepped aside. He said, "On through, Squire. I'll hold them back at the door."

Cameron followed Squire into the alleyway. The man was in no mood to stop, but Cameron pulled him down with a hand on his shoulder. "Pick you up a horse and get going Shag. You know you can never come back. You know why. Try to make a better start somewhere. Try to lose the notion you've got to lick everyone you see to be respected."

Squire looked at Cameron then. His mouth worked, the fear still driving him. He muttered, "You're too deep for me, Parson, but you're all right. Wish I hadn't tied into you. Wish I'd helped you lift that rock the other day." He swung and was gone.

Cameron stepped past Jaffe into the main room. For a moment he stood looking at the men who had supported him in a cause and way he had not wanted. Now he saw the bewilderment, disappointment and starting hostility his action had engendered.

He said, "Boys, I wish you'd take my word for it you'll be glad of this a week from now. No decent man ever took part in a prejudiced mob who didn't regret it." He went on to the batwing doors and through.

Cameron was at the church site the next day, and once more he began to cart rock from the quarry.

A little before noon, Dexter Jaffe came down the trail with Lily. Both looked pleased with themselves. Jaffe nodded as he came up, saying, "Parson, since you were stubborn enough to throw away your support, I could get away with running you out."

"With trying," Cameron said.

Jaffe grinned. "That's what I mean.

Lily will marry me if it can be in your church. How long will it take you to finish it?"

"Not so long, with help," Cameron said.

"You'll get it. There're a lot of hangovers and bad heads this morning, but they'll come around."

As he turned to go, Lily spoke softly. "Thanks, Cameron."

"You don't get off so easily. You'll sing in my choir."

"Do I dare?"

"As a married woman, you won't be working. You'll want something to occupy your mind."

"I'll have plenty of that," Lily said. "Dex is still too stiffnecked to say so, but he wants to help you build your town. I mean to have a hand in that."

When Cynthia came with his lunch at noon, she wore a smile from as far as Cameron could see. Breathlessly she said, "Ralph, you've built yourself a church."

"Not yet," Cameron said.

"You've built it. In the minds of this town. The rest'll follow. I've talked to a lot of people this morning. The quiet ones nobody pays much attention to, but the ones who'll be here when the noisy ones have cleared\* out. They're for you and have been from the start."

"That's good," Cameron said.

She frowned at him. "But there's a thing you've got to square with me, Ralph Cameron. How come you've never asked me for help, the way you have the others? Don't I have any part in this thing?"

"You bring my lunch. Good lunches, too."

"Mother's suggestion."

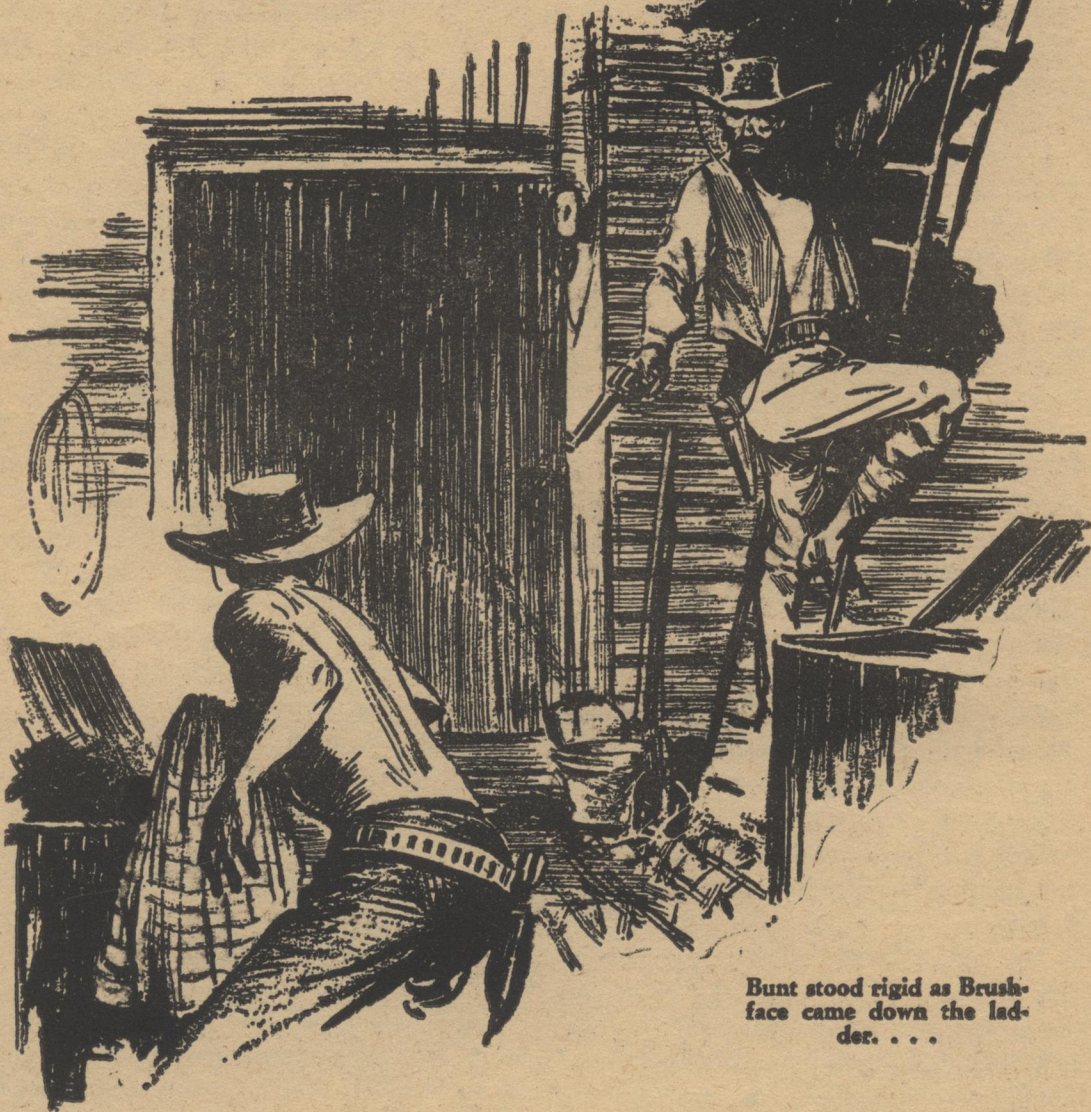
"Well," said Cameron, and he smiled at her. "When a man asks what I aim to ask of you, he wants to take his time. He wants the girl to be sure, Cynthia."

Cynthia widened her eyes and swallowed. "If you mean what I think, you won't get a turndown, parson."

"I mean what you think," said Cameron.



*Wearing the brand of the damned he rode . . . hunted by the law—until his lightning sixes wrote their own challenge to the gallows—"I'll live for one last kill!"*



Bunt stood rigid as Brush-face came down the ladder. . . .

# Brand of the Damned

## By CLIFTON ADAMS

**B**UNT Stewart had the rain to thank for covering his trail, but it didn't make riding any easier in the gummy bottomland along the Salt Fork. The chase had been going on for longer than he liked to remember. Five or six days, he

guessed, but he had lost count back there somewhere. The posse hadn't given him much trouble at first, but then the outraged citizenry of Flatrock had to call in the Texas Rangers. From that point on it hadn't been any picnic.



And to top it all off, Bunt Stewart was innocent. He had never killed a man in his life. He was just an ordinary puncher who carried a gun because it impressed the women and was handy for scaring off the big gray *lobos* that are apt to bother a man at night. But the Rangers weren't going to believe a story like that. Nor the angry citizens back in Flatrock.

It was kind of crazy, the way it all got started. He had been riding down from Kansas, thinking that maybe he could hook up with a trail herd and add a few dollars to his bankroll. Then, along about sundown one day, this big brush-faced geezer came barreling it out of the hills and cut across his trail. He didn't even look in Bunt's direction. He sure was in a hell of a hurry to get somewhere, Bunt figured, or to get away from somewhere.

Well, whatever it was, it wasn't any of Bunt Stewart's business. He brewed some coffee and watched Brushface streak across the country on a big bay horse. And pretty soon, just the way Bunt figured they would, the posse showed up.

Bunt grinned. He didn't know what the big stranger had done, but he sure did have the townfolks riled up. They were ready for a lynching if they ever got their hands on him.

But that grin went away in a hurry when Bunt saw what was happening. That posse wasn't headed in Brushface's direction at all. They were coming after him!

So that was the way it got started. Because he was a stranger and had a two week's trail beard, the posse had mistaken him for Brushface. And that was where Bunt Stewart stopped thinking. He swung to the saddle and rode.

It had been fairly easy losing the posse. He had a good horse and he pulled away from them steadily until night fell. Then he came into some brush country and lost them for good.

The first thing he did the next morning

was to shave. He didn't want to be mistaken for a desperado again if he could help it. After that, he began to breathe freely again, and he figured he had left the danger line quite a way back.

It was around the middle of the afternoon that he came up on a half shack, half dugout affair, the kind of place that nesters usually live in. Over on the other side of a brush fence, an old man in faded blue overalls was cussing a mule and trying to get a plow hitched.

Bunt pulled up to the fence and said, "Evenin'!"

The old man eyed him suspiciously. "Evenin'! You ridin' for a trail herd? If you are, and lookin' for water, you can look someplace else. We ain't got any."

Bunt grinned. "I'm just looking for a job. Saw you here and thought I'd pass the time of day for a few minutes."

"Ain't got no time to frit," the old nester said. But he turned the plow over and sat down. "Lookin' for a job, hey? Well, I reckon you won't find no trouble. Plenty cattle movin' north." He spat. "You come in from the west, didn't you?"

"That's right, pop," Bunt said.

"Had a lively time over there," the old man said. "Flatrock, the place was."

Bunt stiffened. Bad news traveled even faster than it was given credit for. He said, "Some kind of trouble?"

"Feller robbed a bank. Killed a banker too, but I reckon that wasn't much of a loss. Big feller he was, with a black beard. About your size, the way they described him."

"The way who described him?"

The old man spat again. "The Rangers."

Bunt felt his insides begin to crawl. "Did they say which way he was headed?" he asked carefully.

"They figured he'd make for the border. He aint got a chance, though. . . ." The old man stopped short, and Bunt didn't like the way he was looking at him.



"Say," he went on suspiciously, "you got a cut under your ear. A shavin' cut, I'd say."

Bunt said, "Good-by, pop." He got out of that part of Texas before the old nester got his ideas together.

But, Bunt guessed, the old boy finally figured it out. By nightfall, the chase was on again, and this time it wasn't just a bunch of mad storekeepers, it was the Rangers. That night he hid out along a creek bank and did some serious worrying. He wondered if he could cut back to the north, since the Rangers figured that he was heading for the border. After a while he gave that idea up. They would catch him sooner or later. They had a reputation for that sort of thing. His only chance was to get his hands on Brushface.

It was a fine idea. All he had to do was catch the real desperado and hand him over to the Rangers, and that would be the end of it. There was just one hitch. He didn't know where to start.

**H**E DID his traveling at night, avoiding towns and trails and any other place where people might see him. He kept going south because he figured the outlaw was headed in that direction. Then, about the third day out, his horse began to break.

The time had finally come to start taking chances. He took his first one on a grubby little spread along the north fork of the Salt River. An old man and his son were running the ranch, and Bunt hoped they would be willing to make a few dollars without asking too much.

He rode up to a rickety corral where the old man was watching his son trying to get a rope on a big red gelding. He tried to be offhand.

"That looks like a pretty good horse, mister."

The son looked up and mopped his face with a red bandana. "Good, but mean as hell," he said.

Bunt nodded and grinned. "I like horses with spirit. Take that animal there. I'd like to own a horse like that."

The old man crawled down from his perch on the corral and began to look cagey. "Just how bad would you like to own him?"

"Maybe my horse and ten dollars boot."

The old man was a born mule trader. He came over to Bunt's horse and looked him over casually. "We already got one broke-down animal," he said finally. "Feller rode up yesterday with a horse like yours, wantin' to swap." He grinned suggestively. "Bein' neighborly, we obliged. He offered twenty dollars boot, though."

An idea started working in Bunt's head. "What kind of feller?" he said carefully.

"Big geezer with a black beard. Runnin' like hell, it looked like to me." He grinned again. "But I didn't have no call to ask questions."

That was all Bunt wanted to know. He was closer to Brushface than he had hoped. He started skinning the saddle off his horse and counting out the twenty dollars. That left him two silver dollars and a bag of coffee.

It took a while to teach the big red who was boss, but pretty soon he got the idea and Bunt started south again. He felt better, now that he knew that Brushface wasn't far ahead. About noon he found a place where a fire had been made, and he figured that was where the outlaw had spent the night. That meant that the bank-robber had only a few hours head-start on him.

And then the rain came. And here he was in the middle of nothing, down on some gluey river bottom, getting soaked to the skin and not being able to do anything about it. He lost Brushface's trail. He couldn't track a bull if he had been holding the lead rope, the way the rain was coming down. Finally he decided to take to the high ground, where the going



was easier. He hoped that the Rangers were sensible *hombres* that would stay inside on nights like this. He hoped Brushface was as miserable as he was.

It was just an accident that he stumbled across the outlaw's trail again. In the darkness they came up on the deep gully, and the big red shied away and nervous little ripples began to run up and down his shoulder.

"Steady, Red," Bunt crooned. "What's the matter, boy?"

And then he saw what was wrong. Down at the bottom of the gully, he saw the form of a horse. Bunt dropped down from his saddle for a closer look and found that the horse had broken a leg in the fall and had been shot. But the most interesting thing was the brand burned on the animal's side. It was the same brand that Red carried.

Then Bunt Stewart stood up and laughed. He had got his wish about one thing—Brushface, in this rain and without a horse, was probably the most miserable man in Texas.

He wondered what he ought to do next. He couldn't very well go splashing around in the darkness looking for the outlaw. There was one sure thing, he wasn't going to get far without a horse. So that just left one thing. Settle down and try to get comfortable until daybreak.

But where? They splashed around for more than an hour before they came up on the ranch that was just over a hill. Bunt could see the dark shapes of the ranch house and corrals and barns. It was a crazy idea that he was getting, but when he thought of the dry warmth that would be in one of those barns, he couldn't turn down the invitation. Anyway, he would be able to settle it all tomorrow. He'd round up Brushface and turn him over to the law. Then he could start looking people in the face again.

He picked the barn farthest from the ranch house, gave Red a quick rubdown,

then took his shirt off to dry. Red found an oat bin and was making himself at home. It was a good setup, Bunt decided, and he figured he'd have time to catch a couple of hours sleep before they had to move out again. But something changed his mind.

A voice said, "Just stay where you are, mister, and maybe you won't get shot."

Bunt jerked his head back and stared at the loft. And there he was. Bigger and uglier than Bunt remembered, but it was Brushface all right.

"Turn around," Brushface said. "Unbuckle your gunbelt and let it drop."

The outlaw grinned, but the .45 in his hand said it was no laughing matter. Bunt did as he said. He stood rigidly while the gunman came down a shaky ladder and went through his pockets.

"No badges, no papers," Brushface said. "You're no Ranger. Maybe you'd like to tell me why you've been following me."

Bunt said tightly, "I haven't been following anybody."

That was a mistake. The gunman calmly shifted his gun to his left hand and hit Bunt behind the ear with a tremendous fist. Bunt Stewart was almost as big as Brushface, but he wasn't big enough to take a blow like that. He went down.

"I haven't got time to listen to lies," the outlaw said. "I've seen you following me."

Bunt got to his knees and shook his head. He could argue with the gunman, but there wasn't any point to it. The best it would get him was another blow in the face. He said, "All right, I've been following you."

"What are you, a bounty hunter?"

The gunman had furnished him with an answer. Bunt said, "Something like that," and got to his feet again.

The outlaw stood grinning. He said, "That's a dangerous way to make a living, mister."



Then without warning, that gun hand slashed down and the night went up in an explosion of pain. Bunt went to his knees again. He grabbed for something to hold on to. There wasn't anything. He went forward on his face, and the last thing he heard was Brushface chuckling.

"If it wasn't for the noise, I'd shoot you," the gunman said pleasantly. "But maybe you get the idea. . . ."

The rest of the way was darkness and silence.

**H**E WOKE up with hay in his mouth and his head full of drums. He listened to the pounding and wondering what he was doing here. At last he opened his eyes, and he remembered. The barn door was open and light was streaming across his face. A new day had started. The rain was over.

But the trouble wasn't.

Another voice said, "Don't bother to get up. This is a real gun and I know how to use it."

The voice was much more pleasant than the last one, but Bunt had a feeling he had heard the words before. At last he got the hay out of his mouth and rubbed the side of his face with his hand. It was crusted with dried blood.

"Don't get up," the voice said again.

He wasn't in any hurry to do anything. He wished the pounding in his head would stop. He rolled over, very carefully, and that was the first time he saw her.

She was maybe twenty or twenty-one. She had dark eyes and a small nose, and a lot of brown hair braided and done up around her head. She looked very small holding that outsized Civil War Rifle.

Bunt said, "The least you can expect is a broken shoulder, if you try to shoot that thing." He said it mostly to see if his jaw would work.

"But think what the damage would be to you," she said. She was very cool about it. Bunt looked at her again and

decided that she had a stubborn chin. That might turn out to be bad.

He sat up and looked around for Red. Red wasn't there. By now, Brushface would have him hightailing it toward the Mexican border. He said, "You haven't seen a big red horse, or a man with a black beard, have you?"

She looked at him curiously. "I haven't seen anything. You can ask your questions when the Rangers get here."

Bunt Stewart jerked forward. "You said Rangers?"

"There's a company of them about two miles from here," she said evenly. "They've been looking for a man, a bank robber, and you fit the description. When we found you in our barn, we thought we'd better call them in. If there has been a mistake, we'll apologize later."

"We?" Bunt asked.

"My father and two brothers. My brothers are out with the herd, and Pa has gone to fetch the Rangers." She grinned. "I would have gone myself, but Pa is too nervous to handle guns very well."

The fog was clearing. Right now a headache seemed like a pretty unimportant thing. "Look," he said, "you're making a mistake. The same mistake a lot of other people have been making. I'm not the man the Rangers want. The outlaw was here in your barn last night, but he took my horse and got away."

Clearly, she didn't believe him. "Then you haven't anything to worry about," she said.

Nothing but getting strung up to the nearest tree. He got to his feet in spite of the menacing look of that gun. He said, "If you don't mind, I'll just put my shirt on."

She didn't object to that. The shirt was still damp and cold, but he pulled it on anyway. He looked around for his .45 and then saw that the girl had it over on her side of the barn. He decided to have



another try at making her believe him.

"You've got to listen," he said earnestly. "The only thing I've done is to get myself mistaken for an outlaw. The real outlaw was here last night—look, this knot on my head ought to prove that. He took my horse, and for all I know, he's over the border by now."

"He's not over the border," the girl cut in. "If there really is such a person, he didn't get any farther than the hills to the south of here. He's in Ranger country now."

She still didn't believe him. But that knot on his head was making her wonder. He said as patiently as he could, "Now this is the way it all started. . . ." And he told her. About Brushface, and the posse, and finally the Rangers. "So it's me they're after now," he finished. "The wrong man. All Brushface has to do is lay up in the hills and wait for the law to hang me for the job he did."

She stood firm. And that rifle didn't waver. Then it was too late anyway, because there was a sound of hoofs headed in the direction of the barn. Bunt Stewart began to sag. That would be the girl's old man coming back with the Rangers.

But he was in for a surprise. The horse pulled up in the open doorway of the barn. His saddle was empty. Then he walked right in like he owned the place and headed straight for the oat bin. It was Red.

It took a minute for Bunt to put things together. But then he had it. Red was quite a horse; he was particular who got in that saddle. Bunt laughed suddenly. He could almost see Brushface landing on the seat of his pants and cussing that big red horse as he galloped back to the barn.

Bunt went over and slapped the horse's rump. "Come on, boy," he said. "You can finish your meal later. Right now I've got some riding to do."

Red took his nose out of the oats and glared. But he let Bunt swing up to the

saddle without making too much of a fuss.

The girl said tightly, "I'm warning you. Don't try to ride out of this barn."

"Miss," Bunt said sincerely, "I wish I didn't have to. But I can't just sit here and wait for the law to get their hanging rope ready." He nudged Red forward a little, and that rifle was pointed right at his middle. He said, "Of course, I guess you can stop me if you want to. It won't be any trouble to drop Red with that gun of yours." And then he added again, "If you want to."

He rode past her then, not knowing what to expect. He knew that she wasn't bluffing. She could use that gun if she had her mind set on it. But that was a chance he had to take. He was ready to put the iron to Red when she spoke up suddenly.

"Wait a minute!"

Her face was pale, but that rifle in her hands was as steady as a mountain. At last she said, "You're crazy!"

"I guess I am, ma'am," Bunt sighed. It was strange, but he was just now noticing how pretty she was. "But like I said, I can't just sit here. I've got to get hold of Brushface, or whatever his name is."

Queer things happened to her face. At last the rifle lowered. She said, "Here, you'll need this." And she handed up his .45. "That makes two of us that's crazy."

Bunt felt his mouth drop open. After a moment he said, "Thanks, I hope I can prove that you did the right thing."

Then he moved Red out of the barn, raked him with his spurs and streaked across country to the south. He looked back once, just in time to see four riders top a rise on the other side of the ranch. Then he gave Red a big dose of iron. He didn't have to be told that he had got out of there just in time.

The "hills" turned out to be just a few ridges, something to break the monotony on the long way to Mexico. There were a lot of scraggly shrubs and some rounded boulders scattered around, and that was



about all. Turn over one of those boulders and he would find Brushface. But which one? Bunt Stewart didn't know, and the time was running out fast.

He pushed Red through the brush and gained a rise where they could get a pretty good look at the country around them. No Brushface. But the Rangers would be down there somewhere, closing in, getting all set to improve on their almost perfect record for getting their man. It was good to know that the country had a law like that. Unless you were the man they were looking for.

**H**E HEADED RED down into a valley, almost a small canyon, with hills walling it in on either side. And that was a mistake. He came to a dead end and heard horses closing in on him.

The sun suddenly lost its warmth. This was the end of the line.

He sat there feeling helpless. There was no use fighting it out with the rangers and making things worse. The only thing he could do was to give himself up and start all over again trying to make somebody believe him.

That was what he thought before he saw Brushface nose around the bend. And riding beside him were three Rangers.

Bunt was too startled to do anything at first. He could only stare. But he was Brushface all right—clean-shaven, without even a trace of whiskers. Bunt acted instinctively, kicking Red hard and dumping from the saddle. A bullet plowed up the ground as he scrambled for a rock.

Brushface and the Rangers took their cue and hit the ground. In a minute everybody had a private fortress and it looked like it was going to be a long war. Bunt blasted a couple of times with his .45 to stall things. He tried to figure out how Brushface had got tied up with the Rangers, and pretty soon it worked itself out.

The outlaw had stolen another horse someplace after Red had dumped him. Then he must have seen that he was in Ranger country and figured that if he couldn't outrun them he would join them.

So that's what he done. Shaved his beard and pitched in to help the Rangers keep their record clean.

The Rangers cooled their guns for a minute and a dry, drawling voice called, "Throw that gun down, mister. Come out while you've still got your hide together."

"Not while you've got that jasper with you," Bunt called back. "Go through his saddlebags and you'll find the money that's missing from the bank in Flatrock."

He said it, but nobody heard him. Brushface opened up with his .45 and sent bullets smashing against the side of Bunt's rock. Talking wasn't going to do any good. The outlaw couldn't afford to let the Rangers start getting suspicious.

"It's now or never," the dry voice called.

It looked like it would have to be never. If he stuck his head over that rock, Brushface would shoot it off. In the name of the law, as the saying went.

Then things started to happen. The Rangers were beginning to move out from their hiding places, moving along the sides of the hills so they could get him in their crossfire. Bunt swore. Brushface was probably getting a big laugh out of this.

He tried to yell again, but the outlaw drowned him out with his gun. Brushface was playing it smart, all right. The way things were going, Bunt would be the top candidate for boothill in another five minutes.

Then he began to get an idea. If it wasn't for the outlaw, he might have a chance to talk his way out of this, but Brushface wasn't going to pull stakes until he was sure there wouldn't be any talking done.

It was a wild chance, but everything



was a chance now. Bunt stuck his head over his personal fortress and said an earnest prayer. The outlaw jumped at the bait. His gun roared and Bunt felt the hot breath of the bullet as it slammed past his head. Then, he doubled, crumpled, and fell on his face.

It was a good act. It almost wasn't an act at all.

"Well, that does it," one of the Rangers said flatly.

"Is he dead?" Brushface asked.

"He's dead all right," the Ranger said.

Bunt had his eyes closed, but he could almost see the outlaw grin.

The lawman said, "Thanks for throwin' in with us, mister. We've been after this *hombre* all over hell for over a week now."

"Think nothin' of it," Brushface said heartily. "Always glad to help."

Bunt lay where he was. He heard some horses move and he figured that was the outlaw getting ready to pull out. Well, let him get a little head start. They would be able to catch him. Then one of the Rangers moved up to where Bunt was stretched out. Bunt figured it was time to stop playing dead and start telling his side of the story. He opened his eyes, and what he saw turned his blood to buttermilk.

It wasn't a Ranger standing over him. It was Brushface, and the muzzle of his .45 was so close to Bunt's face that he could smell the burned powder and traces of oil.

The outlaw grinned. "I won't miss this time, mister," he said softly.

Bunt watched the trigger finger start its squeeze. He couldn't move. From far away he heard a voice shout, "Hey, what are you doing there!" It was too far away to help him. The chase was over. But he didn't want it to end like this.

Bunt and the .45 seemed to explode together. He jerked up suddenly and the gun roared. He felt it take a piece of

his shoulder. He grabbed something and lunged. It turned out to be Brushface's legs. They went rolling and crashing down the side of the hill.

They reached the bottom and the outlaw was trying to get his gun into talking position. Bunt hacked it away with his hand. He slammed a fist into the gunman's middle. Then, with all the fury that had been building up in him, he slashed at the outlaw's face. Once for that pistol whipping, once for all that running he had been doing, and once more just for the hell of it. . . .

"That's enough," the drawling Ranger said. Two hard hands got hold of Bunt and pulled him away. "Stranger," the man said admiringly, "you sure do die hard!"

The outlaw was on his knees, shaking his head. Bunt panted. "Look in his saddlebags. I think you'll find the money from that Flatrock bank."

The Ranger looked at him curiously. And then he shrugged. "All right, Bat," he said to one of the others. "Go take a look."

Bat went down to where the horses were, and after a moment there was a low, drawn out whistle of amazement. That was all the answer that Bunt Stewart wanted.

It didn't take long for the Rangers to get things straightened out. They patched up Bunt's shoulder and took Brushface away. It was all in the day's work for them, but Bunt Stewart was ready to settle down and do some honest cow nursing for a change. He began to think about the girl back there at the ranch. It was funny the way some people stick in your memory. He could remember everything about her.

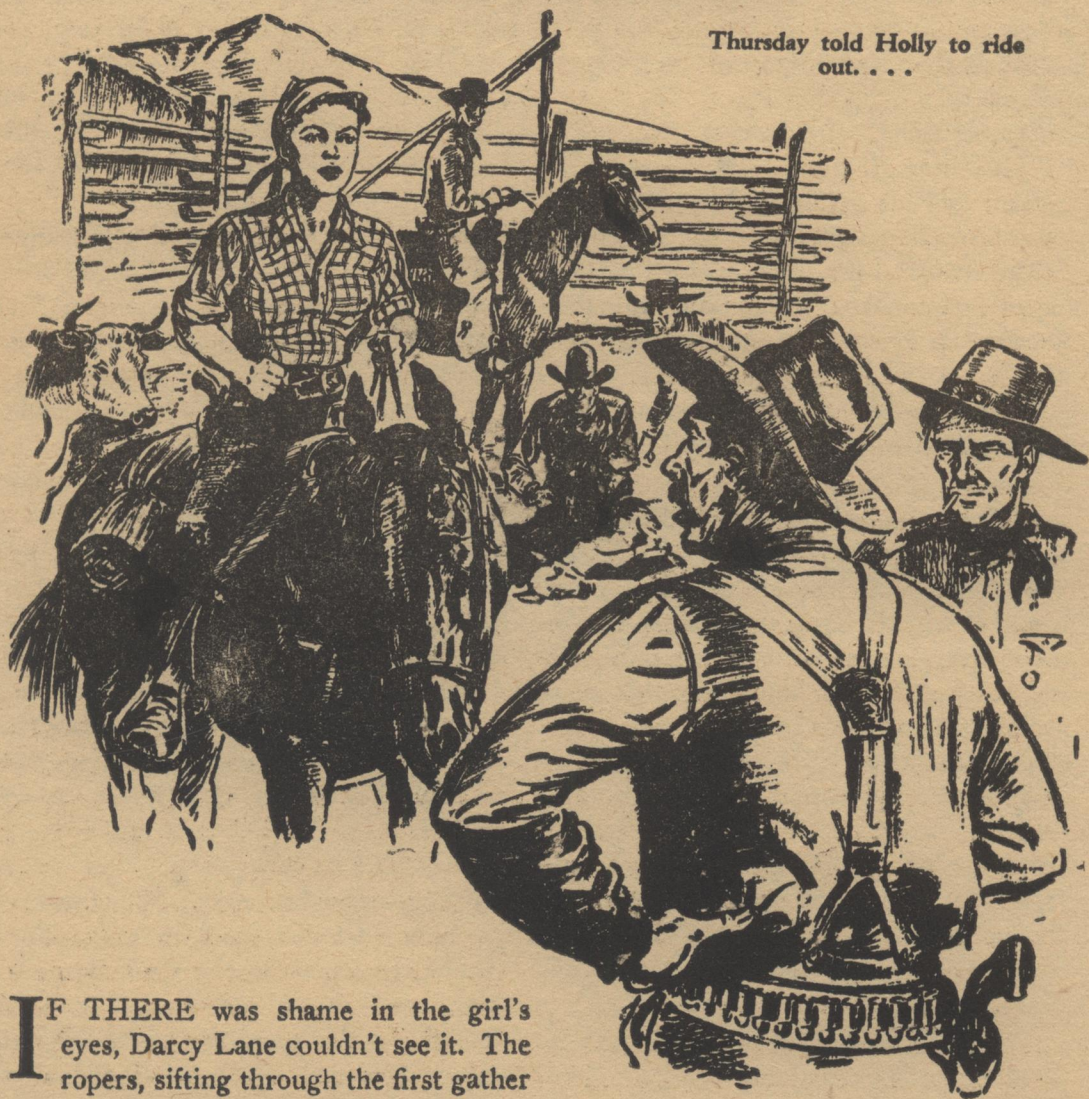
Bunt didn't know what her pa and two brothers were like, but he hoped they had room on their spread for another hand. He liked its looks and thought he would like it there.



*A ghost sided Darcy on that gunswept roundup—the last he would ever ride, unless he could best the thundering sixes that beckoned him from an owlhoot's grave to a phantom—*

# GALLOWS COMPANY

By GIFF CHESHIRE



Thursday told Holly to ride out. . . .

IF THERE was shame in the girl's eyes, Darcy Lane couldn't see it. The ropers, sifting through the first gather brought to the NT branding corral, lifted in the saddle to look. By the fires outside the pole gates, men rose or twisted sharply to regard her. A drifter in dudish clothes was ogling her frankly. Darcy had never looked at a more electrified bunch of cowhands, and it amused him. They hadn't figured on her learning about it

until it was done and well past undoing.

Holly Winther was cold with anger. She still sat her horse, across the branding fires from Darcy, who was about to take a crew out on the afternoon circle. She had a bedroll lashed behind the cantle. Her attention fell, flat and hostile, on



Newt Thursday, the roundup boss. If she felt any humiliation from the events of recent months, she concealed it completely.

"How come you've thrown my stuff into your corral?" Holly demanded. "What's going on here, Newt Thursday? How come I see your NT calves following my Box W cows in the turnouts?"

Thursday was coarse-featured, with a heavy body and brutal touch. The biggest operator in the basin, he planned the roundups, spring and fall. Since he furnished and provisioned the chuck wagon and brought most the crew, he was always elected boss. What he said went with the smaller outfits. Now everyone waited for Thursday to give them their cue, since he had broached the scheme that was to freeze Holly Winther out of the basin.

"I've been waiting for word of the roundup!" Holly added when Thursday failed to answer.

Thursday was caught completely off guard, and it had him clung-tongued. The bulk of the cattle pressed in the big outland corral were his own, for Box W joined the big NT layout, clinging on its upper border like the parasite it had turned out to be. Yet it was true that the enclosure held what Box W cattle, with their calves, the circle riders had been able to scare up on the Winther range that morning, making it the first job of the roundup, in accordance with Thursday's orders.

By common consent they had set out to carve up the old Winther outfit and get shed of the one remaining Winther, secure in the knowledge no cow country jury would find against them under the circumstances. Now Thursday dropped his jaw so that tobacco juice ran over his lower lip. He wiped it off with a sleeve and stared up at the girl. Her unyielding manner was a far cry from what Darcy remembered of her father.

Holly was in boots, levis and shirt and

had caught her hair under a yellow bandana. It brought out the hoyden appeal of her face and the blue of the eyes that, for a moment, had flashed scorn at Darcy Lane. Darcy didn't blame her for that. He had killed her father, one night a few months back, on NT grass and before he had recognized the man. Winther had fled in the darkness, refusing to halt, leaving a pig-tied calf with an NT mother hanging nervously in the near distance. Darcy had sent a shot after the calf rustler that had been lucky or unlucky, depending on how a man looked at it. Jake Winther had got away and died a lingering death some weeks later.

"Why, we worked your range for you, Miss Holly," Thursday muttered finally. "Knowing Box W had nobody to send this year."

"Using whose brand?"

Thursday turned his chew in his mouth and ground it a little. "When you get down to which it ought to be, the answer wouldn't suit you."

It was a low blow. Darcy saw Holly flinch, her face whitening. Before he died, Jake Winther had admitted to a lot of rustling, over the years. It had been suspected but never proved. He had been trashy, a drinker. Though he had built up a fair-size spread, he had always been in financial trouble.

Holly hadn't shown herself much to the neighbors. There had been talk about her, too, once she reached womanhood. But none of Jake's uncertain, submissive character showed in her as she sat quietly in these hostile surroundings. In fact, it was Newt Thursday who had been rendered hesitant.

Darcy didn't like it. He was Thursday's ramrod and did his job, but he had no respect for the man. He had objected hotly to this particular job and had been told to obey orders or turn in his saddle string. But it had been the closest he had ever come to telling Thursday and some



of his neighbors what he thought. Now he had no sympathy for their discomfort. *They figured like father like son*, he thought, *but when it comes to a daughter, I wonder?*

"Meaning?" Holly asked softly of Thursday.

"Since you brung it up," Thursday spat, "it's ten to one every critter with your brand come from a cow under another. We figure we've got a right to take the calf crop to straighten up the books."

"On what grounds?" Holly asked.

"On the basis of who likely lost the most to Jake Winther's whittlin'. Settin' next to him, I was the big loser."

"And how many calf crops?" Holly's voice was soft but scornful.

"All of 'em. We won't touch what Jake had branded, but we're claimin' the calves from here on." Thursday was grinning now, turned easy, for all his neighbors had agreed to the justice of this, and public opinion in the cow country would back him so strongly she would get no help by going to law.

Holly spoke in a voice that was deceptively softened. "And, without any more calves, I'll soon be out of a herd. Without any rustling or brand-blotching or any other crude touches on your part. I won't stand for it, Newt Thursday. Jake Winther stole a calf now and then, and admitted it before he died. I wrote it down in a book, what he took and who from, the way he told me. I aim to pay the debt, but I need my herd. You never lost what you're trying to make out. It don't justify this."

"We'll say as to that!" Thursday growled. "A calf rustler'd be a liar, and likely his girl would be another!"

Darcy straightened in the saddle, anger heating his cheeks. He was about to speak out when Holly's voice came like a shot, with all her harsh resentment in it again.

"From here on, forget I'm a girl. I'm

running Box W and putting it on its feet. I'll pay its debts. First, you're going to brand me a calf for each one of mine you've marked. Then I'm working my share of this roundup, mainly to see there's no more monkey business."

Thursday stared at her a moment, his face red and his neck corded. She had worried him, Darcy knew, with her frank admission of her father's guilt and obligation and her willingness to discharge it. If she threw in with the roundup, meeting Box W's responsibility in every way, Thursday's high-handed scheme would look less reasonable. Yet Darcy had never known a more acquisitive man, and Thursday had been flouted and embarrassed before his crew. There wasn't a chance he'd drop it.

Thought masked Thursday's eyes a moment, then he shrugged. "Well, working the roundup's your say. But you'll take my orders and carry your weight. Mebbe Darcy can use you on circle."

**D**ARCY shut his eyes. Grueling though it was, roundup was a lark to men who spent much of their lives in solitude. The atmosphere was rough, rambunctious, explosive at best. It was vulgar, profane, and brewed its fights with fists and even guns. Not only was it unsuited to a woman; a woman could raise hob through her mere presence. Thursday knew that. He wouldn't have countenanced it without a special reason.

He had given Holly a forbidding job for an attractive girl. He could have let her tally, even work the herd, for she was handy as a man with any of it, and at the corral she would have had large numbers about her. Riding circle she would have to fend far into the lonely range, alone or with one of these rough cowhands.

Holly had paled, but she had a six-gun holstered on her hip, which might have reassured her. She swung down, light and lithe as a boy, and unlashed her bed-



roll. A stamp iron fell from beneath it, which she recovered and tossed toward the closest fire. She carried the roll over to the pile by the chuckwagon. Men were grinning broadly now. Sudro, the dude drifter, looked like a cat ready to pounce. Thursday stared at the ground, scowling.

"I've said my say," Holly told him. "You've got my iron. See you use it on my calves. And see you replace what you've already tried to steal from me."

Thursday said nothing.

Holly mounted her horse and moved around the branding fires to fall in silently with the riders who were waiting to go out with Darcy. The ramrod nearly spoke his piece, but realized that it would cost him his job. From the looks of the faces about him, her only friend here was Darcy Lane, the man she hated. But her protests and efforts were futile, and the sooner she gave up, the better for her.

The circlers moved in a group to the next bunch ground, which was on Thursday's range. But there had been a lot of drift the winter before, so that a great deal of alien stock would be mixed in with Thursday's, as his would be found on other ranges. Darcy tolled off the riders, scattering them out for the wide gather, leaving Holly out of it.

"You don't have to protect me," she said hotly, when they were alone. "If you'd wanted to do that, you could have started a long way back."

"I couldn't help that, Miss Holly."

Her mouth was bitter. "Jake Winther was a calf rustler and confessed to it. But you might have taken him without killing him."

"I didn't know who it was. He wouldn't stop. I wasn't trying to kill him. It just happened that I did." Something in Darcy hurt for her, and in a gentler tone he said, "Miss Holly, I plumb admire your spunk. But you better give up and go home. Newt'll go ahead and find some way to hamstring you. Even if you won this

time, they won't let you make out here alone. It's dog-eat-dog country. There's a drifter in this outfit that I wouldn't want to know you live alone and where. His name's Sudro."

"What else can I do?"

"Sell the herd. Fast. Book count and range delivery. It's the only thing that'll stop Newt Thursday."

Holly's eyes narrowed. "Who in Heaven's name to?"

"Me. Right now. And take my note for it."

"And jump from pan to fire, Darcy Lane? What's my job? And let's get at it."

"You'll ride with me," Darcy said, his voice roughening. "And keep close enough so I can hear your gun."

Scouring the slopes and ravines and beating brush clumps and rock fields was hot, dusty and tedious work, requiring slow motion and infinite patience. Yet once a bunch was formed on an outer sector of the vast circle and started toward the central bunch ground, the movement snowballed, with the scattered, watching cattle flowing into it by instinct. Darcy Lane was mostly separated from Holly, who did her chores expertly, but he observed that she never drew too far away from him.

And he observed another thing. Singly and in small bunches, the turnouts from the branding corral made their way back to the range. No Box W cow was followed by a calf wearing the same brand. The markings were mostly NT, flank burn and ear slit, but twice he saw another brand. Newt Thursday was still administering his self-judged equity. Throughout the long, weary afternoon Darcy was never close enough to Holly to speak, but he knew she must be noticing it.

At last she rode in to him, her face set. "Darcy Lane, what if I take up your offer? You're Thursday's ramrod. Jobs



like that are hard to come by. Either you see something better for yourself, or you'll turn my herd over to him. Then tell me to try and collect on your note."

"That's for you to decide, Miss Holly," Darcy answered.

Her mouth loosened, then firmed. "He's going ahead with it, and I don't have the money or the reputation to beat him in court. Write out a contract and I'll sign it. Range count and delivery. That's all he needs to see. And it checks it to you to see he makes good on what they've misbranded."

"And the note?" Darcy asked.

"Your word is as good. Or as worthless."

Many a holding had changed hands on the back of an old envelope or even a piece of wood whittled flat. Darcy wrote out a crude contract of sale, head count and at market price, requiring him to hunt up the cattle, tally and move it where he wanted by himself. It likewise entitled him to claim everything reasonably under the brand as of that date, when the roundup had started.

"Another thing," Darcy said, when she had signed the instrument. "I'd like to lease your graze the same way. I'll need a place to move the stuff to as it's cut out."

Holly swallowed. "Might as well go the whole hog. But I'm sticking to you like a cocklebur till it's settled."

Darcy cursed himself, silently and bitterly, as they rode in with the afternoon's gather. He was throwing up a job he had worked years to gain, and might never find another. It was not out of responsibility to Holly Winther because he had killed her father. She had reached him with her steady courage and more—with her clean and compelling womanhood.

Darcy wasted no time once the new bunch was penned in the branding corral. Dismounting before Newt Thursday, he said, "Newt, a couple of hours ago I quit you and joined this shebang as an owner.

Here's why." He held forth the paper he pulled lazily from his shirt pocket.

Thursday read it, his eyes widening, and little by little his tightening face turned purple.

"I reckon you kept a tally on what Box W calves you stole," Darcy added, his voice flat but insistent. "First thing tomorrow, we'll brand replacements. And you'll brand everything proper from here on out."

Thursday didn't look at him. He spat close to Darcy's boots, then lifted his voice from the side of his mouth, "Sudro, as of now you're my new ramrod. You'll take out the circle crew, and don't forget Darcy Lane and his new flame're subject to your orders."

Darcy frowned, taken back by the swiftness, the deadly portent. Sudro had drifted in alone. He was young, swarthy and oily-skinned. His Fancy Dan clothes and rough hand with a horse had damned him forever in Darcy's eyes. He had proved fast at marking cattle, seeming to take pleasure in the bloody job, and Thursday had assigned him to the branding fires.

Sudro rose from his work, grinning, turning a look at Holly. "Right," he said softly. "Don't worry. I won't forget that for a minute."

Thursday could have but one motive in placing a drifter in such a position, over the heads of the neighborhood ranchers and Thursday's own crew. Sudro sensed that, too, and something heated his features. Realizing he would be demoted summarily, once Thursday's use of him was made, the others took it with shocked grins that were both amused and embarrassed.

Darcy considered asking Holly to quit the roundup, but decided against it. She didn't trust him. She would be no safer home alone, after this, even less safe. The development had electrified the cow camp, bringing up a mood in the men that verged on an explosion.



HOLLY ate her supper with the crew, afterward tossing her plate into the wreck pan with a man's abrupt dismissal. The work had made her dusty and disheveled, which she did nothing about, trying her utmost to minimize her presence. At twilight she took her blankets and climbed into the chuckwagon to sleep.

With her out of earshot, Darcy said to Sudro, but in Thursday's presence, "I've got one thing to add. I'll kill any man who lays a hand on her."

The drifter took it with a heated grin. "You mean you'd try, Lane. You mean you'd make your try." He flung an intimate look at Thursday, whose face was impassive. The roundup boss walked over to get his bedding.

After breakfast the next morning, Thursday came up to Darcy with a scowl. "You'll take Sudro's place at Tex's and Curly's fire, Lane." He swung around to Sudro, who was mounted and waiting with the circle crew, Holly among them, her face set and pale. "Ride out."

Something climbed Darcy's spine as he watched Holly's small, receding figure when the crew swept out. Yet he accepted Thursday's orders, which were legitimate enough, and went to the branding fires.

He stood it until mid-morning, when he shoved up in brusk rebellion and strode toward Thursday. He knew now that no amount of livestock or grazing lands could be as important as Holly herself, no matter what she thought of him. To Thursday he said, "You sent that drifter out with license to do anything that comes into his low mind. She beat you. What good can it do you to spite her?"

"Depends on you, Darcy," Thursday said readily. "You got a sale contract from her. Sign it over, and I'll run Sudro outta the country. Sign it over, and I'll pay her for what she's already got under her brand. But for nothing else. When you've sweat enough, you'll be ready and everybody'll

be happy again, except mebbe that little—" "Ready now, Newt," Darcy said, and he swung.

The hard-driven fist caught the edge of Thursday's jaw, arching the man's back and dropping him neatly. Thursday blinked his eyes in stunned surprise, shoving up on his arms and pulling his thick legs under him. The man was armed, and black fury stood in his eyes. He seemed to seek a decision for an instant, then shoved up and forward.

Darcy drew out the rush, knowing he had broken the sternest law of roundup. Thursday's meaty, enraged fists hurt when they landed. The puncher stood against it, broke through. He put a left into Thursday's belly that slacked the man's jaw, which a swift, crossing right snapped shut. He followed it up, precise in his anger. The roundup boss staggered back, tried to make another stand, then went down abruptly and lay still.

Darcy swung around. Work had halted. His eyes searched through the NT crew while he gasped, "Anybody else want a piece of it?"

The puncher called Texas gave him a slow grin. "Not me, Darcy. He's sure been runnin' it into the ground." No one else said anything, and none of them looked particularly outraged.

Darcy's gun still rode its holster. He touched it to be certain, then strode out to the saddle band and caught his horse. He rode back past the branding corral. Thursday was on his feet now, braced against the pole gate.

Darcy swung down and stood before the man. "You asked for it, Newt. Make your play or forget it for keeps. And I'll do likewise. It's your say."

Newt Thursday worked his mouth as if bitterness filled it. He hung for a terrible moment in indecision painful to see. Then he shrugged and looked away.

Darcy Lane was no gunman, no bully-boy buckaroo. He had never gone against



a man with a weapon, nor felt the wish. He was weighing the drifter Sudro, as he rode out across the range, and feeling a worrisome tension building between his shoulders. Some of the breed were plain showoff bluffs, others deadly as sidewinders. He wasn't sure about Sudro, but there were certain earmarks of the latter kind. The man was quiet, with only his manner advertising his nature, and that was bad. He was never ostentatious about the gun he wore.

When he came to what would likely be the next bunch ground, Darcy saw in the far distance the first converging cattle. He had no inkling as to the sector Sudro had chosen to work himself, and waited in roweling impatience for the first grumbling steers to come in through the dust. The two riders hazing them brought up their horses in curious surprise, but, beyond tipped nods, offered Darcy nothing.

"Which way did Sudro head?" Darcy asked mildly.

A tall puncher swept a hand toward the slow rise to the west, at the distant edge of which thin juniper stood below broken rimrock. "That way. Sudro and the girl. Me, I was glad she had a gun on her. It's got too thick for my appetite."

Darcy whirled his mount toward the slope. No moving cattle were visible on the long sweep ahead of him, and no tell-tale dust rose beyond the horizon. It was desert plateau, good only for spring grazing, and hot in the morning sun. The merest breeze ruffled the green sage and *chemiso*, idling down to him, and once he thought he heard a shot in the far distance. He told himself it was an overwrought imagination, but he hurried his horse.

He was half up the sweep when the first cattle broke out of a crack in the rim, fingering out onto the slope. Their numbers swelled, disclosing it was the main gather from Sudro's sector. Darcy reached the rim and paused there while more animals poured forth. A great dust

cloud rolled above them, and began to thin as they tapered off. Then the last of them were out of the notch, with no riders following.

Darcy put his horse forward, climbing patiently. The dust was clearing away when he came onto the mesa, but he could see no one. He looked at it detachedly, making it a problem to maneuver. Sudro had figured he had a plain license from the roundup boss to work his will with Holly Winther. But she had a gun, a man's skilled hand with everything she undertook, and a will of her own. He would try to trick and surprise her, and Darcy remembered the real or imagined shot.

At last he saw a single horseman come up from a crevice that had been ironed out in the sweeping flat. It was a long moment before he was sure the horse was Sudro's. Darcy moved forward.

He saw caution enter the man in the distance, but the horse came steadily on. It was sweating, too hard ridden. Sudro had his elbows close to his sides, and his body was taut. Darcy pulled down his horse presently, waiting. Sudro stopped fifty feet from him, and the faint amusement on his features told Darcy the things about him that had been undecided. The man had swung his horse on the off quarter, knowing what he had to meet.

"Howdy, Lane," Sudro said, his voice edged but controlled.

"Where's the lady?"

Sudro swept a hand over his shoulder. "Back yonder. Whyn't you see if you can locate her?"

"I aim to. When we're done, Sudro. I told you last night what I'd do. Get set."

**S**UDRO answered with motion. He wore no gloves, and a brown hand spread and struck downward. Darcy Lane went cold, but his own hand was going. His gun cleared, eared in the same movement, and he unconsciously kneed his



horse as he fired. He felt something slam against his shoulder as his horse bolted. A darkening wave of cold climbed his body, and he nearly fell from the saddle. He grabbed the horn, shutting his eyes hard to clear his vision. He opened them in detached surprise, for Sudro's saddle was empty.

Darcy swung down, his left side without feeling. Sudro's horse was running, but at the place where it had started, the man lay on the sun-hardened earth, blood still pumping from his neck, on which the swarthy head canted grotesquely. Darcy gave him only a second's inspection, then worked himself back into the saddle and started on, looking for Holly Winther.

He still hadn't found her when twilight rolled in, many hours later, though time and again he came upon horse tracks where the rider had worked with the cattle. His whole left side was a fury of pain.

He rode patiently toward camp, saving himself, for shock still weakened him. It was full night when he sighted the distant fire at the cow camp, the cookfire now, and he could see shapes moving now and then before it. He had some hope

that Holly might have come in, but it was dashed when a score of cowhands stared at his bare, bloody and bandaged upper body in uneasy curiosity.

Darcy swung down, having to keep a hand on the saddle to support himself. Newt Thursday was seated cross-legged to his right, his back braced against the corral fence. His gaze flickered on Darcy, then away. Nearly every rider in the outfit swung his head to stare at the man.

"Sudro's dead," Darcy said thickly. "I couldn't find Holly Winther."

There was a moment of dead silence. There was in these men a deep, instinctive chivalry that realities, with their impacts, could bring forth strongly. It was up in this crew now.

The puncher, Tex, Thursday's own rider, shoved to his feet and stared at the man. "To my mind, Thursday, it's your doing. With us fools for lettin' it get so far without runnin' your man off."

Thursday climbed up then. He was trying to maintain his stern mien, but fear broke through. "I never figured it would go so far," he said. "Or that you boys'd let the coyote have his chance at her. You know how things stood. We were only

In downtown saloons, ranch bunkhouses and distant line-camps, the grim word was whispered: "Bill Patterson an' Jay Cross are goin' to shoot out their grudge. An' when they do—God help Bear Paw Valley!"

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trying to right the wrong her pappy done."

"Shut up, Thursday," Tex said mildly. "You better saddle and get, and make whatever disposition you can of your spread from a safe distance."

Thursday looked about for help and failed to find it. Icy eyes gave him their full stare. There were men, in such a position, who would have relished a fate as easy as Sudro's. Thursday knew it so plainly that Darcy Lane felt a moment's pity. Without a word Thursday got his bedroll and disappeared toward the saddle band. The camp was without sound when, a little later, his horse moved out.

"Boys," said Tex, "moonlight or not, let's scatter and not come back till we've found her."

It was Darcy, lingering behind for unwanted but needed food, who thought of Holly's ranchhouse, far down in the bottoms, and got to wondering if she could have returned there. In a fresh shirt and braced with a swallow of whisky the cook gave him, Darcy saddled a fresh horse from the night band and started out.

It was a long ride, and weariness plagued him. The beaten shack, standing among other structures just as decrepit, was dark when at last he came upon it.

Halting his horse, he called, "Holly!

There was a moment of silence, then Holly's uncertain voice answered, "Let me hear your voice again."

"Are you all right, Holly?"

Again there was silence, then she said, "Come in, Darcy Lane, and slow. Keep out of the shadows so I can see you." The intense strain of the past hours was freighted in her voice.

Darcy rode up, obeying her orders. Holly stood on the small porch that formed a back entrance at the side of the house. Through the darkness he saw the rifle she kept leveled at him. She was in a dress now, or a nightgown, and her hair was down her back.

At last she lowered the weapon and turned. "Come in, Darcy," she said wearily.

He followed her inside, waiting while she lighted a lamp. They were in the kitchen, and it was pin-neat, still fragrant from the supper she must have cooked herself.

"You don't need to be scared any more," Darcy told her. "Sudro's dead. The boys turned, finally, and give Thursday his walking papers." He pulled the sale contract from his pocket and handed it to her. "You're back in business and better than you started."

Holly disregarded the paper, her eyes steady on Darcy's. "Don't they despise me more than ever now? Don't you?"

"Miss Holly, I'd count it a favor if you'd let me be your friend. If you'd let me run your cattle for you until—well, maybe—" He couldn't get any further.

But Holly was smiling. "I got away from him, Darcy. He tried a dozen times to catch me unawares. Finally turned open and rough, when we were ready to come in. I outran him, and he tried to drop my horse but missed. And I lost him in the canyons because I knew them better."

"I'll be blamed!" Darcy breathed. "The cuss fought it out with me rather than admit it and get hisself laughed at."

"So you killed him."

"I reckon. Does that make me all the more a killer to you?"

She shook her head. "No, Darcy. And I've got over feeling like I did about Jake Winther. He was no good and always knew it, and so did I. But he was my friend. If I've got another, we can wipe that off the books." Her eyes were bright and soft. "And you tell me I've got dozens."

"And help, if you'll let me."

"I reckon you can. Until—well, maybe—" Her eyes were laughing then, but with him. Darcy Lane met them with a smile.



*A man named East wrote a strange gunsmoke  
finish to the West's greatest story!*

# Devil From Tascosa

By HARRY VAN DEMARK



East pushed the door open and moved in. . . .

**T**HE Texas Ranger situation became acute in 1884. There were not enough members of that law enforcement body to go around.

During the same year another acute situation developed among the big ranchers of the Canadian River country in the

Panhandle. Cowboys were slapping their own irons on unbranded cattle that had strayed from the big herds. Other cowboys were engaged in out and out rustling.

There was a meeting of the big ranchers in Tascosa, where law enforcement was at a low ebb. They decided to send for Pat



Garrett, who had helped rid the Tascosa section of outlaws on a previous occasion. Garrett was free, having been succeeded as sheriff of Lincoln County, New Mexico, by John William Poe.

Garrett, still unpopular with friends and sympathizers of Billy the Kid, was glad to get away. He agreed to work a year for the ranchers if they would have him appointed a captain of Texas Rangers and furnish enough men to do the job.

The ranchers appealed to Governor Jim Hogg of Texas, explaining their difficulties. Hogg appointed Garrett to the Ranger force and said he could hire as many men as he needed provided there was no expense to the state. The ranchers were glad to pay the wages.

Garrett arrived in the Panhandle in the spring of 1884, bringing his brother-in-law, Barney Mason, and a man named George Jones. He began the organization of a company of Rangers with headquarters on the LS Ranch. He chose Albert E. Perry, who had worked as a cattle detective, as first sergeant.

His company organized and his men commissioned, Garrett insisted that provision be made for legal papers, search warrants and warrants of arrest. The Rangers could check the cattle roundups, but legal action would be necessary before he could arrest and disarm offenders.

Again the cattlemen appealed to Governor Hogg. Would he issue a proclamation making it illegal for citizens to wear or carry firearms? There was an immediate protest from cowboys who insisted on carrying Winchesters on their saddles. So a compromise was effected. The proclamation issued by the governor on April 17, 1884, referred only to the six-shooter.

Cowboys continued to protest at the disarming order, but Garrett's Rangers read the proclamation and told them it must be obeyed. Their only recourse was to take the matter up with attorneys and the courts in Tascosa.

Many cowboys secured arm holsters and scabbards and carried their weapons concealed instead of in their belts.

Trouble was not long in coming. W. M. D. Lee, one of the partners in the Lee-Scott Company, owners of the LE and LS brands, saw the need for a new jail in Tascosa, so he and Lee loaned Oldham County \$25,000 with which to build it. Of course the next move was a grand jury. In the fall of 1884 it passed 159 bills, most of them for theft of one kind or another. These indictments were the papers which Pat Garrett had been waiting for.

It was inevitable that opposition to the Rangers would manifest itself. The cowboys, small cattlemen and townspeople took sides. Tom Harris and Jess Jenkins were leaders of those opposed to the big ranchers and the Rangers. Even some cowboys working on the big ranches were not in favor of bringing the Rangers into the country.

Garrett found many of his old friends arrayed against him. Lee and Scott got credit for the situation, and the Rangers were frequently referred to as LS men.

Judge J. E. McAllister, with the support of the county commissioners, declared certain brands to be "outlawed" or "maverick" brands, and Garrett and his men were ordered to round up the stray or maverick cattle. Those wearing outlaw brands were to be considered the property of the county. So Garrett and his Rangers rounded up the strays and strictly enforced the law against wearing six-shooters.

One of the brands declared maverick by Oldham County was the Tabletop, owned by Bill Gatlin and Wade Woods, who hired an attorney named Wallace to look after their affairs.

Wallace, known as the "little man's" lawyer because the big companies would not hire him, selected a man named Green Reagan to follow the roundup and take



care of Tabletop cattle. Kid Dobbs, employed by the LS as a wagon boss, and also a member of Garrett's forces, got letters from the court authorizing him to cut out and hold all Tabletop cattle.

Wallace filed suit against Oldham County for \$25,000 damages, threatened criminal action against the judge and commissioners. The big cattlemen compromised with Wallace for \$800. Two cowboys stole the cattle from the county, which never realized anything but trouble.

WITH all this dissatisfaction and unrest, serious trouble was inevitable. Some Tascosa men had a habit of slipping LS horses out of the pasture to hunt mavericks with. Most of these men were hangers-on in Lower Tascosa. A Mexican, Jermo Martinez, who had been placed in charge of the LS horses, caught some of the maverickers in the act of turning the horses back.

Martinez sought out Gene Watkins and others involved, told them if they took any more horses he would report them to headquarters. His threat stopped them for a short time, but one night Watkins and another cowboy took two LS horses and rode them until the animals were exhausted. Martinez warned Watkins for the last time. A bitter quarrel ensued, but friends prevented a fight.

Some hours later, when Watkins was tending bar in Jess Jenkins' saloon and gambling hall, Martinez walked into the place, and Watkins renewed the quarrel. Martinez went for his gun, but Watkins drew and fired first. Powder burns blinded the Mexican, but nevertheless his shot killed Watkins. Then someone killed Martinez.

The lights were snuffed out by the explosions. Then friends of Watkins went outside and killed Martinez' drunken brother while he was lying in a stupor in the street.

A witness to the murder in the saloon

was an Indian named Pisquah. Apparently Watkins' friends did not want any eye-witnesses. A few nights later they got the Indian drunk and filled his body full of lead as he lay in the street.

Kid Dobbs voiced the belief that the same group of men "voted" the death of John Brophy, a deputy brand inspector, some time later. Brophy paid a visit to the ranch of Tom Harris, brother-in-law of Jess Jenkins, the saloonkeeper, to inspect some hides.

Harris had caused a lot of trouble as leader in a cowboy strike which involved the big ranches. Brophy couldn't find Harris so he impatiently threw the hides on the corral fence and examined them. He found no irregularities, but the visit caused bad blood between the two men.

Some days later Brophy attended a dance in Liberty. A man approached him, said he wanted to see him outside. The brand inspector's suspicions were immediately aroused. He followed the man outside, saw him draw his gun. Brophy covered him from the rear, told him not to move. Then Tom Harris suddenly appeared out of the darkness, grabbed both guns, and cautioned the men against violence. Brophy waited for the other man to agree, but he refused, whereupon Harris said, "Well, if that's the way you fellows feel about it, I'll turn your guns loose and let you shoot it out."

The other man shot at Brophy as he stepped back. The bullet ricocheted off a heavy watch case, but the force of the shot knocked him down. From his position on the ground Brophy fired and killed his opponent.

Then as Brophy arose and turned to seek the protection of the dance floor, out of the shadows came a fusillade of shots. One of the bullets struck him in the back, giving him a wound from which he later died.

One of the most dangerous assignments Garrett and his Rangers had at Tascosa



was the chase after Bill Gatlin, who was charged with cattle theft. Garrett also had warrants for others, including Charley Thompson and Wade Woods.

Garrett and Sheriff Jim East of Oldham County worked well together. They agreed they would have to await a heavy storm to catch the wanted men in their homes. Later a terrific snowstorm, backed by a howling wind, provided the opportunity.

Kid Dobbs led the party because of his knowledge of the country. It was believed that Gatlin and the others were "holed up" in an old rock house at Rock Springs.

It was just before daybreak when the officers rode into the icy Canadian.

The group rode up the river bed at a rapid pace. When they were within a few hundreds yards of the house, Garrett said, "Get out your guns, boys. This is it!"

Prepared for instant action, they rode into the corral. Dobbs then advised that they get north of the house, as there were no openings on that side, making gunfire impossible from that direction.

The men scattered to the north. About this time Dobbs saw Bob Bassett, whom he knew, gathering an armload of wood. Bassett heard Dobbs, looked up, and when he saw the officers he dropped the wood and streaked for the house. Dobbs heard him yell, "Pat Garrett's here with his Rangers!"

To their surprise, Tom Harris stepped out of the house to ask if the Rangers were after him again. Garrett said he had no papers for Harris, but he wanted Wade Woods, Charley Thompson and Billy Gatlin.

Harris said, "Woods isn't here—but the other men are."

"All right. Tell them to come on out with their hands in the air."

Thompson and eight other men obeyed the order, but Gatlin refused. Thompson

was coatless. It was very cold and he asked permission to go back and get his coat.

Sheriff East said, "Get it, but come right back out."

Thompson was no sooner inside, however, than he opened the door slightly to tell East that he was going to stick with Gatlin. East pleaded with him, telling him it was sure death that way, whereas if he surrendered he might beat the cow theft charge against him. East's pleadings were so effective that Thompson began crying, walked out and surrendered.

The rock house had been constructed on the side of a hill and the back part of the lean-to roof was only a few feet off the ground. Garrett tried to get Gatlin to surrender—argued until his patience was exhausted.

After all, he had been sent there to do a job. So he told two of his men to start yanking off the roof poles. This had the proper effect. Gatlin began yelling for Sheriff East.

"Come in and talk to me for five minutes, Jim. At the end of that time, one or the other of us'll die!"

East pushed the door open and moved in with his Winchester pointed at Gatlin's stomach.

Gatlin was standing, a gun in each hand, his elbows well back against his belly. Both guns were pointed at Jim East.

East said, "All right Bill—what's on your mind?"

"I want you to promise if I surrender that you won't let me suffer at the hands of a mob."

"I promise," said East—and Gatlin handed over his guns.

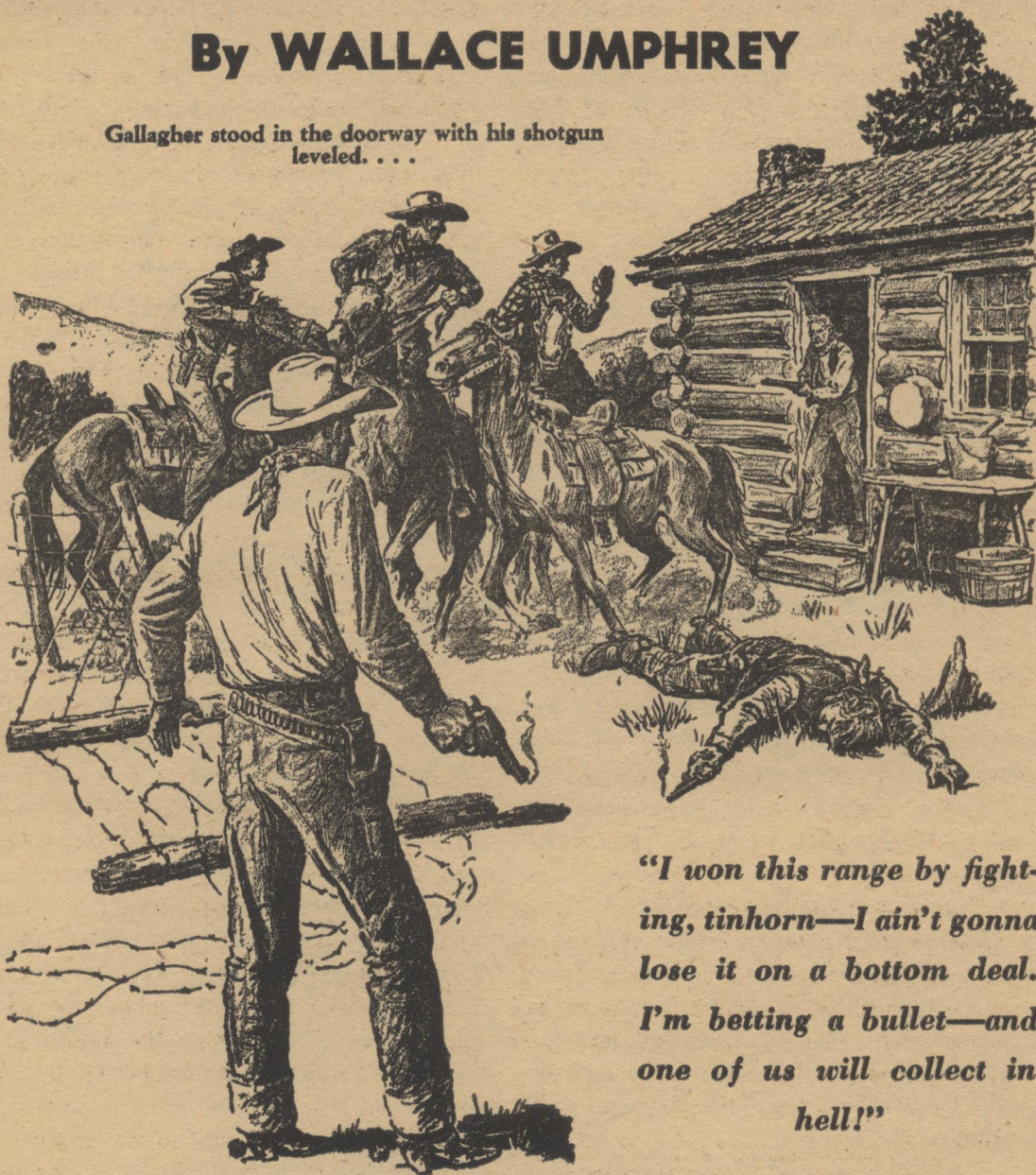
That was the last big case handled by Pat Garrett and his Rangers. There were not many convictions on grand jury charges, but most of the tougher element left the Tascosa country rather than take a chance with the law.



# DEAD MAN'S DEAL

By WALLACE UMPHREY

Gallagher stood in the doorway with his shotgun leveled. . . .



*"I won this range by fighting, tinhorn—I ain't gonna lose it on a bottom deal. I'm betting a bullet—and one of us will collect in hell!"*

**M**ID-MORNING sunlight slanted through the folded-back doors of Killian's Paradise Saloon. The sunlight stopped short of the rear wall, against which Tracy Thorn's chair was set. Here the shadows were relieved only by Thorn's white shirtfront and the darker hue of his hands and face. It was said of Tracy Thorn that he liked the shadows.

A tall, dark, soft-spoken man with a streak of premature silver in his hair, Tracy Thorn was dealing a game of solitaire on the table in front of him. His mind was elsewhere, but it did not slow down the speed of his supple fingers.

Harry Killian said, "Eaten yet, Tracy?"

Tracy Thorn, about to turn a card, looked up.



"I've had breakfast, Harry," he said. "Anne told me you hadn't been in yet."

"Anne," Killian said. He was a big, middle-aged man with a pleasant face. "The only decent cook in Red Rock. The man who gets her will sure be lucky."

Thorn made no reply.

Harry Killian grinned. "How's the ranch these days?"

"Fine," Thorn said seriously. "Tim Gallagher tells me we'll ship some beef this year."

Killian laughed deeply. It was a joke between them. Tracy Thorn's Jinglebit tallied an even dozen cows.

"You're okay, Tracy," Harry Killian said. "You deal from an honest deck. That's all I ask of any man."

Tracy Thorn watched Killian step outside and cross the dusty street. Except for the bartender and a solitary drinker, the saloon was deserted at this hour. The solitary drinker had been in town three days, a small, gray man with a wrinkled, leathery face. His name was Seifert.

Thorn turned back to his game of solitaire, but now his interest was gone. With a gesture that was almost savage in its abruptness he stacked the cards.

Restlessness possessed him. Maybe it was due to mention of Anne Corum, and maybe it was due to mention of Jinglebit. And maybe it was due to the aimless pattern of his own life.

Seifert turned from the bar and said, "How about a drink?"

"No," Thorn said. "No thanks."

Seifert came over to Thorn's table.

"That damned Nesbitt!" he said sourly. "I drove that herd all the way up from Texas—about five hundred of 'em. Nesbitt ordered 'em. Now he's tryin' to shave the price."

"Stand pat," Thorn said. "I know Nesbitt. He always wants everything for nothing. Stand pat and he'll meet your price."

"What if he don't?" The Texas man

scowled. "I can't hire a crew and drive them cows all the way back home. And I'll be damned if I'll let Nesbitt rook me!"

"It's your problem," Thorn said.

Harry Killian came back, a toothpick in his mouth. Thorn stood up and said, "I'll be back later, Harry."

"Sure," Killian said thoughtfully.

"Anne just made a fresh pot of coffee."

Thorn shook his head. "I'm riding out to Jinglebit. I'll see if Jim Gallagher is earning his pay."

"Something on your mind, Tracy?"

"Nothing a ride in the sun won't cure."

"Wish I were younger," Killian said. "I'd speak out for Anne myself."

For a moment Tracy Thorn stood on the high board walk in front of the Paradise, letting his eyes get accustomed to the sunlight. Red Rock looked as if it had been laid out by a drunken man riding a blind horse on a dark night. The town lacked the careful planning of Thorn's own life. Tracy Thorn frowned. He liked the town—and yet he was faced with a growing distaste for his own existence.

A thin, slope-shouldered man passed him without speaking and entered the Paradise. Thorn stared after him. What was eating Jim Blaney, anyway? The Box B owner had often played poker at Thorn's table. Now he'd acted as if he hadn't even seen Thorn standing there.

Tracy Thorn shook his head. It was too early for a man to have so much on his mind.

The bawling of cattle in the pens behind the town lifted mournfully on the quiet air. Seifert's cattle. The cattle that Con Nesbitt had ordered and then refused to take except at a lower price.

Thorn took a few steps toward the livery barn, then changed his mind. Across the street a sign said: ANNIE'S EATS. Thorn stepped down into the dust.

Anne Corum was sitting at the end of the long wooden counter having a cup of coffee. The breakfast rush was over now



and the cafe was empty. A tall, dark, slender girl with glowing skin, she wore a starched white dress under a gingham apron.

She looked up at Thorn, then without a word she went around the end of the counter and poured a cup of coffee. Thorn sat down on the stool beside her. The coffee in the thick mug was hot and good.

"Troubles, Tracy?" she asked suddenly. "You were the first customer this morning. Usually you don't stir till noon."

"Couldn't sleep," Thorn said. "Maybe I don't get enough exercise. I'm riding out to Jinglebit."

Anne said quietly, "You always used to talk about the ranch you were going to own sometime."

Tracy Thorn felt his cheeks burn. "Jinglebit isn't much of a spread, is it?"

"You could make something of it."

"No," Thorn said.

"Are you happy?" Anne asked.

"I'm not unhappy," Thorn said.

Anne smiled. "That's not the same thing."

Boots sounded on the floor and Thorn looked up. Con Nesbitt sagged onto a stool. He was a big, hard, arrogant man with a harsh voice and cold eyes. He owned Lazy N, the biggest ranch in the Valley. Now his eyes were bloodshot.

"Coffee," he croaked. "Black."

He sucked up the coffee noisily. He shuddered. Then with an exaggerated air of suffering he turned to Thorn.

"It ain't worth it, Tracy," he said. "Last night I tried to drink that Seifert jasper under the table, so's he'd sell them damn cows to me. For a little gent he can drink a lot. Must have a hollow leg or something."

"Seifert tells me you're trying to beat down his price," Tracy Thorn said.

Con Nesbitt winked. "I'll get him yet. He can't afford to drive that herd clear back to Texas."

"Texans can be mighty stubborn."

"Stubborn?" Nesbitt laughed, and then held his head. "That's my middle name. I got him over a barrel."

Jim Blaney came inside in a rush. Again he failed to even acknowledge Thorn's presence. He stopped directly behind Nesbitt's stool. His face was flushed, his eyes hot and angry.

"I've been lookin' all over town for you, Nesbitt," he said thickly. "I want to talk."

CON NESBITT turned slowly. He lounged back against the counter, elbows hooked over the edge. A gun sagged in a holster around his hips. All banter was gone from him now.

"What's on your mind?" he asked coldly.

"This," Blaney said. "I've had all I can take from your Lazy N. You're crowdin' us all out—you and your damned drift fences! That's still free range, and you've got no call to hog it all. I ain't got enough grass left to feed a rabbit!"

Nesbitt shrugged.

"There used to be enough graze for all," Blaney muttered. "I'm tellin' you, now. Take down them fences."

"And if I don't?"

Blaney's hand shot out and clamped on Nesbitt's shoulder. He said hotly, "Then we'll rip 'em down!"

Con Nesbitt moved like a coiled spring, swiftly for a big man. He slapped away Blaney's hand. His fist rocked Blaney. He said, "I don't like a man touchin' me, Blaney."

Jim Blaney tried to defend himself. Nesbitt drove him back. Blaney was no match for the bigger man. He stumbled and went down. Nesbitt stood over him.

"You rip down them fences," he said savagely, "and you know what happens."

Blaney rocked to his feet. "Maybe it's come to that."



Nesbitt's fist lashed out again. Fury was in every movement of his big body. He drove Blaney back against the wall, where he began hammering him unmercifully. Blaney put his hands up over his face.

Tracy Thorn moved then. He got down off the stool and grasped Nesbitt's arm and swung him around. His arms encircled Nesbitt's chest, pinning the big man's arms against his sides. Blaney slid away toward the door.

Nesbitt struggled, but Thorn held him powerless to move. Tracy Thorn felt some of Nesbitt's anger melt away.

From the doorway Jim Blaney called out, "Next time, Nesbitt, I'm packin' a gun." Then he staggered outside.

Con Nesbitt was quiet now, and Thorn released him. Nesbitt turned slowly.

"Don't get in my way again, Tracy," he said coldly. "I like you. Get in my way and I'll kill you."

Thorn watched Nesbitt depart. There was no anger inside Tracy Thorn. Just the emptiness that had gripped him for a long time now.

"Nesbitt will ruin the valley," Anne said. "He'll build his empire and there will be nothing decent left."

Tracy Thorn shrugged. "See you later, Anne."

"Yes," she said. "Be sure to let me know all about Jinglebit."

There had been a sardonic note in her voice, and the weight of it pressed on Tracy Thorn's mind as he rode into the hills. He had known Anne Corum for a long time. Her father had been a gambler and at nineteen, after his death, she had been banking roulette. She had worked the gambling halls from Abilene to Cheyenne.

And, somehow, Tracy Thorn had always found himself near her. He told himself he wasn't following her, but he knew it was a lie. Being with her was all that seemed to count in life. Long ago

they had made plans which never seemed to work out. He was sure now that she would never marry him. He had even stopped asking her, deriving what small pleasure he could from just being near her.

Perhaps he expected their relationship to remain unchanged down the long years. He didn't know, because he never thought about it.

And then Anne had quit cold.

"I'm through running," she had said. "I'm going to start growing roots. I'll stay here in Red Rock till I die. I'm opening a cafe."

Tracy Thorn had been appalled. "What?"

"I'm owner, cook and waitress, Tracy. Maybe you can't quite understand. My life's got to have some point to it."

Now Tracy Thorn rode easily toward Jinglebit. He rode like a man who was used to the saddle, even though he hadn't forked his sleek black mare for the last ten days. The sun was hot and he could feel sweat trickling down his back. It felt good. Perhaps the sun would burn some of the restlessness out of him.

He followed the Lazy N drift fence, which now cut off about two thirds of the valley's graze. In the time he had been in Red Rock, Tracy Thorn had seen Nesbitt bite off chunk after chunk of the rich grass. It was still free range—and it was possible for a man like Con Nesbitt to usurp and hold it by strength alone.

Tracy Thorn came upon Jinglebit suddenly. Momentarily he reined in, wondering why he had bought the ranch. The ranch house was still firm and solid, but the outbuildings were beginning to sag. Jinglebit had been the first ranch to feel the power of Con Nesbitt's arrogance.

Thorn had bought it from the bank in Red Rock. All he had bought were the homestead rights. He should have got free graze along with it—but a Lazy N drift fence ran straight across the valley



a few hundred yards away, cutting it off.

Why had he bought it? Thorn shook his head. It was one of the few things he had ever done on the spur of the moment, without conscious thought.

Smoke was curling from the stone chimney of the ranch house when Thorn dismounted. The slab door opened to his knock. Old Tim Gallagher greeted him.

"Thought maybe you up and died," Gallagher cackled. "Ain't seen you for ten days."

"How's the herd?" Thorn asked.

Gallagher looked glum. "Our damned range is overstocked," he growled. "Think we oughta cut down to eleven cows."

Tracy Thorn smiled mechanically, feeling strange undercurrents in the old man's words. Something steamed and bubbled on the kitchen stove. Thorn investigated. He turned and said, "I'll have a bit of that mulligan with you."

They ate in silence. Tim Gallagher had sparse white hair and faded blue eyes, and his hands were crippled by arthritis. Thorn had acquired him along with the ranch.

"What's new in town?" Gallagher asked.

"There may be trouble," Thorn said. "Nesbitt's pushing everyone too hard."

The old man looked eager. "Who?"

"Jim Blaney. His back's against the wall."

"Anybody else siding him?"

"No," Tracy Thorn said.

The eager look faded from Tim Gallagher's eyes. "Blaney can't do it alone," he muttered. "It's gonna take a better man than him."

Thorn made no reply.

"I been here a long time," the old man said softly. "There was a time when half a dozen nice ranches operated around here. It was peaceful and quiet, and everybody let his neighbor alone. Then Con Nesbitt moved in."

The old man sighed. "I remember

when Jinglebit ran nigh onto fifteen hundred head. Now we run a dozen cows—and it's too damn many! Before I die I'd like to see them old times back again."

Trace Thorn smiled stiffly. "You've got a lot of years to go. Maybe you'll see times like that again."

"I don't kid myself no more," Tim Gallagher said. "When you walked into the bank that day and plunked down the money for Jinglebit, I kind of had high hopes. Hope dies kind of hard in an old man, but I reckon it's plumb gone now."

THORN finished his mulligan and slowly sipped his coffee. He didn't look at old Tim Gallagher. Tracy Thorn told himself that it wasn't his fault the old man's hopes had been raised. "Why don't you help Jim Blaney?" the old man suddenly asked.

Tracy Thorn laughed grimly. "I'm not crazy. Nesbitt has half a dozen guns working for him."

"Maybe you *are* crazy," Tim Gallagher said. "Yep, crazy as a loon!"

Anger touched Tracy Thorn. "Careful what you say, Tim."

"I don't have to be careful," Gallagher cackled. "An old man can say what he pleases, on account of nobody dares hit him back!" He grew serious again. "I reckon you must be crazy on account of you let that Anne Corum set down there in Red Rock eatin' her heart out while you don't do nothin' about it."

"Shut up," Thorn said.

"You know what I'd do?" the old man asked. "I'd go right down and get that Anne Corum. I wouldn't say a damned word. I'd just walk in and pick her up off the floor and swing her aboard my hoss and head for the nearest preacher."

Pushing back his chair, Thorn stood up. His restlessness was stronger now than ever. Old Tim Gallagher hobbled after him to the door.

"Don't go away mad," the old man



said softly. "I want to thank you for lettin' me stay on here. For lettin' me go on kind of pretendin' I'm still somebody. Gettin' old is kinda hard, sometimes."

Tracy Thorn walked slowly along Red Rock's main street. He left his horse at the livery barn, making sure first that the hostler treated his horse right. There was a bitter taste in his mouth.

He hesitated in front of the Palace, then crossed to Annie's Eats. In front of the cafe he paused and turned. Red Rock drowsed under the hot mid-afternoon sun.

Seifert, the Texas man, came out of the Palace and trudged toward the hotel. His eyes were lowered and he didn't glance across at Thorn. Tracy Thorn turned and went into the cafe.

A couple of cowboys were sitting at the counter chinning with Anne Corum. Both had range dust thick on their faded clothing. Thorn found himself thinking they were probably top hands. He sat down and Anne moved toward him. The two cowboys went out. Tracy turned to stare after them. Both crossed the street and went into the Palace.

"They were asking about jobs," Anne said.

Thorn lifted a dark brow. "Oh?"

"I told 'em Lazy N might take on some new hands," Anne said. "I told 'em the layout. They didn't look too thrilled."

"I reckon. Apple pie, please."

"How'd you find Jinglebit?" Anne asked.

Thorn lifted his lips in a faint grimace. "Tim says our range is overcrowded."

Anne didn't smile. Her gaze was direct. It disconcerted Tracy Thorn. He looked down at his shiny wood counter and said softly, "Anne."

"Yes?"

"I'm sick of this town, Anne. Let's move on."

"No. No, Tracy."

"Why not?" he asked, an edge in his voice. "Do you want to spend the rest of

your life cooking for a bunch of men?"

"No."

"Are you happy?"

She shook her head. "I can feel the roots growing, Tracy. It's a good feeling. I can live with myself now. I'll never move on again. I'm through running away."

"Who said anything about running away?" Thorn asked gruffly.

Anne Corum put both hands on the counter. The knuckles of her hands were white. "That's all you've ever done, Tracy," she said quietly. "Run away. You've run before and you'll run now. Is it from Con Nesbitt and the Lazy N?"

"I'm not afraid of them."

"I know you're not, Tracy. You're afraid of yourself." Her voice sharpened. "You try to plan everything ahead. You weigh the odds and make a choice. You see the end without the beginning. Can't you see it won't work?"

"The breaks," Tracy Thorn said. "They never came."

"You have to make your own breaks."

"Dreams are easy when you're young."

Anne Corum said fiercely, "They don't die any easier when you get older."

Tracy Thorn mechanically finished his pie. The silence ate into him. Anne was scrubbing the counter with a damp cloth. Thorn got his legs under him.

"You're running again?" Anne asked.

"I'll see Harry Killian. . . ." Thorn's voice trembled suddenly with fury. "Don't say it like that, Anne! I'm just fed up with the town here."

A sudden shout lifted on the still air. Tracy Thorn stepped out to the high board walk, shading his eyes against the slant of the sun. Anne was standing beside him. Others were standing on the walk now, all looking up the street.

A man rode slowly forward—a Box B hand. Jim Blaney's body was draped across his saddle.

"Nesbitt done it," the man said. "Jim



Blaney came home rarin' mad. Strapped on his gun, then rode out like crazy and began pullin' down the Lazy N drift fence. We was lendin' a hand when Nesbitt rode up. He shot Blaney without even givin' him a chance."

The rider jogged away. Tracy Thorn stood there watching the dust rise from the horse's feet. He was aware of Anne Corum at his side, but he didn't turn to look at her. She put a hand on his arm. He patted it, still without looking into her face. Then he crossed the dusty street.

In front of the Paradise he paused. Harry Killian nodded at him. Thorn returned the nod and then moved away.

**T**RACY THORN'S gun was tucked away in the bottom of his warbag. It was wrapped in an oily cloth. Thorn carefully wiped off all the excess oil, punched shells into the cylinder, strapped on a gunbelt and then let himself out into the hallway.

Seifert's room was only a few doors away. The Texas man answered Thorn's knock. Thorn stepped inside.

"Is Nesbitt still dickering for your herd?" Tracy Thorn asked.

Seifert nodded. "He's got me over a barrel. It ain't a comfortable place to be."

"I'll buy the herd," Thorn said.

"Eh?" Seifert was startled. "What'll you do with 'em?"

"I've got a ranch."

"I've heard about it. You think you can get away with it?"

"Yes," Tracy Thorn said.

"Nesbitt's got half a dozen men."

"If Nesbitt goes," Tracy Thorn told him, "they won't hang around."

A little later Thorn entered the Paradise. Harry Killian said, "Wondered where you were, Tracy. Thought maybe you were on your way out of Red Rock."

"No."

"I know your kind, Tracy. I like you. But your kind never stays put long." Harry Killian frowned. "Too bad about Blaney."

"He was a good man," Tracy Thorn said. "He wasn't afraid of Con Nesbitt."

The two cowboys who had been at Annie's Eats were sitting at a table. Thorn approached them and said, "You boys looking for a job of work?"

"Could be," one of them said. "You Nesbitt?"

When Gunslick Blue Roark hired out his irons to Big Gus Hollaway, he tangled up in the strangest job he had ever taken—and found himself surrounded by sultry smiles and blazing sixguns.

## HIGH-TAIL—OR HANG!

by Robert Martin

plus nine other thrilling tales of the Old West that will appear in the April issue of . . .

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April issue—on sale now



"I'm Tracy Thorn."

"We heard about Nesbitt. We ain't lookin' for a fightin' job."

"This one I'm offering is just cows," Thorn said. "I've got a herd of cattle in the pens back of town. Tomorrow we'll deliver 'em to the ranch."

The two cowboys looked at each other, then nodded. Tracy Thorn headed for the door. Harry Killian yelled something after him, but Thorn kept on going.

Old Tim Gallagher was startled to see him ride up. Thorn said, "I just bought five hundred head of cattle." He entered the Jinglebit ranch house and began rummaging in a drawer, looking for the levis and shirt he'd never worn.

"You done what?" the old man asked suddenly.

"Bought a Texas herd," Thorn said. "We'll take delivery tomorrow."

"What'll we do with 'em?" asked the old man helplessly.

Tracy Thorn went to the door. He pointed at the rich grass beyond the Lazy N drift fence. He said, "That's good grass. Reckon we'll use our share of it."

"And I suppose Con Nesbitt will like that?"

"Probably not," Tracy Thorn said. "You got a rope handy?"

He worked hard, pulling down the fence posts. Tim Gallagher got over his surprise and set eagerly to work.

Gallagher cackled gleefully. "Never thought I'd see the day that Jinglebit would live again. Lordamighty, but it's a wonderful feelin'!"

"Here comes Nesbitt," Thorn said.

The half dozen riders thundered closer. Thorn had dismounted, and now he faced the direction in which they came. He felt calm. His eyes were clear and his restlessness was gone.

Tracy Thorn knew that he was through trying to run away from himself.

Con Nesbitt leaped from his lathered horse. His face was vicious. He stalked

toward Thorn with a thumb hooked over his gunbelt. Thorn's hands were held loosely at his sides.

"You're a fool, Tracy," Con Nesbitt said. "I told you once what would happen if you got in my way. Jim Blaney tried it today. Tracy, you're a fool!"

"Perhaps," Tracy Thorn said.

The half dozen Lazy N riders had remained mounted. One of them called out, "Where's the old coot?"

For the first time, Thorn realized that Tim Gallagher had discreetly withdrawn. Thorn kept his eyes on Nesbitt.

"You'll die smiling, Tracy," Nesbitt said. "I took this range and I'll hold it."

Tracy Thorn remained silent. He saw the red splotches creep into Con Nesbitt's cheeks. He saw Con Nesbitt's heavy body tense.

The slight smile was frozen on Tracy Thorn's lips.

And then the two guns sounded at once. Thorn's eyes were quick and his hand quicker. He matched Con Nesbitt's draw. The two guns thundered together. Con Nesbitt missed and Tracy Thorn didn't.

The Lazy N riders stared down at their fallen boss.

A cracked voice yelled, "Any man who reaches for a gun is as good as dead!" Old Tim Gallagher stood in the doorway with a shotgun leveled in his gnarled fists.

The Lazy N riders looked at him. They looked at Tracy Thorn. They looked down at Con Nesbitt on the ground. Then without a word they turned and rode off.

"They'll keep a-goin'," old Tim Gallagher chortled. "I scared 'em off. . . . Hey, Tracy! Where you goin'?"

Anne Corum was just closing up the cafe for the night when Thorn pushed inside. He didn't say a word. He picked Anne up and carried her out to his horse.

"Where are we going?" Anne whispered.

"The nearest preacher," Tracy Thorn said then. "Jinglebit needs a woman."



# CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

*(Answers on page 109)*

**I**N THE old days, many a cowpoke's life depended on his thorough savvy of the rangeland. Test yourself on the twenty questions below and see how well you'd make out in the cow country. Answer eighteen of the questions correctly and chances are you'd be a first rate cow prod. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're still above average. But answer fewer than fourteen, and you're classed with the lents. Good luck!

1. If a cowpoke acquaintance of yours told you he was going after "Charlie Taylor," which of the following would you think he was seeking? Another cowpoke? A butter substitute? A desert cactus?
2. What is the old-time meaning of the term "cow hunt?"
3. In the old days, what was the cowpoke's traditional opinion of a "fodder forker?"
4. If a Western friend told you a certain sheriff had "gravel in his gizzard," what would your friend mean?
5. True or false? The Spanish word *herrar* means to "buck" or to "pitch".
6. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "hung up to dry?"
7. True or false? A "last year's bronc" is a horse that is in his second season of work.
8. In the language of the rodeo rider, what is the meaning of the word "loggering?"
9. If a man is said to "measure a full sixteen hands high," what does this statement tell about him?
10. If a cowpoke friend said he was heading for the "op'ra house," to which of the following places would he mean he was going? The corral fence? A saloon? The horse barn?
11. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "pass in his chips?"
12. What is the meaning of the well known Spanish word *poco*?
13. If you heard an acquaintance of yours was "making hair bridles," in which of the following situations would your friend likely be? Taking a trip south of the border? In jail? Sick in bed?
14. What is the chief duty of a renegade rider?
15. If the ranch boss told you he had just seen a "hoofed locust," what would you think he was talking about?
16. True or false? According to the Westerner's way of thinking, "standing feed" is uncut grass, hay, etc.
17. True or false? A "steeple fork" is a type of earmark.
18. What is the meaning of the Western slang expression "tail over the dashboard?"
19. What is "walking beam?"
20. True or false? "Voucher" is a cowpoke term used in reference to an Indian scalp.



# TALES of the

by LEE

## JAMES BOWIE

WHERE THE WORD "BOWIE" APPEARS IN WESTERN LORE, ITS LEGEND IS WRITTEN IN BLOOD.

THE MAN RESPONSIBLE WAS JAMES BOWIE, A RUGGED SIX-FOOTER WITH FAIR HAIR AND BLUE EYES, BORN IN GEORGIA IN THE EARLY 1790'S. A QUIET FELLOW, STRONG AS AN OX, HE FEARED NEITHER MAN NOR DEVIL.

THE BOWIE FAMILY MOVED TO LOUISIANA IN 1802. THERE, IN THE BAYOUS, YOUNG JIM IS SUPPOSED TO HAVE ROPED AND RIDDEN ALLIGATORS FOR RECREATION AND ENGAGED IN DEALINGS WITH THE PIRATE LAFITTE FOR PROFIT.

HE WAS ALWAYS MIXED UP IN A FIGHT OF SOME SORT, USUALLY WITH THE ODDS AGAINST HIM. IN ONE, THOUGH BADLY SHOT, HE SKEWERED HIS OPPONENT WITH A KNIFE.

GOING ON TO TEXAS IN 1826, HE PROSPECTED FOR THE LEGENDARY LOST SAN SABA MINE OF THE OLD SPANIARDS, AND THEY SAY HE FOUND IT. THREE YEARS LATER HE MARRIED THE DAUGHTER OF THE VICE-GOVERNOR OF SAN ANTONIO.

BUT HE DIDN'T SETTLE DOWN. INSTEAD HE JOINED THE REVOLUTION TO DRIVE THE MEXICANS FROM TEXAS AND ROSE TO THE RANK OF COLONEL. SURROUNDED BY 400 MEXICAN SOLDIERS IN AN OLD MISSION NEAR BEXAR, BOWIE AND 90 MEN BEAT THEM OFF IN HALF AN HOUR'S FIERCE FIGHTING.





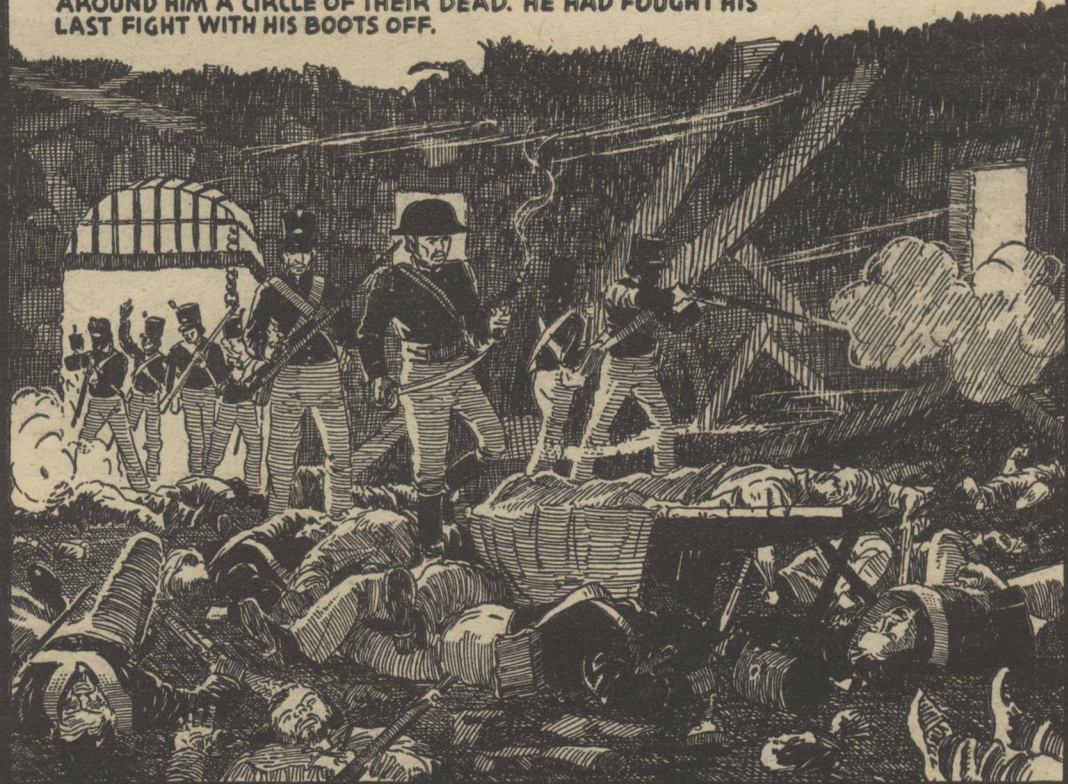
# — OLD WEST



**T**HERE ARE VARIOUS VERSIONS AS TO HOW AND WHERE THE FAMOUS BOWIE KNIFE ORIGINATED. ONE IS THAT BOWIE MADE THE FIRST FROM A FILE. ANOTHER HAS IT THAT IN AN INDIAN FIGHT HE WAS USING A BUTCHER KNIFE TO GOOD EFFECT UNTIL HIS FINGERS SLIPPED ON THE BLOODY HANDLE AND HE CUT HIMSELF. TO PREVENT INJURY, HE HAD A BLACKSMITH MAKE HIM A KNIFE WITH A GUARD. STILL ANOTHER IS THAT IN A MELEE WITH MEXICAN SOLDIERS, HIS SWORD WAS BROKEN IN TWO, BUT HE DID SUCH HAVOC WITH THE STUMP THAT HE GOT HIS IDEA FROM THAT.

**A**NWAY, SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE HE INVENTED THE TERRIBLE BOWIE KNIFE, THOUGH SOME CREDIT IT TO HIS BROTHER REZIN.

**B**OWIE WAS UNABLE TO TAKE AN ACTIVE PART IN THE DEFENSE OF THE ALAMO, DUE TO A BROKEN HIP, BUT WHEN THE MEXICAN REGULARS FINALLY STORMED IT, THEY FOUND JAMES BOWIE ON A COT, AN EMPTY PISTOL AND A BLOODY KNIFE BESIDE HIM, AND AROUND HIM A CIRCLE OF THEIR DEAD. HE HAD FOUGHT HIS LAST FIGHT WITH HIS BOOTS OFF.







# KILLER'S COUNTRY

By  
**BARNEY FLETCHER**

*The law could reach John Lee—outcast, killer and saint—  
anytime by mail, but could not get past his flaming guns—  
until he built a wilderness haven that protected everyone  
—but himself!*

CONVENTION pictures an outlaw on the dodge as a lonely sort of *hombre*, forever moving, forever cut off from the comforts of family life and home. Yet one of the West's most celebrated fugitives, John Doyle Lee, hid out for seven years under exactly opposite conditions, and was only caught when he tried to lose himself.

Lee, an elderly official of the Mormon Church, had played an important role in the shocking Mountain Meadows Massacre, in which one hundred and twenty westbound emigrants were tricked, disarmed and shot down in cold blood, for the high crime of trespassing on Utah without being Mormons.

Alarmed at the lengths to which an overzealous partisan could go, Brigham Young himself banished Lee from Zion. Taking most of his score of wives, and all his minor children, Lee, aged sixty, headed southward into the wilderness looking for refuge. Every U.S. Marshal in the West had orders to bring him in—so Lee, whose mind seems to have had a

perverse quirk to it, holed out in the biggest hole he could find, namely, the Grand Canyon.

You can smile at the choice—it all happened so long ago—but there is a terrible moral in it, too. The old man had become two people. He was John Lee, the Lion of the Lord who had wrought destruction among the Gentiles—and he was also John Lee, outcast, murderer, with a price on his head. He was Lee the patriarch, the outlaw, the saint, the pariah. And for the nine years left of his life, every deed he did had a double purpose to serve, had to be both escape and conquest, a sop to the devil and a glory to Jerusalem.

He built a tiny town, hundreds of miles from anywhere, and because he was a patriarch, and proud, the town stood on top of a visible hill at the Canyon's Rim. Far below, in the gorge, flowed the Colorado River. Constructively, in the traditional Mormon way, Lee planted the bottomlands below his hill with vegetables, fruit trees, and alfalfa. He established a ferry, the only one at the time



that forded the Colorado, and he wistfully called it "Saint's Ferry."

The town and the farmlands he christened "Lonely Dell." Everyone worked communally for mutual prosperity. Everyone, in each of the eight adobe houses that faced one another across the single neat street of Lonely Dell, was named Lee, and was either a wife or child of the town's founder.

Mrs. Lee number 17—her given name was Rachel—had charge of the fort, a kind of lookout tower overlooking both ferry and farmland. She was the best shot in Lonely Dell, and it was her duty to challenge all comers before letting them in from either side of the gorge.

Once satisfied, she turned them over either to Lee and his sons, who operated the ferry, or to Mrs. Lee number 18, the commissary lady. Emma Lee, the youngest wife, is said to have been the best cook of her time.

It was quite a hideout for a man with a price on his head, and soon it became more than that. It was an oasis of safety and rest in the hostile spaces. Travelers and wanderers, lost or out of supplies, owed their lives in many cases to its existence. They spoke, up and down the mountain trails, of the town where the wilderness trek was broken in two—and of the fabulous cuisine of Mrs. Emma Lee.

And so the day came when Lee was notified that his settlement constituted a postal unit of the United States government. He was on the map.

But not as Lonely Dell, and not as Saint's Ferry. The town was named Lee's Ferry—perhaps the only time in history that a government has officially upheld the land claim of a man beyond the law.

Travelers became more frequent. Someone—a fellow Mormon—built a through road from Lee's Ferry to Tuba City, thus linking it more closely with civilization.

The industrious little community was

prosperous and sound. Seven years passed. The old man looked about him, and realized that he had accomplished the impossible. He had started a battle, at the age of sixty, with one of the toughest pieces of nature on earth, and he had won hands down. He was respected and famous.

He was also wanted for murder. And every day that the fame of Lee's Ferry spread was one day closer to the day of his inevitable arrest.

No one knows why no lawman ever followed the mail to the Grand Canyon—why Lee should have been safe for so long in his mountain sanctuary. Lee himself didn't know. He grew more and more nervous about it. Travelers, partaking overnight of his hospitality, later reported that he would talk at great length, far into the evenings, of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, explaining, declaiming, protesting a tortuous innocence.

In 1877, the strain grew too much for him. Lee, the patriarch, surrendered at last. Lee, the outlaw, aged sixty-seven, said a brief farewell to the town that he had founded and that had been too successful for his peace of mind. He returned to Utah, to the wives he had left behind five years before, the less conspicuous wives, who were neither crack shots nor famous cooks.

But he was too big a man now to move quietly. He was arrested in one of his old homes and, after lengthy court procedure, at the age of sixty-nine, he was brought back to the scene of the Mountain Meadows Massacre to face a firing squad.

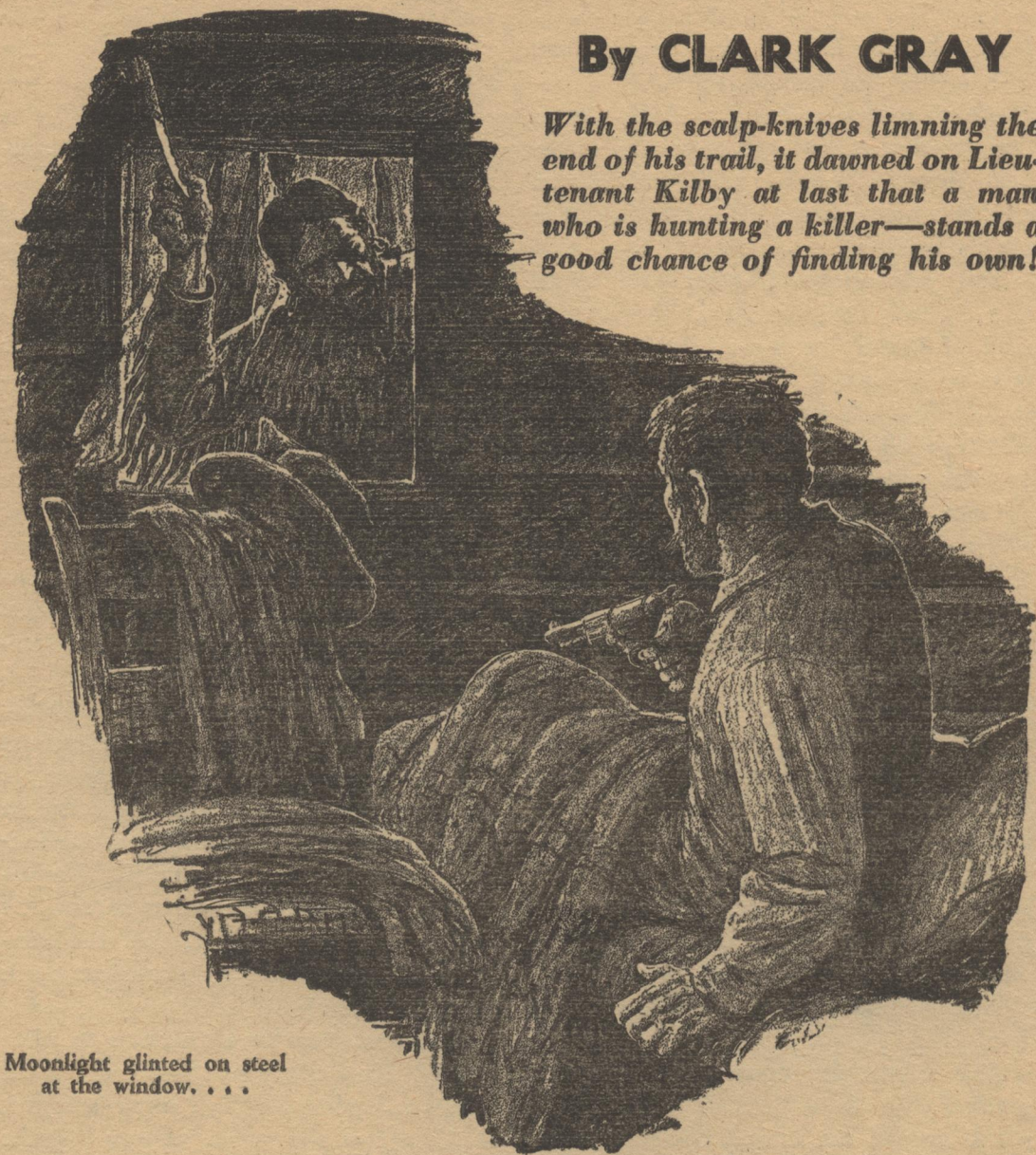
For a time, the remaining Lees of Lee's Ferry carried on without him, under the leadership of the youngest widow, she of the culinary fame. But it never seemed the same again without old John. Soon wives and children drifted away, never to return, and in the end, Emma sold her dower rights in the place, for three thousand dollars, to the Mormon Church.



# MANHUNT

By CLARK GRAY

*With the scalp-knives limning the end of his trail, it dawned on Lieutenant Kilby at last that a man who is hunting a killer—stands a good chance of finding his own!*



Moonlight glinted on steel  
at the window. . . .

SECOND Lieutenant Morgan Kilby, United States Dragoons, had two mules and a dilapidated outfit of rag-tag civilian clothes. One of the mules he rode. The other carried his civilian duffle, a French grammar and a half-dozen pounds of tobacco, although Kilby did not smoke.

Early this morning he had left the

brand new state of Arkansas. He had crossed a single plowed furrow that angled over the hills, marking the boundary between the United States and the sovereign nation of the Osage. At this moment, midsummer of the year 1840, he was approaching the commercial capital of the Osages, a village that went by the ungodly name of Manrinhabatso.



Lieutenant Morgan Kilby did not like any part of it. He cursed the luck that had made him elect to study French at the academy on the Hudson. He was a thin-boned young man wearing his first mustache, a flamboyant affair of the sandy red that only an Irishman can grow. He had a three day growth of red whiskers, too—on direct orders from his Colonel. Kilby hated the itch of the whiskers worst of all, but the Colonel had insisted that he, Kilby, had to look as little like a military man as possible.

Lieutenant Kilby sighed. At Fort Gibson, there would be dancing tonight. Kilby was positive Manrinhabatso could offer nothing comparable to the Colonel's daughter, Martha. But that was the life of a soldier, he thought resignedly, and turned his attention glumly to the task before him.

Manrinhabatso was composed of about thirty huts, sided with coarse planks and slabs of bark, roofed with buffalo skin. At one end of the village, he saw a log cabin. That, Kilby thought, would be the trading post and living quarters of Pierre Lebrun, agent for the American Fur Company. A few Osage men lounged on blankets before the huts; these did not even turn their heads as Kilby clattered past with his mules. A group of half-naked children played around a mangy dog, but they—and even the dog—ignored him. Kilby smiled thinly and brought his animals to a halt before the cabin. A white man stepped through the open door.

Kilby said, "*Monsieur Lebrun?*"

The white man nodded. He was brawny for a Frenchman, with rolled-up sleeves and a thick mat of yellow hair on his forearms.

Kilby said, in his best schoolbook French, "I am Morgan Kilby, a schoolteacher from south of the Red River. I am trying to find my wife, who was captured by the Comanches. I bring you a letter from the commandant at Fort Gib-

son, and a safe-conduct from the Osage agent. I wish to go to the Salt Plains, with your Indians, when they meet the Comanche to trade."

It was a good story. Kilby saw sympathy leap into Lebrun's eyes, and he thought, *here is a kind-hearted man*. But he had not told the story for Lebrun's benefit. It was for the Osages, lounging on their blankets, in case any of them understood French. He had needed a good story to explain his presence here. Pierre Lebrun said gravely, "Come inside. I will have my Creole care for your mules. Your luggage will be safe here, I think."

The Frenchman stepped round the corner of the cabin and shouted something in a curious mixture of French and some other guttural language Kilby did not understand. Kilby dismounted, entered the log structure, and looked curiously around.

Aside from the civilized furnishings of the room: tables, chairs, a piano, a bed, he saw a *para fleche* shield, a quiver, and a bow. He was examining the shield with interest when a woman's voice asked, "You find us strange, *n' est ce pas?*"

Morgan Kilby turned and sucked in his breath in astonishment. A girl—a young girl, scarcely eighteen—stood smiling at him with quirked lips. She wore civilized dress; she was blonde and blue-eyed, with no touch of Indian about her. She was, Morgan Kilby saw, beautiful. As beautiful as the Colonel's daughter. Kilby felt a painful flush creep up the back of his neck.

"Strange, *Mademoiselle?* No. Interesting is the word. But, permit me . . . I am Morgan Kilby, a schoolteacher from Texas."

The girl laughed. "Yes, you speak French exactly like a Yankee teacher. Correctly, but without feeling. I am Colette Lebrun, *M'sieur.*"

"Oh." Kilby grinned sheepishly. And then, remembering the barracks tales he



had heard about Indian traders, he asked, "Monsieur Lebrun's wife?"

"His daughter. His spoiled daughter, *M'sieur*, who loves to hunt and fish and ride, and do all the things a young lady should not do. I am a problem to my papa, as you will soon learn from his own lips. A flirt. And a spoiled child. Is it not a pity, *M'sieur*?"

She was laughing out of her blue eyes, and in spite of himself, Kilby grinned with her. Then the door swung to behind him, and Lebrun crossed the room. Lebrun was scowling.

"Colette, go to your room, please. *Monsieur* Kilby, you are welcome here. May I offer you supper and a bed?"

Morgan Kilby watched with appreciation as Colette Lebrun puckered her lip at her father, then skipped out of the room. The girl was not in complete civilized dress, after all, he saw now. She wore moccasins, and between the hem of her skirt and the moccasin tops he could see a round, tan section of ankle. He grinned, then, when the girl was gone, turned soberly to Lebrun.

"*Monsieur*, I accept your offer with thanks. But I have a private confession to make. I lied to you, out there, for the benefit of your Indians. I am not a school-teacher. I do not have a wife who was stolen by the Comanche, or my wife. I am an army lieutenant."

Lebrun grunted, and his eyes showed faint surprise. Silently he took a cigar from his pocket, offered it to Kilby, and when Kilby shook his head slipped it into his own mouth. Lebrun chewed savagely on the cigar for a moment.

"So! You are an officer of the army, eh? I can tell you the rest of the story, then. You are here to take one of my Indians back to your Yankee law. You will make trouble. But that is not your fault, of course. It is the fault of your stupid government, which does not understand the Indian. You need tell me

only one thing—the name of the man."

MORGAN Kilby started to grin, then thought better of it. "The colonel warned me you would not like this, Monsieur. But I must tell you that it is a serious matter. A soldier was murdered in St. Louis. The soldier was a deserter, and he was very like drunk, but nevertheless he was murdered. The government cannot let such an offense go unpunished."

Lebrun waved his hand impatiently. "Enough. Enough explanation. What is the name of the man?"

"His Osage name is Ouachinka-Lagri—Handsome Bird. He is of the Little Osage clan."

"Yes, I have heard of him." Lebrun scrubbed his furry forearms thoughtfully. "But there are some three thousand Osages. I cannot know them all. Wait one moment."

Lebrun stepped to the door of the cabin, spoke swiftly in a choppy, musical language that Kilby judged was Osage. Presently a tall, buckskin-clad white man entered the cabin. The white man wore his hair in two greasy queues, Osage style. He had a rank black beard and red-rimmed eyes that squinted appraisingly at Kilby. Lebrun closed the door and said in English, "Mr. Kilby, this is Dwight Harrow, an adopted member of the tribe. The Indians will sometimes tell him things which they will not tell me."

Kilby nodded, wondering about the faint edge of dislike he already felt for this newcomer. It was not merely that Harrow was dirty, that he stank of old campfires and rancid grease and sweat. It was the look in Harrow's red-rimmed eyes, Kilby decided. Harrow was studying him coldly, as if he, Kilby were, a beef to be bought or sold.

Kilby said, "Glad to know you, Harrow. I'm looking for a halfbreed by the name of Ouachinka-Lagri—the son of a



Little Osage woman and a white trapper. You happen to know him?"

Harrow hesitated for the barest possible moment, red-rimmed eyes flickering. Then Harrow shook his head.

"Heard of him, but I never saw him. He's in the States, ain't he?"

"It's possible, but not likely. He fell into some bad company in one of those trapper's dens in St. Louis. Got into some serious trouble. Chances are he came back here, to his mother's family. He was raised here, I understand."

"I never saw him," Harrow repeated. "You want me to ask around?"

"Never mind. I'll be going with you to the Salt Plains. Likely I'll run into him."

Harrow nodded, then turned to Lebrun. "My squaw's out of coffee again, Pierre. Her damned relatives drink the stuff like whisky."

Morgan Kilby waited until Dwight Harrow had got his coffee and left the room on silent moccasins before switching the conversation back to French.

"That is a man with a bad eye, *Monsieur* Lebrun. I am not sure that I like him."

Lebrun shrugged. "In the wilderness, one has few white companions to choose from. Harrow lives with the Indians because he is lazy. He is an adopted member of the tribe, and as such he receives a share of the annual annuities, and a house."

Lebrun rubbed his palms along his furry forearms, then brightened. "But we are forgetting supper. I have one bottle of the best Bordeaux, *Monsieur* Kilby. In your honor, we shall drink well tonight. And afterwards, a little music by my Colette, eh?"

Colette's music, after supper, turned out to be a collection of old French and Creole songs, which she sang and played on the Chickering piano. Kilby sat on the floor, knees drawn up to his chin, savoring the lingering flavor of the wine with a dreamy

sense of satisfaction. Colette's blonde hair hung about her shoulders, a dusty lemon color in the lamplight. Beside him, Pierre Lebrun sighed.

"Such a problem, my Colette! I have tried to persuade her to go to school, but she will have none of it, *Monsieur* Kilby. She is a wildflower, almost as savage as my Indians."

"A wildflower," Kilby said, "takes beauty from its surroundings. But of course you are right. Every young lady needs training in the finer arts."

He nodded to Colette, who had turned to smile coquettishly at him from the piano, then said goodnight to Lebrun and strode out into the darkness. Lebrun had assigned him a little cabin in the rear of the trading post as his sleeping quarters. Kilby found a lamp and lit it. He sank to the bed with a sigh and pulled off his boots, feeling for the first time the fatigue of the long day. He rubbed the soles of his feet and—soldier-like—examined them for blisters. Before undressing, he made a careful examination of the little cabin.

The cabin's door was solid enough, but Kilby did not like the window. The window was nothing but a hole cut in the logs, with a piece of oiled paper stretched tight across it. Kilby laid his Dragoon pistol under the straw-filled pillow, then snuffed out the lamp.

Moonlight cast a dim radiance inside the little cabin when he awoke. Moonlight and moving shadows. He lay quietly an instant, feeling the first awareness that he was not alone. He moved one hand cautiously to grasp the cold butt of the pistol under his pillow, and then he looked toward the window.

The moon, by chance, was shining directly upon the window; Kilby could see the round coldness of it through the oiled paper. He also saw the outlined shadow of a man's head.

Something punctured the paper and rasped down the side of the window. It



was a knife, cutting a slit. The slit widened, and the man outside thrust head and shoulders into the room.

Holding himself perfectly motionless by an effort of will, Kilby waited.

The moonlight touched something just to one side of the man's head in the window. It glittered, like steel, and of a sudden Kilby realized it was steel. It was that knife, poised to throw.

Kilby rolled instinctively out of his bed, carrying the pistol with him, and the same instant the knife flashed through the air, an arrow of moonlight. Kilby heard the knife plunge through the blankets and into the wooden frame of the bed with a muffled thud, and then he was on his feet, driving toward the window, gun lifted.

The head in the window dropped out of view. Running footsteps slatted the night. Kilby stuck his head out the window, through the slit in the oiled paper, and dimly he could make out the fleeting figure, a darting pencil line of black through the moonlight. Kilby wasn't sure, but he thought he could recognize the fringes flapping on a pair of buckskin trousers.

**K**ILBY didn't mention the episode to Lebrun next morning. In the first place, he wasn't sure that the would-be killer had worn buckskins, and in the second place, he could have proved nothing, even if he'd wanted to. Instead, he was cheerful and entertaining during breakfast, complimenting Colette on her cooking and Lebrun on his stocks of merchandise. When breakfast was over, he asked Lebrun, "I'd like to visit the Little Osage village today. Could you come?"

"I will come with you. I will leave the trading post in charge of Colette and my Creole." Lebrun's face, this morning, was drawn with worry. "I want to be present when you arrest Ouachinka-Lagri. A cool head will be needed. And *Monsieur*, it would be wise if you did not wear your gun."

Morgan Kilby nodded, recognizing the truth of this. The Osages would not be so likely to suspect an unarmed man. And Lebrun would be at his side with his own weapon. Then Colette said tartly, "If you Yankees would leave the Indians alone, *Monsieur* Kilby, they would soon forget their killing and thieving."

Kilby said gently, "It is impossible to do that, *Mademoiselle*. Ouachinka-Lagri is a murderer."

"And why?" Colette's eyes flickered hotly. "Because you Yankees have constantly pushed the Osages to the west. You have stolen their land, and made them hate you. It was not so for many years, when the French were here. The French were friends to the Indians. It is the Yankee greed that has poisoned men like Ouachinka-Lagri."

Morgan Kilby inclined his head in a sober nod. This was not a new thought to him. But he believed that he saw deeper into the problem than Colette.

He hesitated, searching her face. It was suddenly important to him to make her understand.

"Ouachinka-Lagri," he continued, "has killed a white soldier. Being an Indian, he will boast of it to other Indians. He will stir up discontent, perhaps be indirectly responsible for other murders."

Colette Lebrun said, "Bah! You talk platitudes, *Monsieur*."

"Perhaps," Kilby admitted. "But true platitudes. And don't forget, Ouachinka-Lagri is half white. Possibly it is his white blood that is bad."

"More platitudes. You are like all Yankees. You hate the Indian!"

Pierre Lebrun stirred in his chair. "That is not true, Colette. *Monsieur* Kilby feels as all intelligent men feel. You do not understand. You have not the vision, the understanding. In plain language, you do not have the education."

Morgan Kilby glanced at Lebrun, aware of a depth of emotion in the trader's tones.



He was a little surprised that Lebrun had come to his defense; the fact told him he had been accepted now as a friend.

"*Monsieur* Lebrun, permit me to suggest: in Fort Smith, I know of a finishing school for young ladies. It is managed by an admirable woman."

Colette leaped to her feet, eyes flashing in alarm. "I will not go. *Monsieur* Yankee Kilby, I hate you! I hate your Yankee schools. I will not go. I will not!" She whirled and ran from the room, ankles flashing, her lemon hair swishing angrily about her shoulders.

In the sudden silence, Pierre Lebrun smiled quietly.

"*Monsieur* Kilby, my daughter is a little hellcat, *n' est ce pas?*" We must send her to school—you and I—when your work is finished here. I would rely on your friendship."

THE little Osage village was called Maneh-Chinka, Small Knife. It was not much different from Manrinhabatso. The smooth-packed streets, the bark and skin lodges, the lounging Indian men. At the outskirts of the town Kilby handed Lebrun his gun, then somberly followed the trader to the head lodge of the chief.

The chief of the Little Osages, Lebrun had told Kilby, was called Kahikeh-Tanga.

The inside of the lodge was covered with reed mats. Here and there, arms hung on the walls. From the middle of the lodge, Kahikeh-Tanga rose to greet them with outstretched hand, an old Indian, with the traditional shaved scalp of the Osage, and the roach stripe down the middle, ending in two pigtails.

Morgan Kilby went through the ceremonious introduction as best he could. He had been taught some of the Indian customs, both by the Colonel at Fort Gibson and this morning by Lebrun. There was the courteous handshake, then the serving of food, a wooden bowl filled with half-

cooked meat and water, a huge roast, an extremely long type of sausage, black coffee and squaw bread, a cornmeal dough fried in fat. Afterwards, as he had been instructed, Morgan Kilby grimly stuffed his pipe and lit it.

The old chief watched him gravely as he lit the pipe. Then the Indian leaned forward and took the pipe from his, saying, "*Nanihuh dits tanheh, vita picheh.*"

Pierre Lebrun grinned. "He says your tobacco is good, and his is bad. You won't have to get sick now, Kilby. He'll smoke your tobacco for you."

Morgan Kilby wiped sweat from his forehead and sighed thankfully. After that meal, he thought, tobacco ought to make the strongest man sick. But Kahikeh-Tanga smoked with obvious relish. He was silently lighting the second pipeful from a burning coal when a shadow fell across the lodge.

Dwight Harrow stepped inside, moccasins falling soundlessly on the hard-packed earthen floor.

KILBY had not yet had a chance to discuss his business with the chief. According to Indian custom, business had to wait upon hospitality. And now, he reflected, he might never get that chance.

Dwight Harrow said, "Howdy, Kilby. Lebrun. Sorry to spoil the party."

Pierre Lebrun glanced up in surprise, and Kilby had time to notice the chief's face, to try to read the inscrutable countenance. Then Lebrun said, "Harrow! What brings you to Maneh-chinka?"

Dwight Harrow ignored Lebrun. "Kilby, you won't find Joe Eagle now. I took care of that."

"Joe Eagle?" Lebrun asked. "Who is Joe Eagle?"

Morgan Kilby rose fully to his feet, this time. He had the answer to that one.

"Joe Eagle is the white name of Oua-



chinka-Lagri—a name he took when he went to St. Louis. But nobody here knows that name.” Kilby paused significantly. “How did you know it, Harrow?”

Dwight Harrow looked startled. His red-rimmed eyes slitted. He rubbed his palms on his greasy buckskins, then grunted, “I—I knew him in St. Louis, when I took some furs there last year. That don’t prove nothin’, does it?”

“No. Except there was a white man with Joe Eagle when he committed murder. But you couldn’t have been that man, could you, Harrow?”

“Hell, no!” Harrow bit his lip, and a spark of fear flickered in his eyes. “Hell no, Kilby. I wasn’t even in St. Louis when that murder was done.”

Morgan Kilby smiled thinly. A certainty was dragging in him. A certainty that his job was suddenly almost done. He moved a step toward Harrow, sensing the desperation in the man. Kilby said, “Harrow, the army kept that murder quiet. It wasn’t in any of the newspapers. If you weren’t there, how did you know when it was done?”

Dwight Harrow broke, then. The desperation in his face shifted into a mask of fury. Harrow plunged forward, fist upraised, and Morgan Kilby was abruptly aware that Harrow had another knife.

Instinctively Kilby dodged, stumbling across the lodge, slamming into a pile of harness and dried meat at the far end. He had time to regret bitterly that he had given Lebrun his gun, then Harrow was coming after him, and Kilby thrashed around frantically in the entangling harness, seeking a weapon, knowing now a terrible fear. He was aware that Pierre Lebrun was moving on the other side of the lodge, but too slow. Harrow was almost on him, the knife a glittering ribbon of steel in his fist, when Kilby’s hand touched a palette of the red powder that the Osages mixed with grease and used to paint their faces. Desperately Kilby

threw the power right at Harrow.

The packet struck Harrow square between the eyes, smashed apart, and enveloped the man in a cloud of vermillion dust. Kilby heard Harrow cry out with pain as the dust stung his eyes, blinding him, and then Kilby was moving out of the tangle of harness. He glided around Harrow, and there was Lebrun, shakily holding the gun in both hands, aiming it at the red cloud.

Gently Kilby took the gun from Lebrun. He stood outside the reddish dust an instant, waiting for it to settle around the blinded Harrow. When he could make out Harrow’s head, he struck once, a precise, expert blow.

Two Indians stood now at the far end of the lodge. Morgan Kilby hesitated silently a moment, letting the pounding in his chest fade away, letting his own fear subside. Then he stuck the gun in his belt and stepped forward, knowing some explanation would have to be made to the chief. The other Indian, beside the chief, was a young man, he saw.

Morgan Kilby said grimly, “Lebrun, tell the chief that Harrow is a murderer. Tell him I represent the United States Army, that I am taking Harrow back, and that I also want Joe Eagle.”

Lebrun’s voice was awed. “I will tell him. *Monsieur* Kilby.”

Lebrun began to speak in Osage, but before he had said a half-dozen words, Chief Kahikeh-Tanga halted the trader with an outstretched hand. Kahikeh-Tanga spoke, the words rolling out in long, sonorous sentences, and Kilby, watching, saw surprise flash across Lebrun’s face. Finally the chief finished.

“He says,” Lebrun translated, “that he can understand a little English, that he caught the drift of what was going on, that he has never trusted Harrow. The young Osage with him is Joe Eagle, or Ouachinka-Lagri. He says Harrow is the actual murderer, that Joe Eagle saw Har-



row kill the drunken soldier, but Harrow threatened him, and he, Joe Eagle, was afraid to talk."

Morgan Kilby looked at the young Indian, and for the first time he saw that Joe Eagle had blue eyes. Honest eyes.

Kilby said, in English, "You didn't kill him, then, Joe Eagle?"

Joe Eagle shook his head. "No, sir. I didn't kill anybody. Harrow stole that soldier's watch."

"I believe you," Kilby said. "The murdered soldier was killed with a knife, and Harrow seems to like knives. If I can find that watch, I won't need to take you back." He grinned. "The army has a wide latitude in these matters, Joe."

Watching the relief and gratitude leap into Joe Eagle's blue eyes, Kilby felt a sudden, poignant sensation of happiness.

He said, "Lebrun, tell that to the chief, will you? Just to be sure he understands?"

Lebrun said in wild disbelief, "*Monsieur* Kilby, I cannot believe you! You are the man! You are the man I like—the Yankee with the heart of a Frenchman. And you are a strong man, too. A hellcat, like my Colette. *Monsieur*, when we return to Manrinhabatson, I must have your assistance in sending my daughter to the school in Fort Smith."

Morgan Kilby grinned. That would be a fitting climax to this strange adventure, he thought. He pictured the envious comment around the barracks of Fort Gibson when he brought this beautiful wigwam wildflower back with him.

Kilby said, "*Monsieur* Lebrun, it would give me pleasure to turn your daughter across my knee and spank her. It is what she needs, *n' est ce pas?*"

"It is, indeed," Lebrun said solemnly. "*Monsieur*, you are a man of sensibility."

And Lebrun turned gravely toward the chief to translate.

## Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 97)

1. If your friend told you he was going after "Charlie Taylor," he would mean he was seeking a quantity of a well known Western butter substitute.

2. "Cow hunt" is a term used in the old days in reference to a sort of roundup.

3. In the old days, the cowpoke's opinion of a "fodder forker—" farmer, that is—was not particularly favorable.

4. If a sheriff were said to have "gravel in his gizzard," this would mean he was considered courageous—had guts.

5. False. *Herrar* means to brand.

6. The Western slang term, "hung up to dry," means somebody has been the victim of a hanging.

7. True. A "last year's bronc" is a horse that is in its second season of work.

8. "Loggaring" means riding out of the chute holding onto the saddle horn.

9. If a man is said to "measure a full sixteen hands high," this means he is very well thought of.

10. If a cowpoke said he was going to the "op'ra house," this would mean he was head-

ing for the corral fence to watch the broncs.

11. "Pass in his chips" means to die.

12. The well known Spanish word *poco* means little or small.

13. If you heard an acquaintance of yours was "making hair bridles," this would mean he was doing some time in jail.

14. The chief duty of the renegade rider used to be to ride to nearby ranches and bring back stock which belonged to the rider's spread.

15. If the ranch boss said he had just seen a "hoofed locust," he would mean he had just seen a sheep.

16. True. Standing feed is uncut hay.

17. True. A "steeple fork" is a type of earmark.

18. The Western slang term, "tail over the dashboard," means elated.

19. "Walking beam" means pitching in such a way that the horse's front feet hit, then the back feet, and so on in teeter-totter fashion.

20. True. "Voucher" is a cowpoke term used in reference to an Indian scalp.



# The GUNBORN KIND



*There was nothing small about the old prospector—his flaming sixes challenged the whole state of California—and both felt lucky to survive!*

By  
**LANCE KERMIT**

**J**UST a simple old prospector was Philip Arnold, Kentucky-born, grizzled, and probably descended from Daniel Boone. He appeared in the California goldfields with his rifle and pan sometime in the sixties, and sometimes he found a little dust, and sometimes he didn't. He was known to have worked at one time for George D. Roberts, a far more successful Californian, in the capacity of miner. Just when he went partners with John Slack, another simple prospector, no one was quite sure—just as no one was quite sure when the partnership ended, or indeed, what became of Slack.

In 1870, these two made fifty thousand dollars in a mining deal. It was a sizeable amount of money for such obviously unremarkable characters, but then, sizeable amounts were always being made in California in those days. True to type, they did something foolish with their sudden cash.

Perhaps more foolish than most of their contemporaries would have believed.

While Slack, presumably, protected home interests, Arnold went straight to Halifax, Canada, where he embarked for Europe. In the diamond markets of Lon-

don and Amsterdam, he invested all that hard-got cash in South African stones—diamonds, mostly, but also emeralds and rubies. Because he paid cash, and because he wasn't fussy about cut or quality, the Europeans unloaded on him and didn't ask questions. They were too afraid of shocking him back to his senses.

He made two trips, spent every cent he had, and rejoined Slack in Arizona. There they made one last trip, prospecting in the desert. They were broke of course, but they were too simple to know it. They had lots of diamonds, at any rate. Diffidently, they walked into the Bank of California in San Francisco one day, a little ill at ease in its civilized surroundings and carrying their bundle with them. They insisted on seeing a bank official before they would have any truck with the place—they were skimpily-educated men, and needed reassurance about things like vaults and safekeeping.

They were introduced to William C. Ralston, a millionaire financier, who was quite patient and kind with them. After some persuasion, they opened their bundle and showed Ralston their diamonds.

He took a real personal interest in them, pressing them not to be timid about



It, to tell him where they'd been, what they'd been doing, what their future plans were.

They said they'd been in Arizona. They said they wanted to go back there, and maybe Mr. Ralston thought it was simple of them, but they were going to look for more diamonds.

Ralston's first move was to send cables frantically all over the globe. One of them, to Asbury Harpending, an ex-California businessman who had moved to London, cost the impressive sum of \$1100. The burden of the message, for all its lengthy persuasion, was: DROP EVERYTHING. COME HOME. BIGGEST THING SINCE THE GOLD STRIKE. DIAMOND MINE DISCOVERED IN ARIZONA!

Philip Arnold and John Slack shook their heads ruefully over all the fuss. Might have known it. Once you get in with slickers, like Ralston looked to be, you sure had to watch your step. Before their unwilling eyes, a syndicate, backed by more slickers and millionaires, was organized for the sole purpose of exploiting the Arizona diamond mines.

Arnold was called into a full meeting and asked to sell his and Slack's claim. They overwhelmed his uneasily-voiced objections with glowing pictures of the prosperity awaiting him. True, the mines were worth millions—but what did he, a simple prospector, know of the complicated business of financing their operation? Wouldn't he be better off settling for a fraction of the value—six hundred thousand dollars, say, and being free of worries for life? He wasn't young, his tastes weren't elaborate—as far as money went, six hundred thousand should make him happy forever.

Arnold shrugged. His secret was out anyway. Might as well sell, as have it stolen, he said.

He led them into the desert, where Slack awaited them; he showed them the sandy anthills glowing with diamond dust.

He listened to the sky-high appraisals of the mine experts that the syndicate had brought along, and said wryly that maybe he'd been born to make other men's fortunes.

He took the six hundred thousand dollars and went back to Kentucky. Somewhere en route, Slack seems to have disappeared forever.

Not long after, a geologist named Clarence King, employed by the U.S. government, made a survey of the diamond fields. For the record, he was the first to notice that the diamonds, rubies, and emeralds of the West's newest bonanza were already cut—and even the West, fabulous as it was, could not in nature have produced such wealth. In short, he wired the syndicate—at a cost far under \$1100—that the field had been salted. They had fallen for a \$600,000 swindle.

In vain, the company threatened Philip Arnold in Kentucky. He didn't understand all this talk about stocks and false representations, and such legal language. He was just a simple old prospector, and he thanked his stars he was home at last, safe from California scamps and slickers. He was proud to admit he had over half a million dollars in his strongbox—no more banks for Philip Arnold—the just reward for half a lifetime's exile from good old Kentucky. All this talk about Kentucky extraditing him—well, he guessed Kentuckians would believe a native son and not turn him over for more rooking in the West.

Kentucky believed its native son.

Unfortunately for the simple old prospector, he got into a shooting scrape, within a year, with another grizzled descendant of Daniel Boone, and while convalescing in a hospital, he caught pneumonia and died.

He maintained to the end that he'd been lucky to get out of California with his hide. And California, when it realized he was gone for good, felt lucky too.



# LAST BULLET TOWN

By T. C. McCLARY



## CHAPTER ONE

### Rough Man's Country

**H**E CAME into Trescott with a big six ton Conestoga loaded to the canvas, walking, as he had walked clean from Boston, beside the spotted, stolid, rolling-gaited oxen; pace, one and a half miles an hour, never faster, never

slower, except for the bad grades. This gave him plenty of time to study the town as he crossed the sage-studded, chalk yellow plain, and looking beyond it at the great bend of the milk blue river and the rich gramma lands it bounded, his mind jumped to twenty years ahead and to the booming growth that would lie between.



McLaren froze as O'Brien came  
up with the scattergun. . . .



At the top of the last rolling landswell his screeching right rear axle took fire again and he stopped to scoop sand at it, not even thinking of it now, but thinking with solid judgment, *Only a jerry-camp now, but it won't be long before the boomers and the grangers find it. There's good timber and there will be metal in the hills; there is winter and summer pasture.*

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***"Peace, mister, is where you  
find it—in a lightning draw  
. . . or a faster grave!"***

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*There is salt and gypsum and some borax on the desert down below. That land across the river looks like it would do for wheat and corn, and Bridger said the bottomlands are safe from freshets after spring. Passes East and West and the country itself runs north and south. Sooner or later there will be a railroad. . . .*

The axle stopped smoking and he dusted his thick-fleshed hands, and picking up his goad, moved forward with a step as stolid as the bullocks and put them back in motion. A man learned a lot about life in crossing the Great Plains. Maybe because he had a lot of time to think, and he used it thinking about philosophy to keep from thinking about what had happened to the Donners, and what had happened to the Meekers, and where in hell he was going and what he would do when—and if—he got there.

One of the things he got to learn was that bullocks were ornery stubborn critters that drove a man near crazy with their unvarying plodding, but it was the very thing he cursed them for that gave them worth. Mules took tantrums and got balky and would sit back in their traces, and even the solid Belgium horses would get flurried under gaunt and thirst and wheel a wagon to perdition. But the bullocks didn't change much under any situation; they didn't have much sense, but what they had was moulded into one single thought . . . they didn't mean to change their ways for the Lord or the Devil, and they would keep going at that monotonous, maddening, unvarying pace and hold to it as long as their hoofs held out or until their day's work was over.

He came into the thick, fine-powdered dust of the town's one street, and immediately his wheels slammed into the deep, hidden ruts carved by smaller wagons, and all four wheels began to squeal. The town had grown inward, not out, and it did not yet possess a core. There was a sheriff's office, a bank, a hotel, and a county build-

ing which also housed a gunshop and a ladies' notions, but these buildings had sprouted where their seeds had fallen. There was no symmetry, no design. The money loving, profiteering, business making boomers had not gotten there yet to plot and plan each foot of space because it meant extra dollars.

In front of the bank his bad wheel broke out in flame again, but he kept going, and abreast of the blacksmith's, something cracked explosively, and the axle gave and then snapped off. The smith came to his door with tongs in hand.

He said, "Friend, this is damned near roundup and I've got no time today for fixing emigrants. You can squat right there until I can fix you up, if you're minded."

"My name," the man from Boston said, "is Aloysius O'Brien and I have reached my destination."

A second man, a bearded giant with muscles like twisted cables and bones like oak, came out behind the smith and studied the arrival without enthusiasm. "Mebbe," he suggested roughly, "you've got the wrong town, mister. This is a cattle town and it is not hankering for dudes or grangers."

"I intend," the newcomer stated firmly but without heat, "to set up a saloon such as I ran in Boston if there is room here."

The smith grinned and spit and scratched a naked, hairy chest. "O'Brien," he chuckled, "that is a word meaning friend!" He spread his hand to the unused spaces checkering the town. "There ain't never been enough saloons in any cowtown! Squat where you're a-minded. For that matter, squat right there!"

O'Brien nodded gratefully and took off his porkpie hat to wipe a bald head, heat-fringed so that it looked like an angry desert sunset.

Sheriff Kendall came out of a shadow and crossed through the drifting, lemon colored heat. "Anything special to the



saloon you aim to run, friend?" he asked noncommittally.

"Not in Boston town, but maybe here," O'Brien answered. "I will set up a respectable, law-abiding establishment where a man can buy good liquor at a fair price and meet his friends for talk or a quiet game without fear of molestation or skull-duggery."

The giant frowned. "You mean to claim you've got yore fandango girls trained so they won't rob a drunk and yore faro men will deal an honest game?"

O'Brien drew his short thick body to its fullest height. "There will be no fandango girls, or any other kind, in my drinking place," he stated. "And I will run no house games!"

The giant stared at him with disbelief, then threw back his head to fill the street with roar of mocking laughter. "Listen to the Irish dude!" he guffawed. "No faro, no fandango, no molestation or skull-duggery!" He settled down to chuckles no louder than a cow's bellow. "I will set up a respectable, law-abiding establishment," he mimicked. He looked at the sheriff. "Kendall, you reckon you can cook up enough laws for this jasper to abide by?"

"I reckon," Kendall grinned. He watched O'Brien's choler rising, staining his face beneath his brick-red burn. "Mister," he allowed, "you are going to learn about cowboys the hard way if you set up here with them ideas. I thought the Irish were on the wild side."

"Them are the north Irish, a lot of black, savage pagans, and ill luck to them!" O'Brien growled with conviction.

The giant scowled. "I might be tracing myself to one of them," he growled. "My handle is Black McLaren!"

"Yiss," O'Brien nodded falling into thick accent in his anger. "You might. But you'd not be wanting to drink in my saloon, I'm thinking, McLaren, and so the way I intend to run my business will not

worry you." He turned from the big man.

McLAREN'S eyes blazed and his hairy nostrils pinched in tight and white, but the blacksmith threw his chuckle into the rising heat between the men. "Well, one respectable saloon won't hurt the town at all. The boys can gather there of Sundays, and there are even a few of us like decent liquor still, if we could get it."

"That you can!" O'Brien nodded with alacrity. "I'll serve no rotgut poison across my bar!"

His level gaze came back to McLaren. "Well," he said, "I was meaning no insolence, Mister McLaren, but you were picking me up a little quick, now. I have heard this was a country where a man could speak his mind and frankly, and where it was give and take, and he was judged upon his word."

There was no slightest easing of the giant's crossed pride nor angry glare. He said after a space, with a gritty roughness in his tone, "You heard right, and I will give my word that you won't last six months here, O'Brien!"

He let his hot look linger on the man with dangerous promise, then swung on one heel and moved with the roughness of an angered bull through the gathering crowd. There was an awkward silence until some waddy muttered, "Blacky's mad."

O'Brien blew thoughtfully against his lips. "He pitched into me somewhat fast," he said. "From what Jim Bridger and others told me, I was under the impression a man was given his chance to prove his worth in the cow country before he was hooted at and jeered."

The smith said, "You heard right enough, but it takes a mite of time for a stranger to prove up and for a dude to understand our ways and habits."

O'Brien nodded briskly. "I bear no man a grudge and we'll let it stand and



drink on me on that! If McLaren has a friend here, let him drink double."

The sheriff smiled and glanced around the crowd. "That is a claim no man will lie about," he told the pilgrim. "Black McLaren is a man who takes his friends and grudges mighty serious."

The crowd turned as if at a given signal and glanced off at Boothill, grinning, but O'Brien missed it, for he was climbing up into his toppled wagon, a man with a backside as broad as his chest, but with remarkable agility.

The town was not particularly new, but it was raw; not a trail town, but a cow camp that had not found its form and character and was growing now in whatever crude, utilitarian direction each day demanded. Nothing had been done to better that. Nobody had thought of a survey, or laying out lots and streets, or even putting the front lines of buildings along a common parallel. It was O'Brien who caused thought and agreement in that direction when he found that in all seriousness he could squat right where his wagon had broken down.

But what the country lacked in thoughtful planning it made up for in the robust, lusty speed of its action. At seven o'clock one morning O'Brien told his builder, "No place of mine will start as a dugout, but if you can lay one half of the floor, we can set up the bar, and if that wall is finished first, we will have mirrors under canvas to start out with."

He had brought his dismantled Boston bar and news of it already had men riding in from the hills. He had, it was said, the first mahogany bar, the first gilded mirrors, the first crystal chandeliers and the first brass rail seen in that country. Speed Galt, who owned the fastest of the local deadfalls, was already taking wagers on how long the chandeliers would last.

"As a matter of pride," O'Brien told him. "I will wager myself that they last as long as I do!"

Galt took his wager with a crooked grin. "You don't aim to get shot off first night?" he asked.

"Not me, nor my chandeliers," O'Brien said gravely. "I am not running an establishment for rowdies and for toughs and they will not be welcome with their monkeyshines here."

He had that stolid, stilted way of speaking and of thinking and the crowd hung around to get its laughs, but in the course of moving his bar equipment from his wagon he took over a bung starter, ice bat and sawed-off shotgun, and there was comment on the fact that the newcomer showed a practiced hand with them.

Day's warmth had not yet struck through the chill of morning when he had sorted his freight and made arrangements with the builder. He set off afoot, to the amazement of the early loafers, for a full mile's walk to the mill to arrange for chairs and tables. He found a good deal there of interest, principally the fact that the whole mill had knocked off to rope a bear that had somehow wandered down the river, and, figuring he had time to kill, he did not return to town until mid-afternoon.

His bar was up, solid and secure on puncheoned floors reaching precisely one foot beyond his rail; his mirrors and shelves were already in place against a framework not yet walled, and his chandeliers were hanging from a crossbeam. Some jokester had painted a sign: O'BRIEN'S REEFINED EST. NO WOMEN, NO FARO, NO CURSING, NO GUNS. Looking the place over with considerable dismay, O'Brien said of the sign, "No better one could I think of!" which took the devilish humor out of a friend of McLaren's who had expected its destruction would start a little fun.

O'Brien had his gala opening that night, serving real liquor and good liquor under chandelier light, and the hooting, shooting buckos who had ridden in to do a little



pistol practice got taken with a sense of civic pride in this highfalootin' gaudiness, and a drunken waddy who merely set a chandelier to tinkling with his hat was damned near roped and ridden out of town backwards.

At the end of the evening, Sheriff Kendall said to Cooney, the blacksmith, "If you'd told me this yesterday, I'd have said you'd been drinking cactus juice! But it's too good to last. He'll tread on the wrong toes and get smashed up inside of a week."

"I've got an idea," Cooney speculated, "that running a bar is not so different no matter where it is, and our friend O'Brien has the earmarks of being a solid citizen."

"No," the sheriff disagreed, "cow country isn't the same, and he should have waited a spell with those fancy mirrors and chandeliers. He's not on to the local lingo yet, and he will say the wrong thing to the wrong hombre without meaning to, or some waddy with sandburrs in his tail will put a challenge to him, and he doesn't know how to handle things."

Cooney looked off at the first rose gray smudge of dawn and yawned. "Mebbe, but it was a good powwow tonight, and it is good for a change to have a few drinks of decent liquor and a game with friends that isn't busted to hell and gone by some wild cowhand loaded up on snake pizen."

He yawned again, stretched, and they drifted their separate ways, and O'Brien stood with his incredibly spry legs planted in an empty doorframe listening to the hoofbeats fading out of town.

"A good country," he said with decision to himself, "and good people. There is need for a place like mine; it will encourage the decent and respectable. The wild bunch will not want to pay the price of good liquor and will weary of quiet and keep away, and the men who come will be the leaders and set the pace for good behaviour."

He liked what he had done, and he liked the way his opening had been received,

and most of all he liked the place he could take and the good he could do in the growth of this frontier town into a city. He was no boomer himself, but he was, as Cooney had said, a solid citizen, and the first picture on his walls, when he got walls, was not a lush woman looking innocent as sin, but a carefully drawn map of the town limits with suggested thoroughfares, alleys, watering troughs and a public square with trees.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Fight—or Run!

COONEY'S guess had been right and so had O'Brien's. His gentleman's saloon found plenty of gentlemen as customers in that rough, raw country, and something more—that the toughest waddies and gun kings, pitted against silent comparison with gentlemen, were anxious to show their own manners and behavior could match up to any man's. In five long months, not a man was actually bounced out of O'Brien's, although a few were quietly frozen out or simply crowded out, mostly by the other customers.

The dude had won respect and friends, but the very fact that his establishment had succeeded in his original intentions had left one glaring defect—nothing had happened that had really tested O'Brien's understanding of the country's ways and habits, nor proven him undeniably a man. He had not flinched at firmness when it was needed, but he had not needed the kind that looks into a gun and survives or the kind that quells a riot singlehanded.

So Sheriff Kendall too was right in his predictions, except for time, and the time element was part of McLaren's promise. One week before the six months was over, he came in from his back country grazes, wild and turbulent and pent up for explosion, with a violent man's rip-roaring need



to proclaim himself and make good a boast. It was a Saturday night and he was well liquored on raw green whiskey when he hit O'Brien's like a whirlwind, and not liking the sign which O'Brien had kept, smashed it from its hangings with two well placed shots.

He filled the street with his wild whoop, calling every man in town to come and blow the lid off things with him, and moving into O'Brien's establishment, collided with two men who did not scamper fast enough, and stretched both out in the sawdust by slamming their heads together in his iron hands. The boys were legging it from every saloon and honkytonk and deadfall and pouring behind him through the doors, sensing with that wild, animal instinct of the range that this would be either fun or trouble, and tonight would either show up or establish O'Brien's convictions.

The giant hitched his belt, and, dog-stiff of leg, surveyed the crowd with red-eyed arrogance. "Sissy stuff and pantywaist!" he snorted at the bar in general. "Is this satiddy in a cowtown or a Sunday sermon or a funeral?"

"Whose funeral?" a spiked up waddy called back, ready enough for some rough horseplay, now that McLaren was there to head it.

"Why, could be a funeral for a too damned respectable establishment!" McLaren guffawed, but there was ugly danger and rambunctious challenge in his tone, and damned thin humor.

He picked a big table up by its edge with one hand and tossed it out of his way as he would a stick of firewood. He walked arrogantly to the bar and slammed his open palm upon it with a force that exploded through the quiet and set the chandeliers to tinkling.

Only that delicate, melodious tinkling broke the dead quiet that had gripped the room. No man there had any idea of getting in McLaren's way when he was on

one of his real blow-offs. In these moods he was an unpredictable wolf who took offense quickly.

He cocked his head and listened to the tinkling, and wicked deviltry settled on his wild, bearded face. He looked at O'Brien across the bar and the prismatic light of those fancy lamps set a whirling kaleidoscope of malicious humor spinning in his eyes.

"Purty, ain't it, O'Brien?" he asked. "Purtier than music."

O'Brien was white around the gills, but he met the wild brute's gaze solidly. "Pretty enough," he agreed, "so no man who has come in here since the day I opened has wanted to harm them."

McLaren leaned on the bar and grew mockingly confidential. "Shucks, only a skunk would try to hurt somethin' purty as them chan-de-lays," he drawled. "Purty light, purty looking, and purty sounds." He reached an incredibly long arm over the bar and was able to take a bottle right off the shelf. He busted the neck on the barpole and, careless of splinters of glass, tilted it up to his mouth and let a full third of the bottle gurgle down his corded throat.

"Yessir, you made good yore boast, O'Brien," he purred with taunting civility. "That is good liquor that you're servin' and I'll break the jaw of the man says different!"

He chuckled and looked at the bottle and then half turning, singled out the town's permanent barfly and tossed it to him. "Here, you misbegotten squatter," he commanded, "drink yore fill of good liquor on Black McLaren!"

He turned back to O'Brien and wiped a hairy paw across his lips. "But I'm forgetting this is a specially respectable establishment for gentlemen to meet and have a quiet talk, and like I was saying, them chan-de-lays make real purty sounds, O'Brien. So purty we ought to hear 'em play like a circus organ."



He looked childishly pleased. He looked as if he meant to do O'Brien a favor. He turned idly at right angle to the bar, reached his gun out with intentional slowness, looked at the gun, at O'Brien, and at a chandelier. "Yessir, a real purty crash, like an organ," he nodded, and aimed his pistol.

O'Brien went dead white and his whole body jerked into one solid knot of keyed muscles. At the back of the room, Cooney murmured to the group at his table, "O'Brien raised too fast. He should have waited for the next card."

McLaren wiggled his pistol and thumbed the hammer back. "Kind of nervous tonight," he drawled. "Be hell if I went showing off this way and hit the wrong note, eh, Irish?"

Color flamed through O'Brien's tense whiteness. "I wouldn't!" he advised, tight and grim of voice. "There ain't a man in here ain't been proud of them chandeliers, Blacky!"

"Shucks, I'm right proud myself," McLaren grunted. "That's why I want the boys to see what a real purty bunch of tinkles they make! Why, I figure it should sound purtier than a stampede over an iced-up swamp with the brush sticking through, all stiff-coated!"

He had the gun lifted and beaded and he turned his head and laughed softly into the barkeep's face. "Mebbe purtier than one of yore Irish harps, O'Brien. List close now."

Absolute silence gripped the room. Not a boot scraped, not a breath was drawn. Even the giant's low, gritty chuckle had muted. His finger flicked and O'Brien sucked a hollow breath into empty lungs, and there was the click of metal on dead metal.

McLaren threw back his head and made the rafters shiver with his roaring laughter. O'Brien had gone pale again, and with it kind of weak looking. McLaren's laugh broke in mid-note.

"Ain't going to faint, are you?" he asked solicitously. "Strong bag of beef like you?" He leaned on his elbow, waggling the gun. "Shucks, what you need is a shot of excitement to set yore blood going," he grinned. "Mebbe something like this, Boston."

He opened his mouth and it looked like a red hole against his blue black beard. He put the muzzle of his gun inside and pulled the trigger. Somewhere the breath dumped out of a man like he'd been mule-kicked, and in another part of the room, a man's nerves came unsprung so that he jumped up like a jack-in-the-box with a big clatter.

McLaren eyed O'Brien with wicked humor, but this last act had failed to draw the Boston barkeep. A dead bullet or an empty chamber was an old trick with the boys. His whiteness had gone, as had his mottled flush, and his coloring was normal, although he still looked grim.

He picked up a glass and polished it. "Didn't go off, did it?" he said emotionlessly.

Violence came up through McLaren with the rush of a high wind. His face twitched and turned nasty. "Why damn you for a prissy sneak!" he rasped. "That's as good as calling me a liar to my face!"

O'Brien turned his back and set the glass upon a shelf. "I saw," he muttered, "what the whole room saw."

"Why you son!" McLaren exploded. "Making out I'm toting an empty gun!"

HIS hand flexed at the wrist and four rapid shots slammed out of his gun, tearing the braces on the shelf loose so that it crashed. That left him an empty gun, and O'Brien pivoted fast as a top. His hand moved down and up and he was holding his sawed-off shotgun obliquely across his chest.

"McLaren," he said flatly but without rancor, "I want no trouble and you've had



your fun. I figure this evens the score for my bad temper that day."

McLaren had gone gray with anger beneath his beard. His eyes were burning points of red fire, and the breath was whistling through his pinched nostrils.

"Why you skunk!" he rasped. "Pulling a gun on me when you know I'm empty!"

O'Brien watched him like a hawk. He still held the gun in the same position, he did not point it, but he knew a thing or two about quarterstaff and bludgeon fighting and was in a position from which a man could work a short weapon with remarkable speed and dexterity.

The crowd watched, fascinated, excitement a bright, cruel gloss on every eye, positions strained and grotesque with cruel anticipation of seeing another man hurt, another man fight. Brutal cruelty ripped through the layers of hanging smoke like a raw smell. Both men had made their play and taken their stand, and you could not front McLaren that way when he was drunk without somebody suffering mayhem.

At the back of the room, Cooney muttered in a stage whisper meant to put O'Brien on guard without involving himself, "That damned fool Bostoner is standing too close!"

But his warning came too late if it was even heard. McLaren's vicious mouth twitched once and red fire blazed from his eyes, and he rammed his empty pistol forward, catching O'Brien right at the wishbone. The barkeep turned sick and greenish looking and tried to move his scatter gun, but he was almost paralyzed. In the next instant, Black McLaren had grabbed it and ripped it loose with violent fury.

"So you'd pull a gun on me?" he yelled. "Well, smarter, tougher men than you have tried, bucko, but I'll tell you something. Never pull a gun unless you use it, Irish!"

He gave a raw, wild laugh and pointed the gun just to the side of O'Brien, but where he'd catch plenty of scatter, and pulled the trigger. There was a metallic click, and that was all. It was the same with the second trigger.

"Empty!" the giant rasped, and glared at the gun as if it had insulted him. "Empty—the yellow buzzard hasn't even keep a loaded gun! By mighty, I don't figure he's got the guts to shoot a man even if he had to crawl in shame!"

He switched his hand; he caught the gun just forward of the hammers. His rope corded wrist flexed and the butt slammed with a smashing crack on O'Brien's head. O'Brien was a heavy man and he hit the floor like a freight load, shaking the whole building.

McLaren was wild. His eyes were berserk, he was frothing at the mouth. He leaned over the bar to take another crack. But there on a shelf out of sight was a box of dude scatter shells, capped and primed and all fixed. His lips peeled back suddenly against his yellow teeth, and vicious pleasure took the place of fury in his face.

He slammed the box in front of him, splitting it open and loading. "So he wanted a little gun work—but gentle like and Boston fashion!" he chuckled. "Well, I'll teach him cow country fashion, boys. And how!"

He used the gun one-handed, as he would a pistol. He blasted the mirrors with howls of delight; he splintered the cabinets, he smashed every bottle and glass in sight. He leaned over the bar and lifted the beer barrels out as if they were ten pound sacks, rolling them out upon the floor and blasting them, so that they jetted like a hundred frothing, amber fountains.

"Is it beer you want to guzzle boys?" he roared. "There's beer for every man who wants it and it's free!"

He ran out of shots, but he didn't care



now. The place had turned into a carnival of riot, and all in praise of him. The decent folk were getting out with cold, unspoken contempt, and the toughs were smashing tables and chairs and raiding the bar for what liquor was left. For a full fifteen minutes the riot ran amuck, with Black McLaren roaring encouragement and chortling with malicious pleasure at the destruction.

Then he wearied of the sport and with his lightning switch of moods, let out a freezing roar. "To hell with what's left of this damned cradle of peace and piety!" he roared. "We'll finish the night at Speed Galt's place and give a bar a break that knows how to treat real cōwmen!"

He strode out into the night, the hooting, yelling, stirred-up crowd stomping after and trailing down the street in wild commotion. Across the way, the blacksmith Cooney stood with Z. Z. Zebulon, the banker, watching the wild crowd until it faded beyond the main drag into an alley.

"It's a funny thing," Zebulon grunted, "that Kendall never even showed."

"With elections coming up and every two-bit tough and would-be sport on the range behind McLaren solid?" Cooney grunted. "No, that isn't funny, but it's something to remember." He paused and put a light to his dead cigar and, drawing an even fire upon the tip, nodded his head across the way. "But it is a funny thing McLaren got so wild he didn't make good his boast."

Zebulon pivoted and stared, and then muttered with surprise, "By the devil's own horn, he left the chandeliers! He plumb forgot to shoot 'em!"

O'Brien sat up with a splitting head and rubbed at it, and his first clear thought was that the chandeliers were still intact. Wild hoots and shooting came from a distance, and slowly it occurred to him that the riot had spilled along to other points. He looked at the chandeliers again and it braced him as no drink could have, and

he climbed shakily to his feet and surveyed the damage with grim lips.

Cooney and Zebulon crossed over and came in. O'Brien found an unbroken bottle and in heavy silence set up drinks. Cooney hooked his glass toward him and drank. He nodded at the chandeliers. "At least you have those left," he said. "Galt would pay a fat price for them."

"No," O'Brien growled stubbornly. "It is a sign of Providence. No man is driving me out of a decent, honest business. I will continue."

Cooney made figures with his glass and blew against his lips. "The trouble," he said, "is that he has driven the business off."

"How's that?" O'Brien demanded.

Zebulon looked grave. He said without harshness, "There was something to be settled here tonight, Oby, and McLaren settled it in his favor. You should not have brought the scattergun into play, or else you should have had it loaded, and used it that way."

"What? You mean my patrons will drop away because I tried to behave decently with a berserk drunk?" he demanded.

"That isn't it," Cooney told him. He made a gesture at the shambles. "That's the answer. You were bested, and for fourflushing."

"O'Brien turned scarlet. "It was no fourfush I intended. I figured to humor him until Kendall came."

Cooney lifted his gaze without moving his head. "You don't think Kendall would have stepped into that?"

"And why not?" O'Brien growled. "I am a law-abiding citizen and this was mayhem and riot!"

The gray-haired banker shook his head. "You don't understand this country yet, Oby," he said.

"I understand," the barkeep snapped, "that I was running a decent place for decent men to have a decent drink, and



I am entitled to the law's protection! And I still am!"

Cooney turned his head to the banker. "You can't explain it. It's like the air out here. It's different, but there is no way to tell how until a man feels it."

O'Brien was scowling with an affront deeper even than his anger at McLaren. "You gentlemen are two of my best friends and customers, and you are practically telling me to clear out!"

"No," Cooney said. "We're just trying to save you embarrassment, pardner, but it's hard to make clear."

"Damned hard!" the barkeep growled with ruffled pride. "And I fail to see it. I will clean up the mess, order new mirrors and new stock, and in the meantime I will continue business."

Cooney's lips compressed and he looked at Zebulon, but neither pressed the conversation. The swamper and cook had vanished with the throng. The extra bartender was still there, either out of loyalty or fear of leaving. The four set to work cleaning up.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Gunhandy Man

AT SUNUP, what could be done was done and O'Brien said with stubborn spirit, "Thank you gentlemen, at noon I will be open as usual for business. I hope to serve your usual drinks before the close of day."

Cooney and Zebulon went out. The town was dead quiet after last night's drunken riot. They stood on the top step of the stoop and drew deeply of the clean, exhilarating morning air, and Cooney said soberly, "It is a rotten way to look at things, but I still have my business to consider. I can't drink any more in here."

"More than you will feel that way," the banker granted. "I am just one. But he failed to understand the country, and

maybe because of that, he failed to show McLaren up, and it's the unwritten code that when a man is licked, he moves along. It's too bad. He would have been a solid citizen if he had made the grade."

O'Brien went to his rooms behind the saloon and freshened up, his Irish temper boiling but his strong convictions of behavior holding him contained. He considered going to see the sheriff, but decided Kendall would be around in his good time, and went out and found a new swamper and cook, and at noon promptly had his storage stock on hand and what glasses were left shined and on new shelves, and stood doggedly behind his own bar waiting for his first customer.

By three o'clock, a few of the town's curious had drifted in, more to see him than to drink. By five, he had done a sober business, but not one of his regular customers had been in. He took his usual walk before the usual crowded hour of Sunday sundown, looking for Kendall along the way. Kendall had left town on some business, he learned. McLaren was in the hotel groaning off a splitting headache.

He went back to his place, but it was not the same. The usual crowd did not show at all. The men who drifted in pushed questions at him that set him short with his answers, and after one drink, they did not stay. Some gossip mentioned that McLaren had ridden out of town and saw O'Brien's square jaws harden, but the barkeep gave no answer and the man drifted out, chuckling, to spread the news that O'Brien would not even hear or mention McLaren's name.

By midnight there was not a soul in the place, and all that week trade grew less, beating his spirit down in silent defeat in a way that no man, not even McLaren, could have beaten him physically. From Thursday morning until Thursday midnight he did not have a single customer, and he closed the doors and put out all but a single table lamp, and sat



with two quarts of bourbon which he finished by dawn without even feeling them.

He pulled to his feet with dawn a dreary light coming through the top windows and stood a long space, staring at the points of softly colored light which the chandeliers reflected against the dark gray shadows. "Never before since the day you were put up," he told them grimly, "has your own light been out before three o'clock. It is out now, it was out last night at twelve. I will not sell you. I will break you up myself, but you will not shimmer and dazzle again in your own light, not tinkle in the light winds."

He blew out the lamp, got his hat and walked down to Naylor's Stables. He roused a grumpy hostler who would not meet his eye, and was sullen about renting him a rig. He had put his bullocks out to graze at Harold's ranch and he drove out now with day's clean, golden sunlight putting its first flat rays upon him. He was feeling shaken, uncertain and angry, but more, puzzled by what had happened.

Jeb Harold came from the saddle shed and told him, "They're up grazing on that north slope," and looked at him curiously. "Want me to have them herded down?"

"No," O'Brien grunted. "I'll drive up and take a look at their condition is all."

The rancher nodded and looked at the ground between his boots. "Figuring to use 'em soon?" he asked.

"I was figuring," O'Brien told him, "I might sell them."

Harold looked up quickly and he caught the conviction in O'Brien's eyes that the bullocks were about all the capital he had left, and as McLaren had boasted six months back, he would not last out the time. O'Brien nodded and slapped his horse along, and sat through the morning on the slope, just looking at the bullocks with a beaten man's weary lack of spirit, the present dullness of his mind in contrast to the vivid sharpness of his memories. He thought of how he had

first packed up and started west with those plodding beasts, and of his sureness that in the West a barkeep could be something above a suspected and inferior person, and could, with honesty, take a position of solid decency and help and importance to the community he settled in. He thought of the long, plodding walk through the gaps and across the rivers and the prairie, and of that final day as he came upon the town and decided this was the place for him.

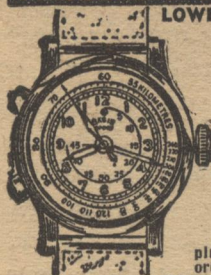
The beasts had been slow that particular day, he recollected, yet he doubted if their pace had actually been in the least different from when they started. It had been his own excitement and impatience, a false sense of delayed progress . . . nothing changed or slowed or flurried those lumbering beasts.

But they had changed out here grazing, he realized. They were tougher of muscle, surer of step, and from time to time as they smelled the long-horned cattle on the wind, they tossed their heads with flaring nostrils and there was a look that was anything but stolid in their eyes. They bore the marks of conflict, and he supposed they had been licked at first by the wild and wiry Western cattle, but the same stubbornness that made them stolid and plodding in the yoke had served to keep them from losing spirit under lickings, until they had caught onto the ways and manners of these wild Western beasts, and used their own superior force to lick them.

The thought floated around nebulously within his weary brain, fading and sharpening but never blotting out entirely, until suddenly he lifted his head with a sharp movement and stared at them, and then his Irish mouth pulled out in a man's hard, challenging grin. He lifted the reins and swung his horse around. Trotting back past Harold's, he called loudly, "Come on in tonight—the drinks are on the house!"



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## FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

**H**E DROVE back in and opened up for business. He stood on the stoop and called his invitation to old customers who strolled by. By evening, the word had spread all across the range, and by sundown, men began to gather, half-shamedly, sober of tone and manner, but curious as hell.

At nine o'clock, Black McLaren came stomping in, filled with arrogant contempt and brutal humor, taking attention immediately as his right. He stopped in the center of the room and, looking at the crowd, roared, "By mighty, this is a funeral and a real one! You boys are even dressed for it!"

He chuckled and moved to the bar, regarding O'Brien with gloating malice in his eyes. "So you're crawling out, but you had to give yore swan like any common, self-pitying yellowbelly?" he demanded. "Well mister, Black McLaren wouldn't want you to feel slighted on such an occasion, so I rode in to help things along."

He grinned and his gaze slanted up to the chandeliers. "Come to think of it, I missed something here last time that needs finishing for me as well as you."

He run his tongue around his cheek and gave the crowd a boastful wink. "Way I recollect," he said, "was I meant to give you boys a tune on them purty chan-de-leers."

He licked his lips and laughed, his mouth a wet red twist in his beard. He took his six-gun out, holding it in his palm and studying it with taunting attentiveness. He swung his wicked grin back to O'Brien, grunting, "Now, for yore special benefit—" he started and stopped dead, staring at O'Brien—

Staring into the muzzle of O'Brien's scattergun.

The barkeep's thumb pulled back the hammer. "Yessir," he told McLaren on a level note, "This evening on the house



## LAST BULLET TOWN

is for my very special benefit. This is the night I want to tell the range I'm staying in business, running a decent, respectable establishment within the law, a place where decent gentlemen can meet a friend for a decent talk or game of cards and a good drink, and like I said that first day, McLaren, my business won't worry you, for you'll not be liking to drink at my bar."

Sheriff Kendall was on hand and he grunted now, "What the hell is building here?" and started forward.

O'Brien's gun swung the slightest bit. With his scatter shot he could circle both the sheriff and McLaren.

"You kept out of this once before, Kendall," he said flintily. "This ruffian has drawn his gun and is facing me and this is both self defense and protection of property under the law!"

At the back of the room Cooney grinned and called out softly, "Sheriff, I got an idea this time his gun is loaded."

McLaren had that idea too. His face was white and his lips bloodless, and the look of a man battling with his courage was in his eyes.

"Now, Mister McLaren," O'Brien growled, "I have come to understand this country and you have come here to show me up. But I understand now what I have to do with your kind in order to hold the respect of a solid citizen in this country."

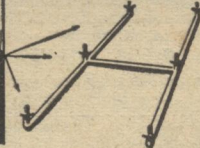
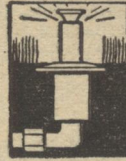
The veins were standing out and turning black on McLaren's gunhand. The small muscles were twitching, jerking with a man's desire to lift his gun and shoot it out, against sure conviction that the scattergun beaded dead upon him this time was this time loaded and in the hands of a man who would shoot.

"But this being a place for quiet, gentlemanly talk," O'Brien said crisply, his brogue thickening with Irish temper, "what was it I interrupted you in saying,

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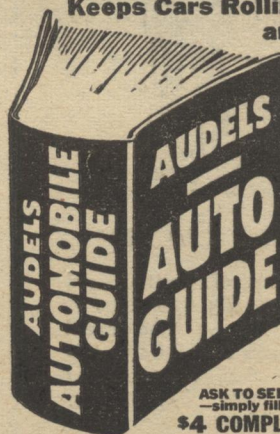
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## FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Mister McLaren?" He waited in silence.

McLaren licked his lips and looked around. He yelled hoarsely to friends and to the crowd, "He pulled a sneaky drop on me! You going to stand by and see me gunned?"

Two or three men's eyes ranged sideways, but Cooney had risen and came walking through the crowd with his right arm crooked, and now other men, the better element, began to shift positions, eyes hard and alert for foul play.

Cooney said, "Black, you had first draw and you're standing now looking at O'Brien with yore gun right smack in yore hand!"



Cooney got ready for foul play. . . .

The nerves were twitching in McLaren's neck, and all the cocksure brutality had rained out of his face. Suddenly he looked like a drowning man struggling madly for breath as he goes down. "I was only meaning to play a tune on them chan-de-leers!" he yelled hoarsely.

O'Brien pulled back his second trigger with a soft snap that had the affect of an explosion in the taut silence. "McLaren," he growled, "we don't allow that kind of play in here. Drop your gun now and get out. "Get out—*muy pronto!*"

Suddenly the giant caught the sweeping impact of all the hatred that his bullying and brutality had built up through the years, and with it he felt the contempt of men who did not fight unless they had to for men who make trouble just to strut



## LAST BULLET TOWN

in glory and gloat in pride. All of that came at him, and with it the other thing, the surging respect for the Boston man who was dead set even now on being a solid citizen.

He gave one desperate try to lift his hand, and it jerked up violently clean to his shoulder, and the gun went sailing back over the crowd's head. It clattered in the dead silence, and then somebody gave a muted laugh, and then a ripple of contemptuous humor ran in a growing wave through the crowd.

O'Brien was letting down the hammers of his gun, then he was reversing it and grasping it in one hand. He put the other hand flat atop the bar for the barman's spring, and there was a hot Irish light glowing in his eyes.

"No!" McLaren barked on a hoarse, cracking note. "Not a clubbing, O'Brien!"

"Then git!" O'Brien snapped, and he leaped over the bar. "Git, or by St. Bridget, I'll have every tooth in yer head for a watch charm!"

"All right, all right!" the big giant yelled, and turned toward the door. Something happened as he moved through the open space. The crowd made for him—he lost his size, he lost his power, he lost his threat to every one of them, and that terrible, unbearable laugh of scorn was beating him out and off the range as no physical beating ever could have.

Kendall looked at the crowd and caught the temper of its grins, and, nodding at O'Brien, moved after McLaren. "I'll just be seeing him out of town a ways," he grunted, and the corners of his lips touched with humorous respect as he passed the now hard-breathing barkeep.

"That is a laugh yer giving me!" O'Brien challenged, now full set to take up with anyone.

"It is," the sheriff agreed over his shoulder. "Yo're looking mighty wild and rough for a solid citizen, O'Brien!"

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## FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 6)

It broke his heart. Within four months, he realized what had happened to him, and he rolled over and died.

Man had won at last. Not with spurs and a bridle, but with kind words and a shrug.

Jack Carney  
Cheyenne, Wyoming

Now here's an account of the way a hitching-up was conducted in the high style of the Barbary coast, even though it was done in Louisiana:

Dear Editor:

No account of the extravagances of gold rush days would be quite complete without the story of the Durande wedding. Charles Durande was not a Californian—he was a Louisiana planter. But he procured, on one occasion, hundreds of pounds of gold and silver dust from the west coast diggings, for possibly the most wasteful and wonderful display in the whole wonderful history of gold.

Durande's two daughters were to be married in a double ceremony, and he vowed to give them a wedding no one would ever forget. The purpose of the precious dust? Not for dowries, though it would have been spectacular enough even at that.

An avenue a mile long, planted on either side with giant pine, threaded through Durande's estate to the portals of his white mansion. Before the wedding, he ordered from China an entire shipload of silk-spinning spiders and had them turned loose among the trees. Shortly the trees were covered with filmy webs. And then the gold and silver dust, brought by special courier over the long dangerous miles from California, was sprayed upon the spider webs by hundreds of slaves who worked with hand bellows, transforming the mile-long walk into a glittering canopy that literally rained gold upon the brides and their guests.

Thus leaving the Durande gardeners with the enviable distinction of being the only workers in the world with the job of cleaning out a few hundred thousand dirty dollars worth of gold from the master's vista.

Robert Torneau  
New Orleans, Louisiana

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Dear Editor:

"Strong White Medicine" was Jacob Hamblin's reputation with Ute and Navajo, Hopi and Walapais. This desert trader, safe and successful where it was dangerous for others to tread, had a simple formula for dealing with the red men—he al-



## ON THE TRAIL

ways kept his word. But he added a twist to it that made them revere him as something of a magician—he helped them also keep theirs.

When making an appointment, business or otherwise, with one of his Indian friends, Hamblin would present the man with a bag of red berries. "Throw one away every morning," he would say. "And when the bag is empty, meet me again."

It worked better than calendars sometimes do among civilized men. He said later that he had never missed a rendezvous, and that the Indians had never ceased to marvel over his knowing when the bag was empty.

Hal Cottrell  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

And here's Buckskin Frank Leslie, the man who went courting with a gun:

Dear Editor:

Among the legendary figures men still talk about is Tombstone's Buckskin Frank Leslie. Considered by many the best pistol shot the West ever produced, the record has it that Buckskin Frank's guns missed their lethal payoff just once.

A romantic, swashbuckling hardcase, clad in finest buckskin, it was Frank Leslie's habit to draw attention to himself by casual bullet-artistry, such as coin-shooting, at which he was nearly but not wholly perfect. It was when he faced other men's guns that he never missed.

A holdup man and outlaw by reputation, but never convicted, Buckskin Frank in his prime took unto himself a wife—by the simple device of killing her first husband in a gun duel, then successfully courting the widow. Later he was said to have kept her in line by occasionally parting her hair with a well-placed bullet, until she left him.

Becoming entangled with another woman, Leslie is said to have attempted to win her with the same methods that had once proven so successful—but this time he missed. He succeeded in killing her, but only wounded the man she preferred.

After serving a prison term for murder, Frank Leslie lived out his days in obscurity—as a saloon swamper.

Buck Salinger  
Burlingame, Cal.

Which brings us right up to the end of the trail for the present. We'll be seeing you at the railheads in our next issue, though, gents. Be sure to let us know how you feel about the stories that appear in *Fifteen Western Tales*, and you'll be hearing from us. *Adios!*

—THE EDITORS



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We don't ask you to believe *us*. Thousands of men and women—first skeptical just as you are—have *proved* what we say. Read *their* grateful letters. Study the guarantee—it's *better* than a free trial! Then try Ward's Formula at *our* risk. Use it for only 10 short days. You must enjoy *all* the benefits we claim—or we return not only the price you pay—but **DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK**. You be the judge! © Ward Laboratories, Inc., 1430 Broadway, New York 18, N. Y.

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