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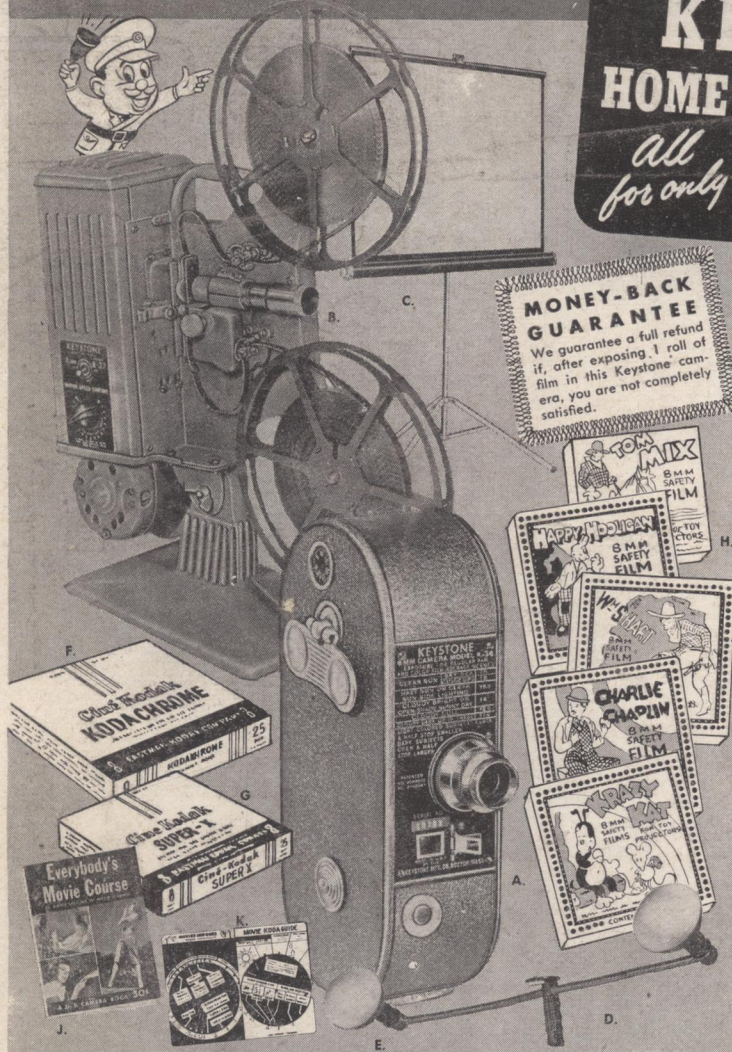
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RAJAH'S LOOSE!



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NEXT MORNING

E-E-E-E-K!
HELP! HELP!



MARY PETERS HAD HEARD THAT ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN ON OPENING DAY OF BASS SEASON. BUT THIS IS TOO MUCH!

RAJAH, YOU TOOTHLESS OLD FRAUD! WHAT'S THE IDEA SCARING FOLKS?

HE'S HARMLESS, MISS, GOT AWAY FROM OUR CIRCUS

I'M STILL ALLERGIC TO LIONS!



OUR GARAGE WILL HOLD HIM UNTIL YOU CAN GET HIS CAGE

I'LL SEND FOR IT NOW IF I MAY USE YOUR PHONE

CERTAINLY



YOU MUST BE STARVED AFTER TRAMPING AROUND ALL NIGHT. MAY I GET YOU A SNACK?

SOUNDS GREAT! WOULD YOU MIND IF WE CLEAN UP, TOO?



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JULY, 1950

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They met at last in the crimson dusk—the king of the badlands and the lawman from hell!
2. **BULLETS BAR BLOOD CANYON**.....*Thomas Thompson* 44
Men have died for a dream of steel—and have lived to dream of guns. Steve Nailor swore to make both come true—or go down with a six-gun tide!
3. **NO MAN'S RANGE (Conclusion)**.....*L. P. Holmes* 108
He could not live as a man—nor could he die—save as a coward—until he'd bought, with his last bullet, his right to no man's range!

Short Western Fiction

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Out of a backshoot grave he rode, gambling an instant from eternity on his sixes!
7. **KILLER'S LAND**.....*Kenneth Fowler* 80
If you can ride under another man's brand, why, you're hardly fit to die under your own!
8. **BOOMER, BEWARE!**.....*Arthur Lawson* 90
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● ON THE TRAIL ●



LIGHT down, gents, and we'll palaver a while. We've got George C. Appell, one of the best storytellers in the business, leading off our drive for this issue, sided by such top hands as Day Keene and Shad Collins. Let us know what you think of their stories, won't you? We're here to bring you what you like best in Western fiction, and this space is here for you to sound off in. And speaking of sounding off, it looks as though you readers have been busy getting together true tales from the history of the Old West. Suppose we let you take over the reins from here on in:

Dear Editor:

Noah Kellogg was a prospecting oldtimer, a fool's-gold follower, and he had chased a dream up and down the face of the Western mountains for years without finding anything but old age. He turned up in Murray, Idaho, in the mid-eighties, full of aches, pains, and plans. Somebody gave him a job as a millhand. There was a lot of excitement in the district those years, about silver lodes.

Maybe old Noah Kellogg, the millhand, tried to talk his way into the excitement. The record doesn't say. Noah, grizzled, a little ragged, was no recommendation for his own advice.

About the same time, a jackass adopted the town. It had no visible owner, no par-

ticular reason for hanging around—just walked in one day, began to bray, was driven out, and returned. The citizens of Murray got used to swearing at its raucous voice, echoing down the neighboring canyons.

Noah Kellogg lost his job as a millhand. He had two alternatives. He could starve in town—or go out and starve in the hills he had mined in his youth. He settled for the latter, pleaded with two fairly solid Murray citizens, men of his own age, for a grubstake. As he talked, the ass brayed in the distance.

The two bored Murray men decided to get rid of two nuisances at once and, putting their pennies together, they managed to scrape up supplies valued at a little under twenty dollars. With these, and the stray jackass, old Noah Kellogg took to the hills, infallibly choosing, by ancient instinct, the twisted road to no paydirt.

Not so the jackass. Within three days, the pack animal had sized Noah up and found him wanting. Silent for once, the stray slipped its tether before dawn and wandered to better pastures. Old Noah spent a hard day hunting his four-legged partner up and down the mountainside—possibly, though he didn't know it, the most profitable day of his life. An irrepressible bray rewarded him at sunset, when he found the creature in a remote though comfortable meadow. The happy ass declined to budge, and Noah, held against his will in that unlikely spot, saw something that made him reach for his pickaxe.

Noah and the nameless ass had just discovered the biggest silver mine in Idaho.

It would be pleasant to record that the

(Continued on page 8)

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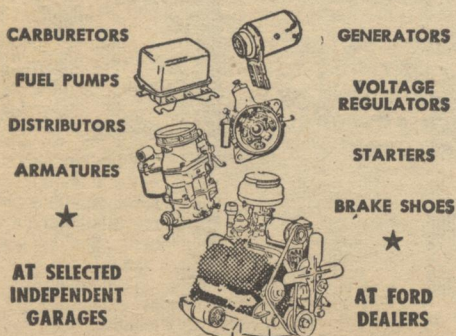


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(Continued from page 6)

old miner and his old creature lived happily ever after—but the ways of the West were more turbulent than that.

After much litigation, brought on by the men who had put up the twenty dollars to stake him, Noah sold out his share in the find for a fraction of its worth—and the clever, vagrant old jackass, after enjoying a short period of admiration and respect in the town of Murray, became just too much of a nuisance to the townsmen, who figured he would probably never find a mother lode again. Or, if he did, it still wasn't worth it. He was just too noisy.

They tied a few sticks of dynamite to his midsection, ending in a long fuse. Then they ran.

After a while, there was an explosion down the canyon, and some echoes. The greatest silver miner of them all had made his last utterance.

And no one mourned his passing—not even Noah Kellogg.

Stanley Mason
Boise, Idaho

In the West, they do everything big. Here's the story of a rumor-builder who went at it in typical Western fashion:

Dear Editor:

They say an Indian never forgets, but even an Indian's memory is a human thing, and when filtered over a few generations, may have some odd results.

The queerest swap ever offered a white man by an Indian was a result of this long memory. Brigham Young, leader of the Mormon pioneers, was approached by a one-armed Indian on the trail, who'd heard Young was a big medicine man, and wanted to do business. His request—a replacement for the missing arm.

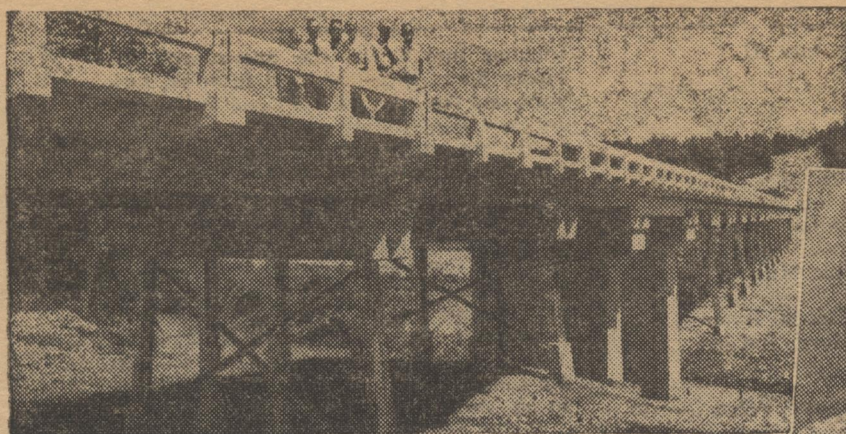
Young, tracing back the strange credulousness of the one-armed one, unearthed a much-traveled Illinois chief, more than a hundred years back in the tribe's history. This chief, one Chicagou (no relation to the town) had been invited by an early French explorer, Etienne de Bourgmond, to visit King Louis XV at Versailles. The Indian chief actually made the voyage to France, where he was treated with respect and wonder. Full of big plans for his people, he eventually returned to the new world.

He told them the French built wigwams one on top of the other, to the height of a cottonwood tree.

The Illini suggested that Chief Chicagou was crazy.

The French counted time by looking at a small box a man could carry with him

(Continued on page 10)



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(Continued from page 8)

anywhere, said the well-traveled chief.

The people said the chief was a liar.

Desperate, the traveler finally came up with the pronouncement that French medicine men could build new arms, legs or heads for those who had lost the originals.

And more than a hundred years later, the story still was in good repute among Indians on the banks of the Missouri.

Charles Kennedy
Gary, Indiana

We'd like to tell one now. We'd like to tell you gents who like your fiction fast-paced and with a lot of punch to it, and that should take in the whole crowd, about a brace of movies we got an advance look at the other day.

They're both produced by United Artists' Studios. One is called *Quicksand* and stars Mickey Rooney, Jeanne Cagney and Peter Lorre. It's the story of the futile attempts of a young boy to cover a trail of wrongdoing. The other is titled *D.O.A.*, and stars Edmond O'Brien and Pamela Britton in the gripping tale of a man who fights his way back from the grave to explain his own murder! We'd advise you to ride close herd on your local movie theater and single these two stories out for special attention when they show up in your territory.

Let's get back to you gents now, with a question. Will wonders never cease? Answer: probably not, as long as the West is around:

Dear Editor:

Somewhere in California there is a golden bathtub, built by nature—and the man who found it first is buried in the area, whether near to it or far no one knows. The lake with the floor of gold is just not on the map.

Nearly a hundred years ago, Francis Lingard was prospecting in the Sierras when drought threatened to send him to the nearest settlement. He had given up looking for gold temporarily—water had become more important if he was to get to Nelson Point alive.

For an afternoon, luck was with him—for an afternoon he had everything, forever, for the rest of his life. In the shadow of the tall, dry pines, he found a little mountain pool, still filled with clear water, and

trickling into it was the stream with the golden floor. When he knelt to drink, Lingard saw the color he had come to the hills for, and gone thirsty for. The pebbles lay on the creek bottom, pure gold, just for the picking—the water was cold and sweet, the autumn evening had no bite in its chill.

Lingard made camp that night by the lake shore. It was the best night of his life. In that one night, he built palaces and lived in them. In that night, he dined at Delmonico's in New York and was presented to Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace. Clouds were gathering in the sky, but Lingard didn't see them, in the darkness, in his sleep.

In the morning, he took all the gold he could load and resumed his journey to Nelson Point, after carefully marking the spot.

Before long, he found the burden too heavy. He made a cache, resumed the trip to the settlement, where people were praying for rain.

The rains came as requested. It rained steadily for days.

When the weather was clear again, Lingard returned to the mountains. But he never found the creek with the floor of gold, that emptied into a little lake. There were only big lakes now. Nor could he find the cache that he had made at the foot of a tall pine. Worried, he continued his search for weeks, until he had spent all the gold he had. Then he told his story to John Carrington, a storekeeper, who agreed to grubstake him as soon as spring came.

The two men spent the following year in the search. Nor did they lack help. Other prospectors became interested, and went from lake to lake, looking for Lingard's lost dream. At last they gave up.

But Lingard himself did not give up. He kept looking, working at odd jobs between trips till he had enough money to stake himself, and then he would go back to the hills where his palaces were. Especially in the times of drought, for years, he was known to haunt the Feather River region, a man with a thirst for special waters.

His thirst never was slaked again. And his find, and his dream, joined the great body of lost treasure and lost hope that make up the back pages of the West's history.

Don Jameson
New Orleans, Louisiana

Which brings us to the end of the trail for this time, gents. We enjoy hearing from you, so if you have a story out of the Old West that you haven't sent in, share it with your fellow readers of *On The Trail*. Until we see you next time, *Adios!*

—THE EDITORS

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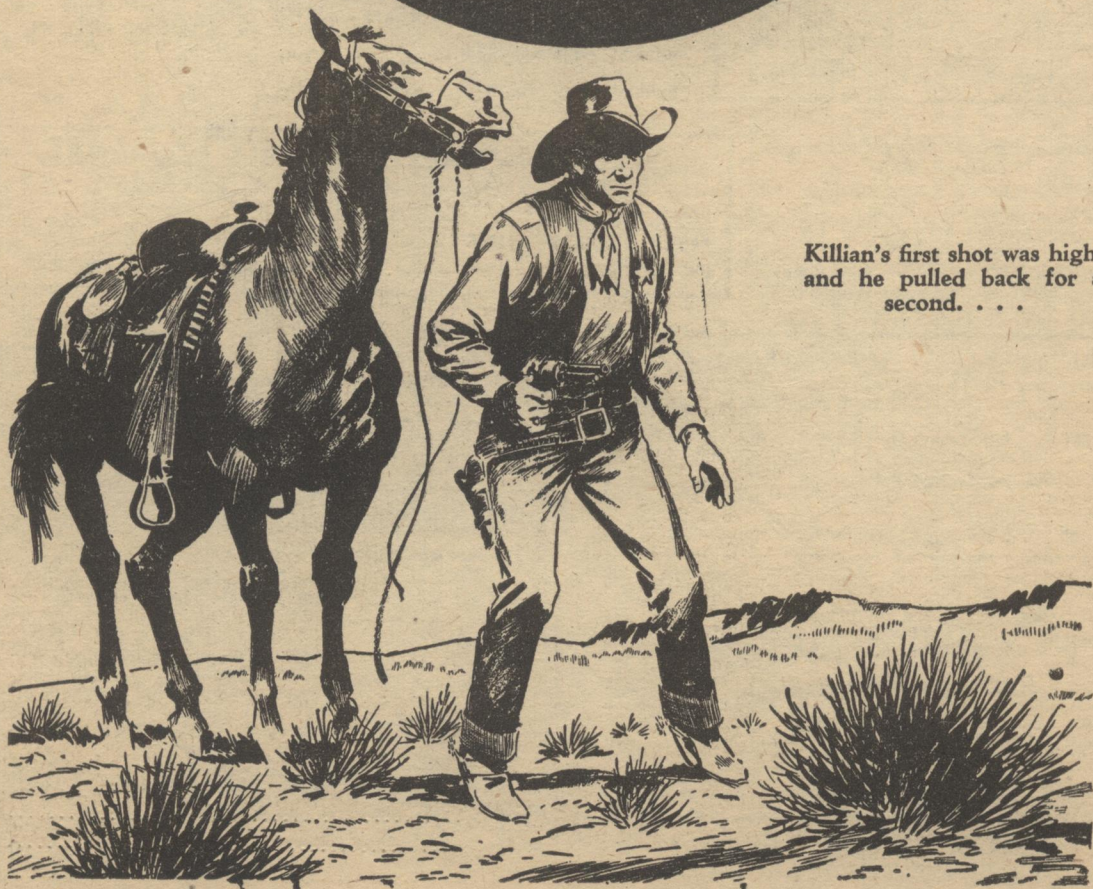
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CHAPTER ONE

Coward’s Brand

A SINGLE shot crashed through the summer stillness of Indian Wells and men dove.

They sprang behind feed boxes, into doorways, behind plank walks—huddling under three inches of raised wood in the animal instinct of self-preservation. And



then someone laughed and the laughter was ragged and hollow and it filtered away after the echo of the shot. Sheepishly, half-grinning, men rose and came out of doorways and out from behind feedboxes and up from the dust of the one street. They batted idly at their clothes, eyes down, not caring to look upon one another. Miss Pansy Perkins, she who imparted book learning to such of the ranch children as would attend her school, whacked dust from her parasol, clucked her store teeth, murmured "Ah decla'—" and marched primly past the saloon and so to the New York Emporium for a bit of ribbon.

Dale Sutton took his hand from his gun, tugged his hat low and stepped from the coolness of his sheriff's office into the heat-blasted street. He made a motion to Rusty O'Rourke and the redhead came out of the shade of the saloon entrance and blew the last tendril of smoke from his gun muzzle and proceeded to reload.

Dale said, "Talk to me, Rusty. Be friendly with me. Tell me why you did that."

"I don't know, Dale." The redhead holstered and stuck grimy thumbs into his belt and squinted in puzzlement. Through his squint, he noted Dale's calm grayness and limp smile and slumbrous eyes. Dale Sutton wasn't a man to do immediate things immediately, and you would have thought that he was better qualified for the role of bench loafer than that of sheriff of Indian Wells. Yet there was something to him, something that wouldn't take shape on a man's tongue and come easily into words; something slow and forceful—like an elephant leaning inertly against a tree, until the trunk splintered. "Dale, it's nerves—though not yellow cords, understand. Nerves—trail nerves, like you git after you've drove three thousand head from the Dalles up to Kaycee."

"I think I see what you mean." A

crosstie on the planking had been ripped white by Rusty's bullet, and Dale ambled over and pushed it flat with a boot. "Rusty, you'd think Owen Killian was on the edge of town, the way men act . . . Don't do it again, Rusty. I'll lift your badge if you do."

Rusty O'Rourke had been deputized that morning. "I promise, Dale."

Dale Sutton crossed the street and clinked onto the opposite walk and headed for the bank. The bank was a square brick building, one story high and with no false front. There was an alley between it and the Emporium, and at the alley head Dale Sutton stopped and turned and faced a fat man and smiled softly upon him. "Beg pardon?"

The fat man swallowed sandily a few times, debating whether or not to repeat himself. The little old pappy man he was talking to swung away and walked briskly to the tie-rail. Dale repeated, "Beg pardon, Mist' Sutherland? I thought you had called me, suh."

"Mebbe mentioned yuh name, Sutton. Loose shootin' ain't fuh the Wells."

"Course it isn't, Mist' Sutherland. You heard any more?"

Sutherland flapped his moist mouth in and out and jiggled his thumbs up and down his braces and cleared his throat. "What I mean is, there may be more."

"Owen Killian?" Dale Sutton elevated his chin so that he was smiling the length of his long nose. It gave the effect of height, though he was no taller than Sutherland. "He won't bust into a feed store, suh. He'll hit the Wells fed full."

"Well . . . thought I'd mention it."

Sutton wanted mightily to play tag with insults, but he didn't have the time. He needed to abuse this obese whisperer and bring from him the admittance that he had been telling the little pappy man that the sheriff was too slow in the job. But he lacked time, he had to see the banker. "Mist' Sutherland, I recommend,

suh, that you put into print any opinions you may hold about the law." Dale half-turned to the brick wall behind him. "I put my 'pinions into print." And he tore loose a paper poster and slung it at Sutherland and held his hand just short of the man's bulging belly. "Read this yet?"

Sutherland didn't take it, for he had read it several times. It announced a five thousand dollar reward for Owen Killian, preferably dead, wanted for a jailbreak at Jefferson City and two bank lifts since. Each of the lifts had occurred between Jefferson City and Indian Wells; and the second had been closer to the Wells than the first.

"He rides alone, Mist' Sutherland." Dale crumpled the poster and tossed it away. "So don't be afraid."

"Me?" The fat chins shook in denial. "Me? I ain't—"

But Dale Sutton had already stalked noiselessly into the bank. For an instant the teller started to squat, face rigid in fear. The cashier, as Dale passed his desk, brought his hands from a top drawer and pressed them onto a blotter in order to remove gun grease. Dale knocked on the door to the lone private office and kicked it open gently and walked in and kicked it shut behind him. He took off his hat.

"I understand, suh, that you wish to see me." Dale sat down and ran the brim of his hat through his fingers.

Gavin Gore nodded curtly. He was a square-jawed man with solid white hair and restless eyes. He kept dripping cigar ash onto his bright weskit and brushing it off; he kept revolving the cigar in his hard mouth, sliding it from one side to the other, taking it out and holding it for inspection, replacing it and revolving it some more.

He was sitting sideways to his desk, rocking slightly, and he spoke to the fly-specked window instead of directly to Dale Sutton. "I'm worried. So are you. So's everybody."

"No cause for that, suh."

"No?" He favored the sheriff with a lip-lift that showed rickety gray teeth. "The man's a killer."

Without pride or arrogance, Dale said, "So am I."

"Huh." Gavin Gore lay his cigar in a brass tray and swung around to face Sutton. "You're fairly new in your job, Sutton. You got elected to it because people felt sorry for you after you lost your ranch, before the War. You know that, don't you?"

"I suspect it, suh."

"Well, I think you're going about this thing wrong. You've only deputized two men, and they're both in town. They ought to be out on the prairie where they can see." Gruffly, Gore asked, "That shot—didn't O'Rourke fire it?"

"He did, suh, and has been reprimanded."

"That sounds like Army talk." Gore picked up his cigar and struck a match and held the flame to dry ash. "Thing is, Sutton—" he blew out the match—"the war's been over for now four years and—" he dropped the match and puffed—"things're different." He coughed roughly. "I'm a member of the parole board at Jeff City, and law enforcement has changed, I can tell you."

"Would you like a reconnaissance in force, mist' Gore? I could telegraph to Jeff City for some marshals, 'cept that the telegraph—" he coughed apologetically—"has been tampered with."

"So I heard." The restless eyes jumped all over Dale Sutton. "Probably Killian's work. That means he'll strike soon. Well, Sutton, I can't risk it. Put your men out of town where they can see."

Dale held onto his hatbrim, not turning it. "See what, suh?"

Gavin Gore looked long at him and the blood flooded through the broadness of his face and pinked his scalp. "Owen Killian." He said it quietly—respectfully,

almost, and with just a shade of fear.

"It's been my experience, mist' Gore, that the more men you deputize, the more men get killed. Further, Owen Killian is a lone hand, and that's the way I prefer the game. That is to say, he rides alone."

"Meaning?" The word was blade-thin, blade-sharp.

Dale Sutton shrugged idly. "That sometimes, men who ride alone have friends along the way."

The blood washed up into Gavin Gore's scalp. He bit down hard on the cigar, and its tip tilted upward. "Would you know any of these friends, Mr. Sutton?"

"No, suh. Not yet." Unaccountably, Dale Sutton felt fear. Not the fear that makes a man lunge for his gun but the fear that warns him that soon he may have to.

"I see." Gavin Gore seemed to relax, then. "Odd, Sutton, that you should want this job. I mean—" Gore was talking to the window again—"a man who let a ranch slip through his hands isn't likely to be content with sheriff's pay and fees."

Dale inhaled and exhaled before he spoke. He had to control the trembling in his hands. "There was a war on, suh."

"Uh-huh. But you got foreclosed before 'sixty-one, as I recall."

"I could have got it back—if I'd stayed here."

GORE didn't say anything for a few minutes. He let ash drip to his weskit, and he brushed it off. He rocked slightly as he smoked. Then, "Sutton, I'm sorry I won't be here to see you handle your first gunfight. I've got to be in South Pass this week for a conference."

"I see." Dale pushed his brim through his palms again. South Pass had a bigger bank than Indian Wells, and for an odd moment Dale Sutton considered suggesting that Gore take the cash on hand with

him, under escort. But he didn't, because the suggestion would undoubtedly be denied. South Pass was down near the Line and it did a lusty business in the sort of goods that come over the Line in the moonlight, and it wouldn't be likely to want guardianship of someone else's troubles. "When do you leave, suh?"

"Tomorrow." He said it loudly—too loudly, Sutton thought. *Glory be, everyone has trail nerves!*

Sutton asked, "You want the deputies out on the prairie? Between here and Jeff City?"

"Anywhere you want 'em. You're supposed to handle that. But yes—out of town, where they can do some good." Gore dropped his cigar into a cuspidor and it hissed out. He swung around to Dale Sutton. "Maybe you're right, about handling a lone man alone. Man like Killian—he couldn't have any friends." Gore's wink took Sutton by surprise. "He was in the war too. On the other side, though."

"Truly, suh?"

"With King Quantrill." Slyly, Gore asked, "Ever hear of King Quantrill?"

"If you mean William Clarke Quantrill, of the Kansas Confederate Irregulars, I have heard of him, suh. And if you refer to Killer Quantrill, who massacred Union wounded while eatin' his lunch, I am certain I have heard of him, suh. That Quantrill, mist' Gore, was killed at Taylorsville near the end of the War." Sutton noted the tear in the brocade of Gavin Gore's weskit.

"Yes . . . there's even talk that Owen Killian shot him, and not some Union man." Gavin Gore studied Dale Sutton side-eyed, thinking, *Not the killer type, this one. He talks about it, but he doesn't do anything about it. Too slow. Safe. Prefers to play it safe.*

Gavin Gore smiled. "I suppose you'll tell me that you killed Quantrill." He had no desire to imply insult.

Dale put on his hat and stood up. "I was in the vicinity of Taylorsville in the spring of 'sixty-five. I know something of Quantrill's Raiders."

"I see." Now Gore studied Sutton full-faced, overtly. His smile sank to the faintest grimace. "Didn't I hear somewheres that you tried to take a prisoner once, and spared him—and that he took you?" It was something that wasn't mentioned in Indian Wells; no matter what they thought of Dale Sutton as a sheriff, they liked him as a person.

Dale put one hand to the doorknob. "I asked him for his gun, and he gave it to me from the wrong end—after he'd agreed to surrender." He opened the door.

"Never agree to anything under arms, Sutton. Me—I don't carry a gun."

In the doorway Dale said, "Me, I wish I didn't have to." He went out and strode the length of the bank and found the street. Late afternoon shadows were seeping into the street, and the sheriff clinked across them and went to his office. Rusty O'Rourke was there, spraddled in a chair, flipping his cylinder out, spinning the chamber, flipping the cylinder back into the frame again. Dale told him to holster.

Rusty got up. "I was merely playin' with the thing, Dale."

"You got to play on the prairie now. Get Lipscomb. Haven't seen him since I deputized him. Tell him to flow back and forth northwest of town. You stay in circulation northeast of town. Arrange to meet occasionally directly north of town."

"I don't get it."

"You will, son. Old Man Gore wants it that way, and it's his bank we're paid to protect these nights . . . Mount up and track. I'll be here. Oh, just a minute, Rust—that telegraph repaired yet?"

"Nossir. Man's comin' down from the Company in Jeff City to fix it." Rusty O'Rourke swung his jaws unbelievably.

"Looks to me that this Killian must be mighty untrained in pole-climbin'. That pole where the wire was cut looks like a bear had tried to git up it."

"Maybe one did. . . . Evenin', Rusty, and don't shoot 'til you're sure it's Owen Killian, hear?"

Rusty O'Rourke heard that; and going out to the tie-rail, he wished that he hadn't. There was something too hesitant about this sheriff, too lag-handed. Rusty liked to shoot, he liked the kicking buck and burn of a .44 and he liked to see his target jerk to the impact of lead. Lipscomb liked it like that, too, and he said so as they trailed slowly into the twilight north of Indian Wells.

Rusty shook his head and ticked his tongue against his teeth. "If he was jus' a little faster, and not so pussyfoot about every damn single thing. . . ."

"Mebbe he got shook up in the War, an' don't like the sound of guns." Lipscomb had ridden with the 2nd Michigan under command of a youngster named Custer and he still had trumpets and banners in his head. "Ride to the guns, I allus say."

At the point where they parted to go east and west respectively, at the place where the telegraph dangled off its insulator, Rusty ventured, "Maybe for that money, he don't want to get shot at no more."

"For thirty a month?" Lipscomb raked a hook and moved west. "That's what I been thinkin'—it isn't much." And to himself he added, *When there's a chance to make some more easy.*

Dale Sutton was half-dozing in his office, boots crossed on the battered desk, hands folded across his narrow stomach. Thought patterns whirled in crazy kaleidoscope across his weary brain and kept him awake and restless; he didn't want sleep, but he did seek relaxation and he wasn't getting it. He came full awake and sat up and leaned forward on the desk, toying

with an empty tobacco sack. The lamp was down and outside most of the lights were off and Indian Wells was closing up for the night.

He raised the lamp wick an inch and made a smoke and sucked on it awhile, turning the image of Gavin Gore over in his mind. Gavin Gore was a threat to his plans, such as they were, and Gore should be watched. But in the morning he was leaving for South Pass to attend a conference. Maybe that way was better. Dale Sutton thought, *You can kill a man and that's the end of everything for him, but there are other ways, better ways. A man is either good or he is bad, and if he's bad you must kill his soul before you kill his body. Bullets are notably unsuited for that—the way I figure it.*

Owen Killian . . . quick of hand and fast of foot and with the spirit of Satan staining his very soul. Owen Killian, standing there laughing through the shot smoke, reaching for a *riata* that he carried under the gray smock worn by the Quantrells. Looping out the *riata* and neatly snaking Sutton's pistol off the ground where it had fallen after Killian had shot it out of his hand. Owen Killian, lashing Sutton's face with the *honda*, and then mounting and dragging Sutton through the red mud like a dead dog. Dragging him until his ribs were cracked through and his jaws were torn raw and he was a gasping thing, a mutilated thing, a thing only half alive . . . some blue-breechered Mounted Infantry had slipped through the woods then, and Owen Killian had slammed two shots into his captive and galloped off into the pines. The last of his laughter had stayed with Sutton for a long time.

Sutton crushed out his smoke and sat back in the chair and felt his body gingerly. The shot holes still hurt, when he was tired, and his back teeth throbbed brutally and made him wince. He wondered if there was a dentist in South Pass.

CHAPTER TWO

While Satan Laughs

IT WAS dawnlight, thin and gray, when he lifted his head from the desk and yawned and jumped to his feet. He heard the rider plainly now and he grabbed his hat and patted his gun and stepped outside. O'Rourke, it must be, or Lipscomb. But there had been no shots, and shots woke him up no matter how deeply he slumbered.

The rider came in at a heavy gallop and turned his foam-curded horse toward the office and dropped to the ground clumsily. "Sutton?"

"Yes?" The rider was a stranger. Sutton reached for the paper he held out. "For me?"

"That's right." The man was getting his breath. "Two days it tuk . . . I saw one of your deppities yonder . . . he said you'd be here."

The pencil scrawl on the yellow foolscap was from the telegraph operator at Company headquarters in Jeff City. It read—all the words run together without breaks—"K R Nevins of Sundown Y spread found killed this evening on west fence with horse intact Apparent motive personal robbery Prints of only one other horse This may be Killian heading for Wells Wire to be repaired this week."

"Two days ago, huh?" The Sundown Y was a day's fast ride east of the Wells; Nevins, therefore, had been found between the spread and town. That would place Killian almost on top of the Wells—if he was going to hit it. Sutton believed that he was. "Any posses out from Jeff City?"

"One makin' up when I left. But they was feelin' west, not south, for here."

Sutton made a ball of the message and rubbed it between his palms. "Maybe I'll get his gun first, this time."

The rider flung spit. "Lead travels

both ways, Sheriff. I wouldn't try for his gun—I'd try for his heart."

Dale threw the paper into a basket. "Maybe I'll do that, too . . . Look, mister, the restaurant opens in about ten minutes. Get some grub, then do me a favor: tell that deputy who stopped you to move east toward the Sundown, will you? To stay between it and town. . . . Many thanks." The sheriff unlocked a desk drawer and peered inside and unfolded a square of paper and examined what was inside it. Then he carefully folded the paper and shut the drawer and locked it again. He'd have to move slowly now, for he sensed that the long kill was about to start.

The town was talking about it all morning; men stood under verandas and spoke cautiously and tried to divine why K. R. Nevins had been shot. Nevins had been a quiet man who ran a good outfit and made good money on beef for Kansas City. But he'd been close with that money, and the men of Indian Wells guessed that he had a considerable amount on him when he was murdered. "For payroll to the bench and fence riders," someone muttered, and the others nodded. They were so tangled in thought they neglected to tip their hats to Miss Pansy Perkins as she tripped toward school.

The man who had mentioned the payroll called, "Just a minute, sheriff!"

Dale Sutton came toward him with the taste of breakfast still in his mouth and stopped ten feet from the group. Eyes were narrowed upon him, and there was little welcome in them. "Suh?"

"We been talkin' about more deputies, or a posse."

"Truly?" Dale tugged at his long nose thoughtfully. "Two're enough, seems to me, thankin' you for the interest, suh." He made smoke and let it stream from his nostrils.

Fat Mr. Sutherland pushed out from the group. "Now see here, Sutton, if

we'd had deputies ridin' over Sundown way, Nevins'd be alive now. And remember that we had to get the news from Jeff City—and not from our own law enforcement agency." He cleared his throat roughly. "Sech as it is."

Dale spouted smoke and shook his head once. "Thing is, gentlemen, that the more men you have in front of a gun, the more men get killed. I wouldn't like that."

Suspicion held them to silence. It was an icy thing, cold as a lance. The fat man Sutherland felt encouraged by numbers. "You speak fuh yo'self, sheriff, not fuh us."

Softly, easily, Dale told him, "One against one is fair enough." He didn't dare say more, for he realized that you are the master of your unspoken words but the slave of your spoken ones.

"S'pose there's more'n one? S'pose Kilian has a crowd with him?"

Dale ventured, "He may have a friend, but the friend won't be with him." The suspicion stiffened. He could see it in them. Sutherland let his alpaca jacket fall open to reveal the glint of imitation silver on his gun butt. Dale went on, "Nor if there'd been a posse would it have been over Sundown way protecting a payroll. It would have been groping between here and Jeff City—and that, gents, is the wrong direction!" He spit out his cigarette and walked away and left them with that.

Gavin Gore slapped a team out of the livery stable opposite the Emporium and waved his whip in salute to the group. The rig rolled south, dust dripping from its wheels, and Gavin Gore was gone. Sutherland said, "A fine man, Mistuh Gore."

Everyone grunted agreement. Someone observed, "Lucky for the prosperity of the town that he won't be here this week, an' mebbe get hurt. We need men like that."

Sutherland shook his jowls up and

down. "Fuh my part, gennelmen, I'm keepin' my holster open." No one believed him, but they didn't call him on it because their interest was centered on Dale Sutton's retreating shoulderblades, and that interest was not nice.

Sutton reached his office and this time when he unlocked the desk drawer, he removed the object which lay in the square of paper and pushed it into his pocket. He had a feeling that he might want it later, and that he would forget it if he didn't take it now.

He pulled his gun and snapped open the chamber and took out each bullet and resealed it. He closed the chamber and holstered the gun and found a carton of extra ammunition and broke it open. He filled his pockets with shells and replaced the carton. Then he unhooked two Army canteens from wall nails and filled them at the pump in back, and he rigged the canteens to his saddle and soothed his horse a bit and gave him a palmful of oats. It was mid-morning by the time he had gone to the restaurant and bought cut bread, bacon and coffee and placed them in his light saddlebags with a can and a spoon and a small pan; and it was close to noon when he had secured a steel spool and stuffed it with matches and rolled it into an oilskin and lashed the oilskin behind the cantle of his saddle.

"Goin' someplace, Sheriff?" It was the little pappy man from the day before. Jennings, Sutton remembered him as being called. Bought feed from Sutherland occasionally. Had a spread south of town, near where Sutton's own place had been before they foreclosed on it.

"A little ride. Check on my deputies." Dale faced him abruptly. "But if you want anything, I'll be in town till after dark."

"I'll remember that, Sheriff," Jennings sniggered in quick amusement. "We'll all remember it."

"Many thanks for your interest in pub-

lic affairs, suh." Dale Sutton entered his office and removed his hat and took off his boots and changed his socks. He put his boots back on and crossed them on an opened desk drawer and conjured up the picture of Rusty O'Rourke and Lipscomb zigzagging to and fro far west and far east of the trail into town. Owen Killian could get past them without any trouble, and that's how Sutton had planned it.

For this was a personal matter and not one to be interfered with from any outside source and that, too, was the way Sutton wanted it.

HE SENT for the Mex stable boy and told him to carry rations out to O'Rourke and Lipscomb, and then he walked to the restaurant and had some chili and middlin' and pone and corn sticks and coffee. It was a heavy meal, but he might need it if he failed to get supper. He wasn't certain that he would fail to get supper, but he thought that he might. He was a man who planned slowly, omitting nothing. He reminded himself that he must load his off saddlebag with oats sometime after sunset. And then he would be fully ready.

Back in his office, he smoked lazily and watched men drift up and down the street, and he didn't need acute hearing to know what they were talking about. They glanced toward his office window quickly, nervously, and as hastily looked away.

It made him smile.

They would be demanding, "Why don't he mount up and chase Nevin's killer down?"

And the answer would come to them, "Because which way would he go? It's better to stick here and defend the town."

But they were furious, nevertheless, and that's what Dale Sutton wanted. He would hone their tempers with soft talk and semi-denials and oblique answers; and by the time he was gone south out of town, those tempers would explode and

that would be fine. Just the way he wanted it.

He smiled again, and twisted his cigarette between callused fingers and thought once more of Owen Killian. Killian, liquor-brave and gloatful. Killian, pretending to understand Dale Sutton in the woods near Taylorsville. Killian, caught in Sutton's gunsight before he could go for his own weapon.

And Dale Sutton giving him a chance. "Hand it over butt first, Reb, and I'll take you in unpunctured and whole." It had seemed queer, using the word Reb for a Quantrill man, for the Quantrills were an armed mob that had come out of the West to feast at the fringes of the Confederate States Army—with it, yet never of it. "Give me your gun, Reb." The man was a little drunk, but gradually he understood.

"All right—it's yours. My name's Owen Killian and I hold the rank of cap-

tain and you'll have to treat me—" The Adams pistol exploded and the bullet knocked Sutton's gun into the air and sliced his knuckles and then Killian had the *riata* out and was snagging Sutton's gun. Neat, soldierly—with no words. It had been when Killian lash-cracked Sutton's head and face and then dragged him at rope's end that Sutton's fury screamed through him and stayed with him and left a hard core in his soul . . .

Sutton felt his body again, touching the two bulletholes tenderly. His teeth ached frightfully, and he thought about there being a dentist, maybe, in South Pass.

Presently he struck a match and lighted the lamp and turned the wick low.

He stood up and put on his hat and was pleased at the prospect of having supper that evening. It would be one worry eliminated. He saw the Mex boy and crossed the street and told him to fill

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the off bag with oats. Then he went to the restaurant and sat down at the counter and ordered steak—double size, with a double side order of fries and beans. "And when you bring the coffee, Nick, leave the pot on the counter."

Tonight would be it, of that he was sure. Tonight had been a long time coming, but it was here and he welcomed it, and it would be as good a time as any to commence the long kill.

Sutton took his time with his meal; he chatted with Nick awhile, and then he strolled over to the tie-rail and told his horse to be patient. Little Jennings and fat Sutherland were there, showing immense interest in the saddlebags and cantle roll. Sutton ignored them both.

Miss Pansy Perkins clicked past on high leather heels, bound for a meeting of the County Temperance Society. She was the fourth and latest member to join, and she didn't want to be late. Dale followed her to the board shack with the canvas roof where the Society met, and he loafed outside a while, listening to the adjurations and exhortations of a guest speaker who was giving the members a preview of hell by scattering cinders over the front seats.

The sheriff ambled down to the saloon and had a drink and talked a minute with the barkeep; he noted Sutherland and Jennings and one or two others at a back table, and they seemed to be drinking too much. That, too, was all right with Sutton. Maybe they'd sleep more soundly for it.

In the moonlight he strolled to his office and patted his horse, then went in and blew out the lamp. After that he crossed the street in semi-darkness and paused a moment at the alley head next to the bank. He watched the saloon empty, and he watched the drinkers vanish homeward. The temperance meeting let out, and the cinder-streaked members darted clear of the saloon's guests. The lights

went out in Indian Wells, and the moon slipped higher. Dale Sutton walked easily down the alley to the rear of the bank and tested the back door for which only Gavin Gore had a key. The door was unlocked.

He returned to the tie-rail and took his horse and led it by the bridle past the backs of the restaurant, the feed store, the stable, the Emporium. He pulled the animal into an alder stand a hundred yards behind the bank, and pegged it on a picket. He sat down among the alders and rolled a smoke and smoked a while, not thinking of anything in particular. You can do just so much, plan just so many details, before you reach the saturation point.

He tried not to think of Owen Killian, yet the man's devilish image kept crowding to the front of Sutton's mind. That drag ride near Taylorsville had been the worst of it. That humiliating, savage rope-haul through the Kentucky hills. A mile and more of it, before the blue-breechered Mounted Infantry had shown up. A mile and more, a lifetime and more. . . . Sutton stubbed out his smoke and tried to relax.

Owen Killian came sometime after midnight, when clouds were bearding the moon. He came ghost-silent, and just as suddenly. He came wraithlike along the backs of the buildings, leading his horse behind him. And despite all the size and fill and muscle of him, he came almost daintily, testing each footfall. There was no hesitancy to him, no unsureness of movement. He moved as if he had rehearsed the thing several times. He snafled his drawn reins around a standpipe and catfooted to the back door and waited, head cocked, mouth open.

He went in, and drew the door shut.

Dale Sutton rose and stroked his horse's nostrils and neck, not speaking.

Owen Killian came out, gently closed the door, and lifted two small sacks into

his single saddlebag. He collected rein, swung up, and rode past the rear of the bank and past the alders and south out of town in the moonlight. The clouds were free of the moon and Dale Sutton followed Killian with his eyes for almost a mile. Then he mounted and followed him with himself, keeping that mile interval between them. It was easy going, the night was cool, and every nerve in the sheriff's body was awake. He was beginning to enjoy this.

KILLIAN stopped twice—suddenly—and searched the night full circle around. Sutton, each time, froze in the saddle, reins to stomach. Killian didn't stop again until dawn, and then he dismounted in a dry wash and had a smoke.

Somewhere ahead was a granger's soddy, man named Hall, and he had water. He'd run a pipe down to his tank, and the dry season didn't bother him. Sutton figured that Killian's lone canteen would need refilling at that tank, so he rode wide around the dry wash where Killian was crouched, smoking, and snaked through cutbacks and washes until, toward full yellow daylight, he raised the top of Hall's tank. He kept wide of it, west of it, and then jack-knifed directly in and rode straight into the barn and caught a rafter and dismounted by letting his horse walk out from under him. He dropped into the straw and faced the man Hall, coming at him with a shotgun.

Hall stopped, frowning. "Didn't know who you was, sheriff."

"I'm glad you didn't shoot first." Dale waited until Hall broke his barrels. "Man's coming here in a little while. I want him, but not yet. He'll ask for water."

"I got some."

"You also have salt, I bet. Dissolve a pound in a container of water and give him that, will you?"

Hall pondered it. "Fixin' to double him over?"

"Something like that."

"An' you with a gun handy?" Scorn edged the granger's tone.

Dale Sutton's mouth lines hardened. "I'll order it now, not ask it: dissolve a pound of salt in the water he gets. His canteen holds a pint and a half, full. So he'll have salt soup come a mile of jogging. Move, Hall."

Hall moved.

Owen Killian rode slowly as he came, but his horse was wet from a dawn trot. He came in at the walk and nodded to Hall and asked for water. "See you got a tank, an' all."

In the barn Sutton thrilled to the harshness of that voice.

Killian swung off and took his canteen off the saddle hook and shook it empty and helped himself from the container Hall offered. Killian asked, "Anyone been this way? I'm expectin' friends."

"Buzzards, is all."

Killian screwed the cork into his canteen and hooked it and swung up. "I'm obliged, mister."

Hall waved a pipestem in dismissal.

Dale Sutton followed his man down the long horse miles with a sense of urgency that made him impatient. The posse worried him, for one thing. Back in Indian Wells they'd discover two sacks of bills missing and the back door unlocked, and they would form up a posse. The posse from Jeff City had gone west, because all escaping felons went west and tried to get lost in the Bitterroots. But the posse from the Wells might conceivably ride south. Or it might ride east toward the Sundown Y, where Nevins had been found, guessing that its quarry would backtrack. Or it might. . . . Sutton was alert.

Owen Killian had stopped on a rocky shelf that rose to rimrock off the flatland. He was lifting his canteen to his face.

And then he was blowing salt water through his lips, shaking his head and wobbling the canteen. He spit a few times. He craned his face around and glared at the empty spaces behind him, mouth moving. Then he slung the canteen into the dust. After a moment, he dismounted and retrieved it and emptied it and put it back on the saddle. He moved south again, by way of the rimrock, climbing his horse slowly.

Sutton waited until the man had disappeared beyond the crest before he followed.

He put his horse into the up-trail, gun out in case of ambush.

But there was no ambush.

Owen Killian was small in the distance, riding into the lavender of coming twilight, following an old hunt trail down off the rimrock onto the flatland again. He pushed himself off his saddle once or twice and stood stiff in his stirrups, and Sutton knew that he was looking for water.

Sutton holstered, lifted his canteen, and took a swig. He decided then to close the interval, for he wanted Killian to have an uneasy night. He closed up to half a mile and held it that way until the flatland became broken and creviced in a series of dry coulees. He closed up to a quarter mile and got his gun and waited until Killian was heading into a cutback. He thumbed back the hammer and lay the barrel over his raised left forearm and squeezed off one shot.

Killian whirled and the bullet splashed sand off the cutback. Killian fired and threw himself forward and stabbed spurs and was out of sight. His bullet sliced sand fifty yards behind Sutton.

The sheriff dismounted, took the pan from his bag and filled it with water and held it for his horse. When that was done he put the pan back and mounted and fingered a cigarette together and considered things. An ambush, for one.

In the thickening dusk he swung left, east, and stayed with it for half an hour.

In full darkness he pointed south again, into the coulees; and by moonrise he was out of them. He pegged his horse in a wash and crept northwest, steering himself by the low-burning stars of the August night. He came on Killian within fifteen minutes, mounted, waiting, facing north.

Sutton slammed a shot under the man's quivering horse and the horse came apart and spun on skidding hooves and Killian windmilled for balance. Sutton sighted on the man's turning hat and blew it off with a second shot. He put a third under the wheeling animal and watched it buck and land and line out south with Killian grabbing for snarled reins.

Sutton walked up to the punctured hat, examined it, and threw it aside. He listened to the fading scuffle of hooves, and he had to smile. He found his horse and unsaddled it and spread the oilskin and had cold rations after he'd treated the animal to oats. Then he fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Madman's Ride

THE morning was clean-cool and bright and there wasn't a cloud in the high blue sky. Dale Sutton picked up his man when the dawn coolness had melted to the heat of mid-morning, and he tracked him until afternoon.

It came to the sheriff that Killian was keeping a straight course, not trying to shake off pursuit. The course he was following would take him to South Pass within a day or two, and Sutton couldn't have that. He closed his interval again that afternoon and felt mighty sorry for Killian's horse as he fired a scare shot. Killian plugged in his hooks and galloped heavily away, hair streaming off his collar. Sutton let him go.

The heat of August strikes like a saber. It lashes necklines and lances wrists and

splits lips to raw soreness. And unless you are wearing a hat it stabs into the skull and does monstrous things to the mentality.

It began to get Owen Killian toward sundown. Sutton could see it in the way the man began to sway slightly as he rode. He would sway and rock, and recover. After a while, he didn't recover so fast, and his limbs went loose. He began to throw his head around, trying to snap the sun-blast from it. He sagged in the saddle, twitched, and came straight. And sagged again.

Dale Sutton really felt sorry for that horse.

It was desert down here, without grass, without water; without horizon or hope beyond it. South Pass was the only handhold to life. . . unless you had water.

Sutton could almost trace Killian's thought processes. He could almost hear the pleas ringing in his own head: *If I*

had a drink—a drink of anything. Liquor, water—anything. Who's behind me? Why doesn't he front on me? Where the hell is the Pass? Gore? Gore, where are you?

That evening, Owen Killian's horse gave out. It gave out in a splay of scraping, sliding hooves that plowed up a small sandstorm of their own. And Owen Killian was on foot in the darkness, hand to gun butt, eyes wild, a savage thing reverting to animal status.

Sutton couldn't see him in the night, the moon had yet to come up and the stars were still weak. But he could talk to him—even though Killian couldn't hear it—and he did. He told him, *Killian, basically you're a greedy fool, which is what made you a killer. It's also what made you and some of the other Quantrills handle the people the way you did at Lanner's Station that time in '64. But that's all in the past now and the Station must be*



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weed-shot through the charcoal of its burning. We buried them, along with Lanner. The present, however, must be very real to you, Mist' Killian. Very real indeed. You're too fast with immediate things, and not fast enough with the future. You forgot—you who rode for three years with William Quantrill—that cavalry is an extremely delicate arm due to rapid deterioration of men and horses, suh. And your horse has played out and you're next. Do you think, suh, that you can reach South Pass on foot?

The moon rose and soaked the sand in its radiance. Its ever-huntful light crept across the desert and showed Dale Sutton where Owen Killian was sitting, arms hanging off kneecaps, head down, gun dangling from one hand.

The sheriff reached back and felt the two small sacks that he had taken from the single bag on the dead horse. Killian didn't want their weight now.

Dale Sutton was leading his horse then, he had unsaddled and reversed the blanket and saddled again, with loose cinches. And now he was walking with one hand taking short rein, and when he saw Owen Killian start to get up, he stopped and mounted. Owen Killian got to his feet, shoved his gun in his holster and started trudging down the moonlit miles toward South Pass. Sutton judged that the man would move at night, so long as he was able, and hole up during the heat of the day. It was about all he could do, granting that he retained his sanity. Sutton didn't want him to lose that.

The sheriff decided to rest his horse and himself, and catch a short nap. Too, he was hungry. He hobbled the animal instead of putting it on a picket, because the sudden and noisy arrival of a posse from the Wells would frighten it, and it could yank a pin where it couldn't run far on a hobble. Dale fed and watered his horse, then fed himself. He stretched out on the sand, not using his oilskin, and he

watched the stars awhile. Presently he fell asleep.

The eastern skies were awash with a pearl hue when he awoke, and he unhobbled and saddled and rode out into the dawn. Owen Killian was staggering into a sun-shriveled stand of cottonwoods, obscene and naked of foliage. He flopped and crawled between two trunks and bent an arm over his eyes and lay that way in the rays of the rising sun.

Sutton threw off and led for half a mile, and below a break in the ground he pegged his horse and watched his quarry sleeping. It occurred to him to reload, and he did so slowly, wiping the wax from each cartridge casing before inserting it in the cylinder. Then he put a smoke together and enjoyed it, rising occasionally to observe Killian.

He must be careful of the man now. He had no desire to have Killian become unshackled from his reason, because he had a definite use for that reason sometime later. How much later, he couldn't yet tell.

He peered long into the north, prying at the yellow emptiness of sand and sky until his eyes smarted and he had to blink them back into focus. There was no posse there, no living thing at all. He faced toward Owen Killian and for the breath of a moment felt pity. It went almost as soon as it had come, but it had been there—pity for the man's cracked lips, for his wriggling throat seeking liquid even in sleep; for his broken bootsoles and chipped heels. But the emotion died under the impact of memory, and Sutton finished his smoke and fought the impulse to ride south now and intercept the man between the cottonwoods and South Pass. It was an appealing idea, but it would leave him open to having Killian snatched by a posse. And what a posse would do to him, Sutton didn't want to happen. Hanged men do not talk, and this man must talk before he was hanged. He must

talk about a certain banker friend of his.

Owen Killian lurched straight up, gun out, eyes switching left and right, awake all at once. He licked his raw lips and rubbed his head and crabbed around to face in every direction, gun pointing with his eyes. He got to his feet and braced himself against a dried cottonwood trunk and seemed to be getting his breath. He appeared to be surprised at where he was, in the open; and Dale Sutton knew then that the man's heat-dim eyes had failed him in the dawning and informed him that the trees were foliate. Shadows create strange images, out on the desert.

The man thrust his gun in his shirt and pushed himself away from the trees and trod southward again, dragging his feet off the sand, letting his arms hang forward, keeping his head low.

Sutton waited until the man was tiny in the distance; he waited for the space of three slowly-smoked cigarettes before he mounted. It was when he mounted that he caught the sand-scurd far to northward. It was the faintest shimmer glinting above the horizon, light yellow against the light blue sky. That would be a posse coming down, having wasted two days riding all over the Sundown Y and the Jeff City trail. It would have crossed Killian's horse by now, and that would have given it direction.

SO DALE SUTTON had to hurry. He trotted past the cottonwoods and put his horse to the lope and kept that pace until Killian was clear in the near distance. Then Dale pulled down to a walk, threw off and led by the reins.

He thought Killian would never turn around, would never hear the chuck and sift of four hooves and two feet coming toward him. Dale didn't draw, because Killian's gun was still undrawn.

Owen Killian halted, swayed, and turned his head.

One ragged eyebrow was raised, as if

in disbelief. Then a waxy querulousness widened his trenched, dark features, as if he had seen an apparition. He was still a hundred yards away, and Dale could see him giggle. He saw it, and then he heard it. It sent a feather of fear up his spine, for its overtone was maniacal. Dale was closing the long kill just in time.

Killian was fumbling at his shirtfront, not giggling any more, but concentrating on something. Sutton distinctly heard, "You' dead, soldier. You died four years back . . . I done it." Then the gun was out, muzzle shaking crazily.

Dale drew, cocked, and held.

Owen Killian turned full around and pressed his gun hand against his hip and fired.

The bullet snarled high overhead and was gone.

Killian shook the fuzzy mandibles of his jaws drunkenly. He forced a frown together and managed to steady his eyes on Sutton, and fired again. The shot was low, it tossed up sand twenty yards in front of Sutton.

Dale took a breath, squeezed steadily on the trigger, and felt the gun buck. The bullet went where he wanted it—just short of Killian's feet.

"Ghost?" The word was a hoarse croak. "You' a ghost, man. Ha' come you do this to me?" The next bullet snagged through Sutton's trouser leg and he jumped. Killian laughed.

Sutton plugged his second shot directly between the man's legs, and Killian reacted with a stupid leg-lurch. And now Dale laughed. He dragged reins over his horse's head and dropped them. He started forward, timing his pace, never taking his eyes from Killian's gun hand.

Somewhere behind him, the thrumming of hoofs vibrated across the hot silences.

It was near noon and sweat seeped from Killian's forehead in glass beads. He wiped at it, fired again—wide to one side—and swung around and paddled away on

clumsy feet that refused to cooperate with one another, so that he was moving sideways as much as frontwards.

Dale Sutton ambled along in the man's tracks; relief was surging through him and he didn't feel so nerve-tight and his teeth didn't ache at all. His body felt resilient, as it had before the War.

Owen Killian folded to one knee, heaved himself up, took two . . . three steps. And folded to both knees with hands in the sand.

Dale holstered his gun and set his hatbrim against the flare of the sun and walked quietly around Owen Killian and squatted in front of him. "Give me your gun." He held out a hand, fingers open.

Killian gagged on the mucous and spat some out and lifted his rutted face to the sheriff. He whispered, "You . . . 'live—man?"

Sutton nodded dumbly. There was nothing else he could say except what he had been planning to say at this moment for four years. "Give me your gun."

The rushing hooves were hurtling down the last of the distances and Dale could see the riders moving at him in their own alkali. They commenced to spread, to widen their approach.

Owen Killian released a stored-up sigh, brought his gun out of the sand, spun it weakly butt first and held it out.

Dale took it, dropped out the cylinder, emptied the remaining cartridges into his palm, and flipped the cylinder back into the frame. "Used to be an Adams pistol—remember?" He stuck the empty weapon into his belt.

Killian's next words were foul and loud. He finished them with his chin in the sand, with his arms spread out, with his heels flopping to the agony of the sun-
lance that was piercing his head.

Sutton whipped a kerchief from his trousers pocket and shook it out and lay it over Killian's skull. He stood up fast as the posse arrived and screened sand all

over the place and jostled into a ring. The man Jennings came at him on foot, covered by the guns of the others. There were five of them, including fat Sutherland. Sutherland was soaked in sweat and he was puffing mightily.

Jennings ordered, "Hand him over!" He knelt and jerked the kerchief away from Killian and nodded vigorously. "That's him, all right." Jennings bounced to his feet. "You two have a falling out?"

"Suh?" Dale cocked his hands on his hips and managed to smile. "I didn't hit him, and he isn't dead. Why, no—we didn't have a falling out. Not today, leastways." He rubbed his nose reflectively. "A fast bullet gives a man no time with his conscience."

"Where's the money?"

Fat Sutherland squeaked, "Yuh—let's see that money afore we find a tree."

"Why—it's in my saddlebags. The left hand one, I do believe." Dale lanked calmly toward his horse with Jennings at his heels. He unbuckled the bag and showed the two sacks. "Now I propose that we take it to Mr. Gore, who is in South Pass attending a conference."

Little Jennings hesitated, hands clawing at the sacks. "To Mr. Gore? Why not take it back to the Indian Wells Bank where it belongs? And where you belong, Sutton, in your own jail!"

Dale could afford patience. "Let's help this man—we can use him still. Bring me some water, someone. And a jug of whiskey, if you got some."

"Just a—"

Not raising his voice, Dale went on, "I'm still duly elected sheriff of this county, and you'll take my orders. We'll all ride to South Pass now and hand this money over to Mr. Gore. Rather—Killian here will." Dale winked in imitation of Gavin Gore. "I want you gentlemen to see two old friends meet. You might say that they're cut from the same cloth."

The suspicion was still deep in them, as

it had been for a week. Then Jennings accepted the plan. "But you'll ride in front, where we can watch you." He flipped a thumb. "Two of you pack this man onto Sutherland's horse. It's broader."

And Dale Sutton led the cavalcade south for the Pass, smiling quietly, though none of those behind him could see it. He felt pretty good.

They rode through the afternoon and into the twilight, stopping only once to prop Owen Killian erect behind Sutherland. Damp neckerchiefs and watered whiskey and dry bread had combined to stoke Killian's sanity to the burning point; and when he was propped behind the fat man he also was bound with wrists at the small of his back and with a line running under the horse's belly from spur to spur. And at that single stop they asked him for the second time where he was going to meet Gavin Gore. The first time he had shaken his head, but this time, when he saw the noose run down the rope and saw the rope loop over a cottonwood limb, he told them, "A mile south of the Pass. At the bridge."

"At what bridge, suh?"

"Where you cross to the Line."

Sutton nodded. "That much closer to Mexico." The suspicion was going out of the posse and even the fat man was impressed. He was becoming a figure of some importance, carrying the quarry behind him.

In the starlight they circled around the lights of South Pass and swung wide of it and pointed for Dos Hermanos Bridge. Short of it, they filed into a gully and uncut Owen Killian and gave him a hat to wear.

Dale nudged him out of the gully onto the trail leading to the Line. He whispered, "Now, gentlemen, you will attend that conference—if your eyes are sharp." He stayed close behind Killian until they were within sight of the bridge's white-painted rails. "Remember—this hammer

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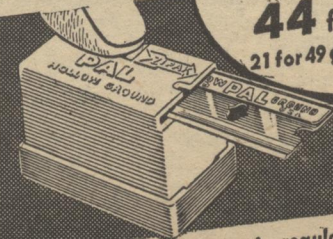


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can fall faster than you can dive away."

Owen Killian limped a little as he approached the bridge. He hesitated, at the escarpment, and cleared his throat.

"Killian?" Gavin Gore's bulk was square in the moon-shadow. His bulk left the bridge's deep shadow. "Thought you'd never get here. Find the money?"

"Yes, where you told me."

Gavin Gore stepped closer to Killian. "What's the matter? Where's your horse? I don't like—" He saw Dale Sutton and he heard the stuttering soprano whicker of two horses and the echoing whinny of another and he dove for his gun and Killian spun around on bent knees and flew at the sheriff and Sutton fired through the bottom of his up-angled holster and saw Gore jerk and go down. Killian struck his shins and grabbed for his gun and Sutton drove a rowel into the man's back and heard Gore's gun and felt the bullet slock into Killian and felt Killian go limp. Sutton fired twice and Gavin Gore tumbled forward onto his face.

THEY packed the two bodies into South Pass and halted at the beginning of the street and Dale brought forth the shred of brocade that he had been carrying ever since he'd taken it from his desk drawer. He told Jennings, "Found it on the telegraph pole." He held it to the blood-stained weskit that already was commencing to bulge and flatten at the

sides. "Yup—matches for color and weave."

"He shore had his trained seal." Jennings booted Killian's stiffening form.

"Tried to train two of mine, too. Wanted them 'way out of town, so Killian wouldn't be interfered with too much."

"They were headin' for Mexico—that it?"

"Why, sure." Dale mounted. "Gore'd look innocent enough—until he was far enough away to beat extradition."

They left the undertaker's in a happy mood, and Sutherland declared that he would stand dinner all around.

Little Jennings hung back, holding Dale near him. "Where'd them two *hombres* meet—Gore an' Killian?"

"The way I figure it—at Jeff City when Gore went up to sit with the parole board. He saw a good thing in Killian."

Jennings made throat noises of approval. "'Cept he didn't know he had a sheriff on the job, huh? Well—neither did we, Sutton. . . . Here's the feedbag, and I'll buy the drinks." He held open the door for Dale. "I s'pose you'll be takin' that reward money and buyin' back your ranch now."

At the bar, Dale denied it with a jawshake. "Gore killed him, I didn't." He hoisted his glass. "Besides, Mr. Jennings, I kind of like the job . . . your health, suh."

"And yours—sheriff."

A NEWSPAPER of the frontier days carried the following notice for the devout: "The Reverend Mr. Blaney will preach next Sunday in Dempsey's Grove at 10 o'clock A. M., and 4 o'clock P. M., Providence permitting. Between sermons, the preacher will run his sorrel mare, Julia, against any nag that can be trotted out in this region for a purse of \$100."

—Jerry Carroll.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 43)

R EIN UP, pardner. Here's your chance to prove you're not a phildoodle or a drug-store cowboy. Below are listed twenty questions dealing strictly with rangeland matters. The men in the group will be able to answer sixteen or more. Those who fall in the phildoodle bracket, however, won't be able to answer more than fourteen. Good luck!

1. If an angry-looking cowpoke told another one to "dally your tongue," what would he mean?

2. What is the meaning of the Southwestern term, *baile*?

3. Which of the following two terms would a true Westerner be most likely to use in reference to his horse? Cow pony? Cow hoss?

4. True or false? A "cowman" is a person who *raises* cattle.

5. True or false. *Chigaderos* is a term applied to riding aprons.

6. As a Westerner, from which direction would you normally expect a "Chinook" wind to come.

7. If the skirts on a saddle are round, could they be considered "California skirts?"

8. True or false? A "cutting horse" is also sometimes known as a "carving horse."

9. If the ranch boss sent you out for some "brush splinters," which of the following should you return with? Brush country cattle? Wood for the fire? Some rustlers who were making trouble for your outfit?

10. In the language of the cowpoke, a "bucket dogie" is which of the following? A person who has just come "out West" for the first time? A cowpoke who cannot stand to ride long distances? A calf purchased in the

midwest and shipped to the ranch for purposes of restocking.

11. True or false? A "box brand" is a brand with an inverted "V" over it.

12. True or false? A "brander" is the individual who actually applies the hot iron to an animal at branding time.

13. When it is used in reference to a stampede, what does the term "bend" mean?

14. "Bible" is a cowpoke slang term used in reference to which one of the following items? A frontier judge's lawbook? A book of cigarette papers?

15. Which one of the following terms is *not* used in reference to an outlaw? Cat-eyed? Short-trigger man? Red fox?

16. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "to arch his back?"

17. What is the meaning of the term, "bush-whack?"

18. If a cowpoke refers to a critter as an "animal," which is it likely he is talking about— A sheep? A bull? A goat?

19. True or false? To "bake" a horse is to ride it in such a manner as to overheat it.

20. True or false? "Bad medicine" is a term sometimes used in reference to a man who is thought to be dangerous.

TINSTAR, FIGHT OR DIE!

Grimly they waited for that last bullet showdown—the flaming moment when a gun-trail ends—the tinstar with a town to die for—and the badman living for just one more kill!

By SHAD COLLINS

CAM DUNCAN stood in the darkness beside the stage office and watched the cloud of dust roll along in the weak moonlight a quarter of a mile out in the desert. Out of the cloud came the jingle of trace chains, the creak of wheels and the sound of hoofbeats. Duncan looked through the lighted window of the office at the clock. *A little bit late*, he thought.

He dropped the cigarette he was smoking, into the dust at his feet, shook his gun loose in its holster, and pushed his hat back a little on his head. The actions were a kind of ritual. His face, when the hat was lifted, looked a little younger, but it was a young-old face, lean, and there was a *hungering* look on it and a weariness that was not physical. A little bit late, he thought of the stage, thinking of it without interest or resentment, thinking of the thousand nights when it had pulled into town just like this. If it were late, that would change nothing.

Nothing was ever going to change, Cam Duncan thought; the stage would come in like this for another thousand nights and he would be there to meet it because that was part of his job; or perhaps he would be killed and someone else would be marshal of Black Rock, but that would change nothing either. Lucy was not going to change, he thought with weary anguish,

and that was the only change that would count. Everything else would be the same, or it wouldn't; no matter. The world of objects would be the same—the desert, the street, the stage coming in about ten at night.

The vehicle rattled up to the platform; the shotgun guard got down and went directly inside; the driver wrapped the lines over the brake handle and descended to the street, the dust billowing from his clothing.

"No trouble, Jeff?" Cam Duncan asked, still standing partly in the shadow.

"No trouble," the driver said, not even looking in Duncan's direction, knowing that he would be there.

"Any interesting passengers?"

The driver slapped at his thighs with his hat, dust jumped out of his clothing, and he jerked his head at the coach door which was now opening.

"Usual thing," he said. "Drummers, gambler or two, couple of women for Belle's place—you know how it is this time of the year. Don't know what's on the second section."

Cam nodded, looking at the first man to alight. He was a slender man with a ghostly blond mustache, a little bit overdressed. He turned and put out his hand to help a woman, a pretty, red-haired girl of about twenty. The others got stiffly

Cam dropped behind one
of the big chairs and began
shooting. . . .



down and stood in a little knot on the platform for a moment, blinking in the light from the window of the stage office, waiting while their luggage was placed on the platform.

About what Jeff called them, Cam thought. Gamblers and drummers. Black Rock, since it had become a railroad terminus and a shipping point for cattle from the south, was filling up with a floating population, souls blown in on the wind. The stages, running north and south and coming in from the west where the rail-

road had not yet penetrated, were full of them.

Let them pass, Cam thought, looking at the little group on the platform. *Let them pass, those aren't the bad ones.* The stage pulled away, the group dispersed into the night, and Cam saw, to the south, the shallow, moving pall of dust in the moonlight, the other section of the ten o'clock stage into Black Rock. He stepped back into the shadow again.

When the stage pulled to a stop, the driver dropped quickly to the ground and

moved along the side of the four-horse team.

"Got the Dalloway boys aboard," he said, speaking rapidly and without looking into the shadow. His hands went up to the back of one of the lead horses as if he were examining it. "Picked them up at Blue Springs. Figured I'd tell you, in case—" He broke off the sentence as if not quite sure what he had intended and then went quickly around to the other side of the team. *He doesn't have a gun*, Cam thought. He looked at the guard who was still sitting solidly on top of the stage. *That one doesn't know how I stand*, Cam decided.

He felt excitement in himself and something else, curiosity perhaps, and thought: *Maybe this is the night*, thinking of himself as dead without any regret, as he watched Bill Dalloway, big and slow and handsome, getting out of the coach door with Harvey Prescott, a cold killer, very dark and small and quick and deadly, behind him. Cam Duncan heard himself saying, "Don't get down, Dalloway. You're not stopping in Black Rock."

The big man seemed to pause in mid-stride. Beside him Prescott stood, small and dark and almost indifferent. The three other Dalloway brothers got out of the coach and stood on the platform, moving apart from each other slightly. Wooden-faced, they stood in the light, waiting, looking at nothing at all but profoundly tensed and watchful at the same time.

"You'll be taking that coach out of town in five minutes," Duncan said quietly. He was still in the half shadow of the stage office. He did not take his eyes off the men on the platform; on the seat of the stage the guard had not moved.

"I don't understand you, friend," Bill Dalloway said easily. His eyes squinted a little as he tried to see Duncan more clearly. Then he turned slightly so that Cam saw the flicker of light on the heavy, dark-handled gun.

"Be plain, friend," Dalloway said patiently. "Who is it that doesn't want us around?"

"I don't want you," Cam said.

"You would be the marshal," Bill Dalloway said speculatively. "You would be Cam Duncan, wouldn't you?"

"That's right."

"Step up into the light so a man can see you a little," Dalloway invited him.

"This is fine right here. We've got nothing to say to each other, Dalloway."

"I don't think you'd bushwhack a man from the shadows that way," Dalloway said, as if thinking aloud. "Would you, Duncan? I don't think you would. Would you?"

"You with the shotgun," Harvey Prescott said harshly, speaking for the first time. "Just keep it in your lap and don't get gay."

Dalloway said in a soothing voice, "You've got nothing against us, Duncan. We're in the clear in Black Rock, in the whole state. Not a thing on the books for you or the sheriff."

"Let's keep it that way," Cam said evenly. "You boys just ride on through."

"That's hard talk, friend. I don't like that so good."

"No offense," Cam said in a voice of cold neutrality. "Nothing personal, boys. Just my job."

"That kind of a job can get you in trouble. It can get you killed, friend."

There was a hint of excitement in Dalloway's voice now; he looked powerful, ready, dangerous.

"Now or tomorrow, it can," Duncan said. "Make your play."

"A man doesn't like to be ordered," Dalloway said. He moved slightly again and said, like a small boy discovering a great secret, "I can see you, friend, and there's only one of you."

"I've got six friends in my pocket," Cam said quietly, his hand on his gun butt. He heard someone moving in the

shadows on his right, but he could not look. "Make up your mind, Dalloway."

"You with the bird gun," Dalloway said without looking at the guard. "Be careful."

He moved another cautious half step. Beside him Prescott still wore an air of cold indifference. The three tall brothers stood silent behind him.

"Sorry, Marshal," Bill Dalloway said. There was a strained quality in his voice, but it was steady. "You don't have enough friends."

Tonight, then, Cam thought without fear; *tonight.* He fixed his eyes on Prescott as the most dangerous and thought, *Try to shoot him first.*

"You don't count so well, Dalloway," a voice said flatly from the darkness on Cam's right. "You never were awfully smart, Bill."

A MAN stepped out into the light. He was small and slender and his face was a sickly white. It was the face of someone in his early twenties perhaps, but the hair on his hatless head was as gray as that of an old man. He wore an air of fragility, or of disease, and, beyond that, an aura of complete carelessness, a recklessness as of despair. The heavy guns on his gunbelt seemed too heavy for his thin body. He came forward into the night air.

"Johnny Moon!" Prescott said with

something like flat disbelief. And then, with fear in his voice, and confirmation, "Johnny Moon, by God!"

Bill Dalloway turned to look at the man and a rush of blood darkened his face. Beside him Harvey Prescott was motionless. The impassive brothers in the background moved a little, shifting their feet.

"Well, Johnny," Dalloway said, and there was a touch of uncertainty in his voice. "You taking a hand?"

"It looks that way," Moon said tonelessly.

"I heard you were dead."

"Give me time," Johnny said. "Give me a little time."

"Kind of funny to see you siding with the law this way."

"That's the way it is," Moon said with finality.

The tension went out of Dalloway's body. He smiled easily.

"Well," he said. "I guess we'll oblige you, Marshal."

Prescott looked at Moon and there was something—relief or perhaps regret—in his eyes. He looked, Cam thought, like a man counting his money to make a bet and then deciding against it. There was something intimate and at the same time impersonal in the look that passed between the two gunmen, as if Prescott and Moon felt that they themselves were the only men really present. Then Prescott turned

MAN FROM MISSOURI ASKED TO BE SHOWN!



**And He Was!
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ST. LOUIS, MO.—Carl W. Rau, Missouri chemical engineer, is no longer a skeptic about the big switch to Calvert. "Friends showed me," he said. "Calvert really does taste better, really is smoother any way you drink it."

and got back into the coach, followed by the brothers.

"So long," Dalloway said. There was no fear in his voice, no evidence that he had been beaten. "See you again sometime, Marshal—in sunlight."

He went into the coach and the thin gunman, Johnny Moon, stepped swiftly into the shadows.

"You probably saved my life," Cam Duncan said, speaking into the darkness after the stage had rolled away. "And you put your neck out."

"You can buy me a drink," Johnny Moon said. "Is it worth more than that?"

They stood at the bar and the bartender put the drinks before them. Johnny Moon drank his in a gulp, as if it might be his last, and turned his young, ruined face to the other man.

"It's the wrong job for you," he said. "You aren't a gun-fighter." He looked at Cam Duncan, at the lean, unhappy, ironic face, the hard health, the utter solidity of the marshal's body, with envy and bitterness.

In the light, Moon seemed corpse-like, beaten. He unhooked the belt from his waist and put it on the bar. He was very tired. He looked what he was: a sick man; one of his lungs was almost completely gone with consumption.

"No, I'm not a gunfighter," Cam said. Then, "You know the Dalloways and Prescott?"

"Used to," Moon said. "When I was on the dodge. Long time back." He looked at Duncan and said evenly, "I'm clean, Cam. You know I'm in the clear."

"Sure," Cam said. "Don't get on the prod, Johnny."

"A retired gunman," Moon said ironically. "That's me."

"Yes," Duncan agreed without hearing him. Cam was looking at the girl across the room.

Lucy Tull was not pretty, but she wore a stampless quality, dateless and unique;

she was a Presence. She had fair hair and dark eyes and the figure of a mature woman. She turned to Duncan, meeting his gaze steadily, and in her look was longing and despair, desire and hopelessness, a look like his own. It was a look of such pure need that it seemed that it might set the room on fire, but only Johnny Moon saw it and with an oath cuffed his glass toward the bartender.

"You damned fool," he said to Duncan. "Get out of town. Or kill him."

Lucy looked away and Duncan glanced at her husband, Spence Tull, as the man began to deal. He was a tall man, florid, with a thin mustache and light, colorless eyes—handsome, hard-finished, a good gambler. He looked self-possessed, complete; the cards squirted out of his hand like small feathers of light; he seemed totally unaware of his wife, quietly sitting behind his shoulder.

"No," Duncan said.

Moon gulped the second drink and said in a fury of despair, "Kill him. Or shall I?"

"No." Duncan turned and picked up his drink and smiled at Johnny Moon, a smile as insubstantial as his own hope. "Thanks, Johnny. It won't work, that way."

Moon looked at him with a terrible anger and pushed out his glass again and Duncan said, "Take it easy on the booze, friend. It isn't that I don't want to buy, but take it easy."

"Why?" Moon asked. "Why? I saw the sawbones today. He says I've got about four months to go. Why take it easy, Cam?"

"No reason to leave the party early, Johnny."

"Damn you," Moon whispered. "Damn you for a fool!"

He looked at Duncan with the absolute envy of a man who is going to die soon, seeing the hard indestructible-looking body of the other man.

"Look," he said, wild with a desire to

live. "I'm kicking off. But you—you—" The knowledge seemed almost too much to be believed— "You're going to live years yet if you don't let someone like Dalloway kill you. And you just walk around like a ghost when all you'd have to do is kill him and you'd be able to marry her. That's all you want, isn't it? That's all that's between you and being alive, isn't it?"

His voice strangled with something like rage. Feeling the fact of his own death inside himself, it seemed to Moon absurd that Duncan should hesitate for a moment. The seconds ticked off the big clock above the bar, each one irrevocable, final, carrying his death, and he had a tearing desire to live, to be happy, even by proxy.

"Let me," he begged. "Let me have him."

"No," Cam said again. He felt tired, dispirited. "No. It can't be done that way. And it'd be murder for you to go up against him, too easy for you."

He looked at the lost, sick face of Johnny Moon, the face of one of the most deadly gunmen of his time.

"You wouldn't like to live with it," Cam Duncan said.

"I'm living with a lot of dead men," Moon said evenly. "And besides, it won't be long."

"It wouldn't do. Not for you and not for me and not for her."

"Why does she let him hang on to her?"

"Duty, maybe. A kind of honor—"

Moon laughed as he might at the speech of a child.

"Honor!" he mocked. "Duty! When you are where I am, friend, and you think of each breath you draw because you can number how many you have left, you won't think so much of things that are only words. There's only one word that has any meaning and that is life."

"Those words are a part of life too."

"No. There's only one word that has any meaning, and that's 'happiness'."

"Oh," Duncan said, pushing his glass away with a little gesture of sorry humor. "Oh, that."

He turned away from the bar and went out into the street.

"Hello, Cam," a voice said from the darkness outside. "Heard you had a little trouble tonight."

CAM recognized the voice of the sheriff. Then in the shadow he saw Benson, small and stooped, the figure of an old man. Benson carried his worry around with him as if it were something that he wore, like his star, or his gun, or his boots. He was an aging, peaceful man who had begun to see that the job he had was too big and too dangerous.

"It could have been trouble," Cam said. "It didn't grow up to be, though."

"They're rough boys, them Dalloways," the sheriff said. "And with that damn Harvey Prescott with them—" He let the sentence die on the air. "Look, Cam," Benson began again. "I don't tell you how to run the town. That's your department, thank the Lord. But it's getting mighty tough to handle, with the railroad and those cattle coming in. You could use another man, maybe."

"I'll get by," Duncan said. He thought, *Benson is remembering that I'm not a gunfighter.*

"All right," Benson said uneasily. "The Dalloways—you know they're friends of Spence Tull?"

"No." He wondered why he was not more surprised.

"From a while back," Benson said, as if still not certain he should talk about it. "Back in Texas." He waited a moment and then said: "Why you think they turned up here?"

"It's getting to be a big town," Cam answered noncommittally.

"Yeah. Railroad payroll coming in. Cattle buyers paying off. You could pick

up a lot of money in a fast haul. And the Dalloways would be fast."

"Yes, they'd be fast."

"But then, there are other towns they could visit," Benson said. He paused and cleared his throat. "I was thinking," he said uncertainly. "There's faster ways of picking up cash than playing poker for it."

"Drop that," Cam said. "Just let that lay as it is."

"Well, you know now, anyway," the sheriff said, as if it were an epitaph, and went on into the saloon.

The smell of horses, of leather, of train smoke. The streets ran north and south, to the railroad tracks; or east and west with the desert at each end. The sound of voices, the jingle of spurs, the mechanical, furious hilarity of pianos from the honky-tonks. Yellow light from the saloons in which the dust hung golden and absolute in the dead air. Parts of his world.

Cam had walked these streets on a thousand nights, making the rounds; he could see himself as if he were a hundred men, all of them walking the separate streets, looking in at this or that saloon, cautioning a drunk in one of the tonks at the north end of town or waiting for the stage at the south. It was his life, and that life seemed to him now as complete and impersonal as the golden motes of dust in the lamplight, as if it were a thing which might exist quite apart from himself.

Should I go away? he asked himself. He thought of Spence Tull and the Dalloway brothers. That they knew each other did not surprise him at all now. It seemed that he had always known what kind of man Tull was, although he had not spoken more than a dozen words to the gambler since that time, three years ago, when Tull got down off the stage, turned to help someone and it was Lucy. Cam had spoken to Lucy—how often?—perhaps a hundred times. That they had fallen in

love was not a thing that could have been expected at all; therefore it bore the character of pure inevitability.

Go away? He was doing her no good by staying. And there was Tull. Sooner or later, Tull would make a move. The Dalloway business was evidence. Tull was going bad. He would kill Tull or be killed by him, but in neither case could he win. They wouldn't, Lucy and he, be able to live with the dead man between them.

Abruptly he turned back toward the saloon where he had left Johnny Moon, Lucy and her husband. In his mind he saw his life, so perfectly involved with the world, with the color of the lamplight and the smell of dust and the slope of the street; it seemed completely formed, like an object itself, and therefore something that could be left behind and forgotten like a worn gunbelt or an old saddle. Then he had a terrible spasm of loneliness for the hundred men who walked on the streets of the town, on this and other nights, all of whom were himself.

WHEN Cam entered the saloon, Lucy was sitting at an unused table talking to Johnny Moon, as he had seen them on other nights.

He went over and sat down and Johnny Moon said, "A drink for the marshal," and he said "No," a little too abruptly, and then there was an awkward silence.

"What is it?" Moon asked after a moment.

"I'm going away."

"Cam," Lucy said softly, and he felt the pain in her voice: and the relief.

Duncan did not look at her. She put out a small hand, touching him briefly once and then again as if there were no assurance in the solidity of his flesh. Cam saw Moon looking at her with the eyes of a sick animal and thought with wonder, *Johnny's in love with her too.*

"When?" Moon asked.

"Now's as good as any time. The mid-

night stage south, I suppose it will be."

"I suppose," Moon said carelessly. Then, "It should have worked better for you two."

Cam felt a familiar numbness as of pain, knowing that it was finished now, and then an unbearable and sickening weakness and he asked, almost with shame, "Come with me, Lucy."

She shook her head. "I can't," she said in a low, broken voice "I want to, but I can't." And then, seeing Cam looking at Spence Tull, she said, "He wasn't always like this. Once, he was—" Again she shook her head, saying in despair, "Responsibility, Cam. I just can't go."

"Yes," he said, "I know," not looking at any of them now. He began to unpin the star from his shirt.

"You're a pair of fools," Johnny Moon said bitterly. "Damn the two of you."

Cam stuck the star on Moon's vest. "Give it to Benson and the city fathers," he said. "Good-by, friend."

"Run away, then," Moon said. "You're deader than I am."

"Good-by, Lucy," Cam said, seeing the blond hair, the dark, unhappy eyes. She gave him a long look and her lips moved but he did not hear her words. Then he went out.

He wanted to find Benson and tell him of his decision, but he could not find the sheriff. Guilt began to work in him like a slow poison as he thought of Benson, old

and tired and careful. He'd have too big a job on his hands. *That's not my business*, Cam assured himself, but the feeling of guilt, instead of going away, was stronger.

He got together the few possessions which he owned, feeling like a deserter, thinking of what Moon had said: "Run away, then." *I'm not running*, he told himself, going along the dark street toward the stage office. *I'm not running*. He remembered the thousand nights when he had walked like this, to meet the last stage into town, and again he had the feeling of his life being a thing, like a room or an old pair of boots, which could be left behind.

He was right about that, anyway, he told himself, thinking of Moon's last words to him: "You're deader than I am." It gave him a little wry satisfaction, but did not allay the guilt. Then he heard the gunshot and the silence.

CAM saw it all in a glance, as if it were a stage tableau, as he stepped through the saloon doors. Johnny Moon stood facing the bar, his arms on the top of it, standing very still. His gun-belt and guns were on the bar top in front of him, but he was carefully keeping his hands away from them. Behind him was a young cowboy, quite drunk, his gun pointing at Moon's back. The gun was smoking and there was a smashed



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whiskey bottle at Moon's elbow, as if the cowpuncher had shot at it.

"All right, killer," the cowboy was saying thickly. "Let's see you. The great Johnny Moon. Let's see you try for me."

"No," Cam said, going down toward them.

The man with the gun turned slightly, so that he covered both Moon and Duncan.

"This isn't your deal," he said. "You ain't a marshal now any more."

"Put it away," Cam said. He came forward steadily.

"I'll shoot, Duncan!"

"No," Cam said again, "no you won't shoot," speaking with the absolute confidence of a man who is certain of the outcome or who does not care.

The cowpuncher shifted slightly again, as if he were no longer sure of himself. He started to speak, but Duncan was close to him now and hit him swiftly and hard.

"Look out!" Moon shouted.

The thin gunman turned in a blur of motion and there were guns in his hands now and he was shooting. Splashes of flame licked out from the rear of the room and for a moment the place shook with gunfire. Then Cam saw the three of them on the floor, the cowboy dead with the others. Cam had not managed to knock him out, and the puncher had fired once. Duncan's own gun was in his hand and it was smoking, although he had no memory of drawing or firing it. Against the bar, Moon stood with the heavy guns hanging at his sides. There was a smear of blood on his shirt.

"Thanks," Moon said, and let the guns fall to the floor. There was a little cry from Lucy and she ran over to them. Men began to move around again. Duncan saw Tull, still at the table, a nicked revolver in his hand.

"You might have tried to shoot that thing," Cam said. "We could have used some help."

"Your war, Marshal," Tull told him coldly.

Cam turned to Lucy and Johnny. Moon had been raked along the ribs by a slug and was bleeding strongly, although it was not a bad wound.

"Maybe you will make a gunfighter at that," Moon said painfully.

"If I'd known he had friends, I might have been more careful," Cam said. "I thought it was just that one poor drunken fool."

"They steamed him up to it, I guess," Moon said. "When you came in, I saw his friends in the mirror, getting ready to make a play."

"Lucky you did."

"Why did they do it?"

"Well," Cam said, trying to avoid a possibility which he did not want to consider. "Well, it'd be something big to have Johnny Moon a notch on a fellow's gun."

"Maybe, for the cowpuncher. But what about those two?"

"What about them?"

"I've seen them, down on the border, in the old days," Moon said. "They could jump pretty salty."

"So?"

"The star," Moon said, and Cam looked at it, shining palely on the thin gunman's shirt. "Maybe they figured I was the marshal now," Johnny Moon said. "Somebody doesn't want any law around here, friend."

CAM and Lucy had taken Moon to the hotel where he lived and now walked back through the dark, quiet streets toward the saloon. The bodies would have been taken away now, and there would be a fresh layer of sawdust on the floor and Spence Tull would be dealing again.

"You missed the stage, Cam," Lucy said.

"I know. I was thinking, now, that I wouldn't be taking it."

"I knew you had changed your mind," she said bitterly. "I knew it, after the shooting, when you talked to Johnny."

"Yes."

"You know how it will end, Cam?"

"Yes, maybe I know that too."

"Something's going to happen," she said, her voice almost a sob. "I can feel it working out. Something. He'll kill you, or else you'll kill him."

"It might be that."

"Then where will I be?" she asked him.

"How will I live then?"

When he did not answer, she asked in a weary voice, "Why, Cam? It won't ever be right for us. Why didn't you go?"

"I don't know exactly, Lucy," he said. "Something—responsibility, maybe—the same thing that stops you. I feel bad about going—guilty. All these years as marshal, staying around because you were here—well, I've made it my job now, Lucy, something I've got to do, at least until Benson gets a new man. Being marshal, that's my life, a duty—"

His voice broke off inconclusively. He was not sure himself how to formulate the responsibility he felt.

"I know how it will end. Oh, I know how it will end."

"We can't help that," he said. "You're here and I'm here and we can't do anything to save ourselves because that's the kind of people we are, Lucy. There's nothing we can do."

He could hear her crying in the darkness.

LAST night for me, Cam Duncan thought. It was three days after the shooting, and he and Benson were coming down the street in the early dusk, following two roustabouts who were wheeling the railroad payroll toward the bank in a little cart.

Last night, Cam thought; Lucy was wrong after all.

"Well," Benson said as they got to the

bank building, "I'm glad we got this taken care of. Now I don't have to worry about that new marshal I'll be breaking in, with this payroll out of the way. When you leaving, Cam?"

"Going out tonight," Cam said.

"Kind of envy you," Benson told him.

"I'm getting too old for this job."

There was light in the bank windows. The men opened the door and pushed the little cart inside. It was like a hotel lobby, a big room full of ugly furniture, badly lighted. In the middle of it Mark Grandin, the president, stood as stiffly as one of the old-fashioned chairs. Behind the desk, in the cashier's cage, a pale face shadowed by a visor stared at them dully. Cam had an indefinable feeling of uneasiness.

"Well, Mark, we got it for you," Benson said heartily to the president. When Grandin did not reply the sheriff said, "Hell, if you don't want the payroll, we'll keep it."

"We'll take care of it," a cool, amused voice told him.

Bill Dalloway stepped out of the shadow with a gun in his hand and then there were the wooden-faced brothers at the windows of cashiers' and tellers' cages, and, behind Dalloway, Harvey Prescott.

"You hadn't better move, Marshal," Dalloway said. "You're not standing in shadow now."

For a long moment they stood looking at each other, and Cam Duncan thought, *You've got to try—you've got to try*, and found that he could not move his arm. Then the roustabouts let go of the cart and the strongbox fell with a clashing of metal.

Duncan dropped to the floor behind one of the big chairs, feeling the hat jump from his head on the way down, and began shooting. He got Dalloway squarely through the stomach with his first shot, thinking in amazement, *It's so easy*, and then with wonder, *I'm still alive*. Then slugs began to cut into the chair all around him.

To his left he could see Benson, also behind cover, and heard the smash of his gunshots. The two men who had brought in the payroll were hugging the floor, not even looking up. They had no guns. The cashier had disappeared and Grandin was down, but Cam did not know whether or not he had been hit. A head, not the cashier's but that of one of the brothers, appeared at the cage window and a gun pointed at Grandin. Cam smashed a shot through the flimsy counter where he thought the man's body would be, and the head disappeared. Then, behind him, Cam heard other guns come into play. He kept firing at the counter, felt something smash into his left arm, and for a moment pure pain stunned him.

He found that he was trying to load his gun with a broken arm. Around him there seemed to be only gunsmoke and silence. Then a voice said, "All right, Prescott, you're the last."

Cam saw Johnny Moon standing just inside the door. As he spoke, Moon dropped the heavy guns into their holsters, looking at Prescott, who was in a corner beside the body of Dalloway.

"In the old days, always thought sometime you'd make a try for me," Johnny Moon said. "Now try, Prescott."

Cam did not even see Moon draw his gun. It simply appeared in his hand, held hard against his hip, and flame spurted almost continuously from the muzzle. Prescott took a fumbling step forward, like a man going in the dark, and said in surprise, "Johnny," and went down.

The whole thing had taken less than a minute.

"It's all over," Cam heard himself saying stupidly.

"Horses," Benson grunted. He was down on the floor, badly wounded. "They'd have somebody with the horses."

Yes, Cam thought, they'd have to have a man with the horses, and he'd have to wait long enough to be sure. Cam knew,

suddenly, thinking, *Lucy was right. She knew who that man would be.* He got up.

"Give me a gun, Johnny," he said. "Give me a gun."

"You know who it is back there?"

"Give me a gun."

"You damned fools," Johnny Moon said, and rapped the flat of one long gun against Duncan's head.

It did not knock Cam out. Lying on the floor, dazed from the pain of the smashed arm as much as from the head blow, he saw Moon's slender figure going rapidly to the door at the rear.

For a fraction of a second there was nothing. Then Cam heard the heavy blast of a carbine, and then, late and reluctant it seemed, the sound of Moon's .45. After that there was no more shooting.

What seemed a long time later, the room was full of people and talk and pain. Lucy was bending over him. She had been crying, but there was no accusation in her eyes.

"It wasn't you, Cam," she said. "Oh, I'm glad it wasn't you!"

He knew that she meant both that she was glad that he had survived and that he hadn't shot Tull, the man who had held the horses.

"Your arm," she asked. "Is it bad?"

"Not so good," he said weakly.

Benson, sitting on the floor while the doctor probed his wound, gave them a twisted smile.

"You're having hard luck catching that stage, Cam," he said. "You'll never make it now."

Cam thought of Johnny Moon, lying out in the darkness, dead with a carbine slug in him, and of his own life, which had seemed complete and finished, a thing that could be left behind. Johnny Moon had given that life back to him.

"I won't get it tonight, anyway," Cam said, and looked at Lucy's face and knew that he would never have to catch that midnight stage.

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 31)



1. If a cowpoke told another to "dally your tongue," he would be ordering him to keep quiet.

2. The Southwestern term *baile* means a dance.

3. A true Westerner would be most likely to refer to his horse as a "cow hoss."

4. True. A cowman is a person who raises cattle.

5. True. *Chigaderos* is a term used in reference to riding aprons.

6. Normally, if in most parts of Western United States, you would expect a Chinook wind to come from the northwest.

7. Yes, if the skirts of a saddle are round, they could well be California skirts.

8. True. A "cutting horse" is also sometimes known as a "carving horse."

9. If the ranch boss sent you out for some "brush splinters," you should return with some brush country cattle.

10. In the language of the cowpoke, a "bucket dogie" is a calf bought "back East" somewhere and shipped to the ranch for purposes of restocking.

11. False. A box brand is a brand with a boxlike frame around it.

12. True. A "brander" is the individual who applies the hot iron to the animals at branding time.

13. When applied to a stampede, the term "bend" means to turn the stampeding herd.

14. "Bible" is the cowpoke slang expression used in reference to a book of cigarette papers.

15. "Red fox" is not a Westerner's term for an outlaw.

16. The Western slang term, "to arch his back" means to become angry or to be angry.

17. To "bushwhack" means to ambush. Needless to mention, the cowpoke's vocabulary has a variety of other terms which also mean to ambush.

18. If a cowpoke refers to a critter as an "animal," quite likely he is referring to a bull.

19. True. To "bake" a horse means to ride it in such a way that it becomes overheated.

20. True. "Bad medicine" is an expression used in reference to a person who is thought to be dangerous.

Digger's men came charging
down on them with guns
drawn. . . .



Men have died for a dream of steel—and have lived to dream of guns. Steve Nailor swore to make both come true—or go down with a crimson tide!

BULLETS BAR BLOOD CANYON

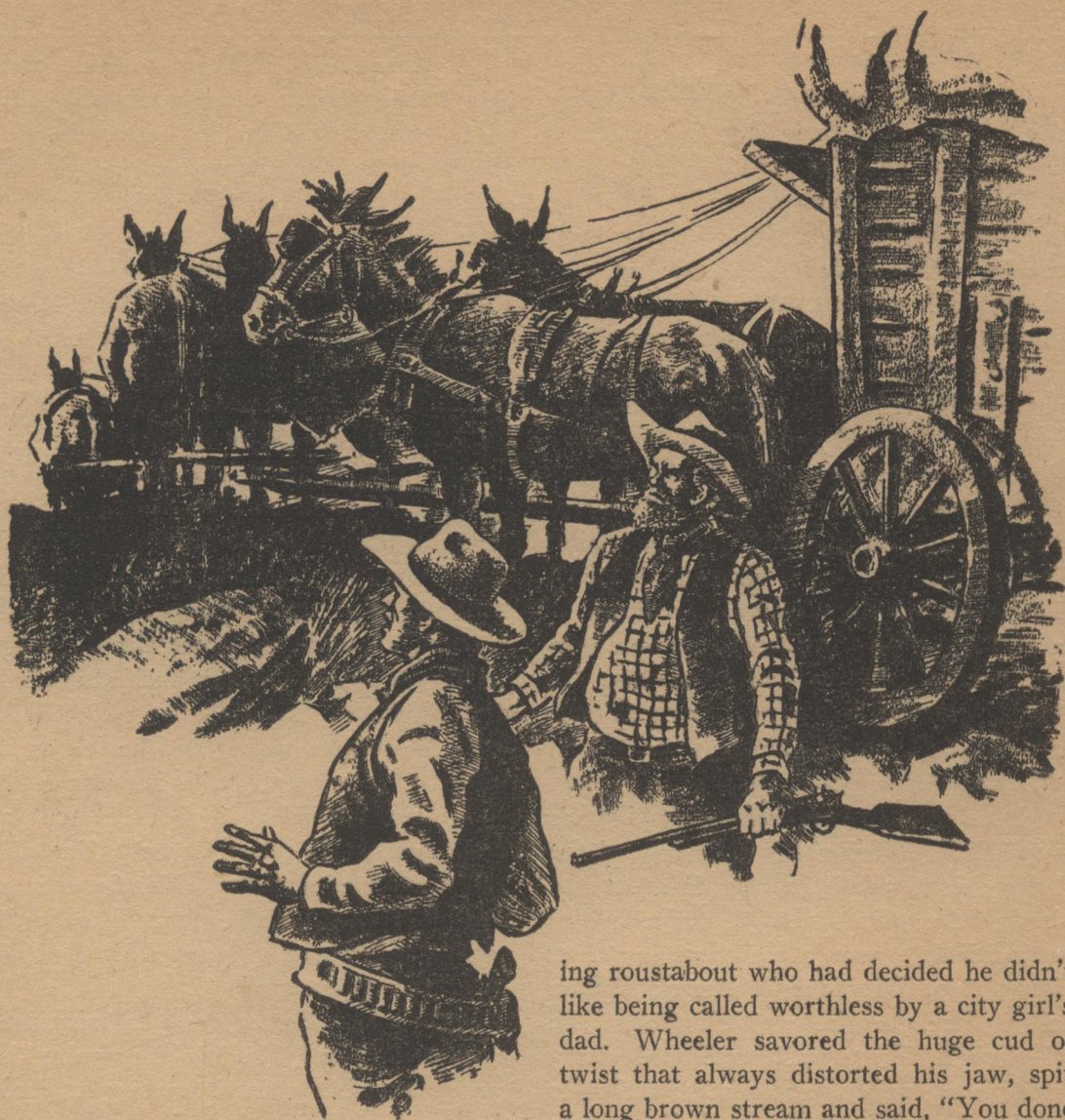
By THOMAS THOMPSON

CHAPTER ONE

Devil With Dynamite

THE bridge over Fossil Gulch wouldn't have been beautiful to most people. It was to Steve Nailor. Every rough-hewn timber hauled down

from the Ochoco represented man hours of dust and sweat; every cross member meant blistered hands and short tempers; every piece of planking was a part of a sleepless night spent wondering how he would meet his next payroll. It was a crude structure, but it looked big and imposing, as if it were there to stay. It



meant much needed money, for it marked the completion of the contract. She was an ugly bridge and maybe she wasn't the best engineered bridge in the world, but she was Steve Nailor's baby. Steve stood there with the hot wind blowing through his close-cropped hair and he liked what he saw.

Wheeler Gaines, who admitted to being the toughest damn muleskinner in the state of Oregon, squinted his faded eyes against the afternoon glare and silently shared in the satisfaction. He had been closer to Steve than any other man and he knew what this meant to the cowpunch-

ing roustabout who had decided he didn't like being called worthless by a city girl's dad. Wheeler savored the huge cud of twist that always distorted his jaw, spit a long brown stream and said, "You done it, Stevie. In spite of snow and wind, hell and high water, you done it."

"And in spite of Big Bill Bowes," Steve Nailor said.

"By golly she'd be proud of you," Wheeler said. He still had hopes of patching things up.

"Lorrie?" Steve laughed. "I reckon Oliver Walsh has got that all surveyed and staked out. From here on I take my women where I find 'em, Wheeler."

Wheeler knew that wasn't so. He also knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Steve slapped the old muleskinner on the back and the dust clouded up from Wheeler's denim jacket. "Come on, part-

ner," Steve said. "I've got a quart of honest-to-gosh whiskey I've been saving for this day. It's three months since I've had a drink and I'm thirsty."

They started down the rocky, twisting trail toward the collection of jerry built shacks. Steve Nailor, under six feet, was blocky and windburned and his smooth-shaven face had a fixed tenseness about it, like the face of a man who is constantly pushing himself. Wheeler, twice his partner's age, walked with a shuffling gait that somehow managed to convey the idea that man's place was on the high seat of a wagon or on the neigh wheeler of a jerkline string. Under his battered black hat Wheeler's bald head sloped down in a series of rolls to his badly broken nose and straight on to his whiskered chin. He had a way of watching everything at once and not appearing to look. He said now, "What's that jigger up to?"

Steve caught something in the old man's voice and he jerked his head toward the bridge first, as he always did. At the foot of the pilings near the edge of the turgid little stream a man was standing, looking up. They caught a quick glimpse of his face, then he turned and ran into the brush. There was a rattle of movement in the willows and a horse and rider emerged, came into view for half a minute and then were lost in one of the rocky canyons. Wheeler was still standing there scratching his chin, puzzled, when Steve saw the curl of blue smoke lifting straight up for six or eight feet to where it was caught in the breeze that always moved in the gorge. They had both seen enough blasting around here in the last three months to know what it was.

There was nothing either man could do. They stood there in fascinated disbelief and the center of the bridge seemed to raise from its foundation. The planking buckled and then came the sound, the screeching tear of nails from boards, the splintering rip of timbers, the final crash

of the dynamite. Smoke and dust and debris shot fifty feet into the air and both men were knocked flat by the concussion. Hugh pilings and fifteen foot lengths of timbers shot up like rockets, turned end over end lazily, then plummeted down and sent spumes of frothy brown spray mushrooming up from the creek bed. The rumbling echoes of the blast went rushing down the canyons, smashed against the red and green rock walls, bounded back and crashed into the barriers again.

Men rushed out of the shanties down the slope. Horses and mules tugged and reared against their picket ropes. A half dozen dogs went yelping wildly out into the sage. The sound rumbled away and there was nothing left but the mocking chuckle of the stream as it burbled around the wreckage. Steve Nailor got to his feet. He was trembling and he felt as if the blast had ripped out his insides.

A flying splinter of rock had cut a small gash in Wheeler's cheek. The old man kept running the tip of his finger into the blood then looking at it, as if he didn't believe it. He said, "I worked for Big Bill Bowes for ten years."

Steve said, "Sometimes you misjudge a man, Wheeler." He didn't recognize his own voice. He started running toward the shacks and Wheeler followed.

They worked like automatons and at first there was no sign of feeling in Steve Nailor. It was like when a man worked on a storm torn night with a stampede. You worked and you thought about it later. One man had a broken leg. Another had a cut on his head and he kept walking around, laughing. A third wouldn't have to worry about a left shoe any more. They quieted the stock and poked aimlessly at the debris, working furiously, accomplishing nothing.

All the wagons below the bridge had been wrecked by falling timbers and four Fresno scrapers were twisted lumps of metal. The crew of twenty men walked

around the camp, each with his own thoughts. Most of them were outraged at the needless destruction, surprised that Big Bill Bowes would stoop to this, sorry for Steve; all were sick with the realization that this was the end. A few started packing. Wheeler Gaines chewed thoughtfully and rubbed his knuckles against the blood on his cheek. He had seen the calm killer-rage come into a man before; he was seeing it now as he watched Steve Nailor. He said, "Steady boy. I still don't believe it."

Steve got the cook to rustle up supper as usual, feeling in his own mind that this was the least he could do for the boys. A sapper called Jinkey took over the first aid and when things quieted down Steve made a speech, the longest he had ever made in his life. With each word the cold anger in him kept growing.

"I could bellyache and cry and make promises," he told them. "I'd rather give it to you straight. You want to know what your chances are of getting your last two months wages and you've got a right to know. They're damn slim. I got a dollar and four bits in my pocket and a bottle of whiskey in my warsack. The equipment, what there is left of it, is maybe half mine and the rest is mortgage. You know the deal on the contract; I get paid when the job's done. I can't finish it, so I get nothing and I lose the ten thousand dollar bond I put up. One man wanted to

see me fall flat on my face on this job and it looks like he's seeing it. Some of you said I was a damn fool, and maybe I was, but from here on out I play it my way and play it alone. If you want, you can force me to sell my equity in the equipment and you'll get paid off a nickel on the dollar. If you want to gamble, I'd like to straighten things out so that I can keep a couple of wagons and a string of mules to put me back in the freighting business. I'll make out IOU's for every one of you. Hang onto 'em, because someday they'll be good, and I don't mean with Bill Bowes' signature. Eat hearty, buckos, it's your last meal."

He left the long commissary building and there was dead silence behind him.

Outside the night had come down over the barren hills and the stars were big and close. The smell of sage and juniper was thick in the air. He looked at the tool sheds, the long bunkhouses, the lean-to barns. He had tried to be a big shot because a man had said he couldn't be. He had failed, just as Big Bill Bowes had said he would, but it had taken dynamite to do it. He thought of Bowes, sitting in his plush office in Portland, too much of a big-timer to get out on his own jobs any more, and he thought of Bill's daughter Lorrie. He didn't like thinking of either of them. He felt Wheeler's hand on his arm. "The boys say go ahead and salvage what you can, Steve. There's a couple of

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good wagons and that puts us back in the freighting business."

"Not us, Wheeler," Steve said. "Me."

"Steve, we're partners—."

"I'm gonna bust a man's back, Wheeler. He's a friend of yours and I don't think you'd like watching it." He turned and went over to his own shanty and fished the bottle out of his warsack. He pulled the cork with his teeth and tilted the bottle high. As the fiery liquid ran down his throat he thought, this was another thing you didn't like about me, wasn't it Bowes?

PRINEVILLE was dusty and hot in the lobby of the Ochoco Inn and swapped lies and ranches. They barely looked up when Steve Nailor walked in and tossed his bedroll against the counter. Few here knew him. It was a week since the explosion, eighty miles away, and talk had turned to other things. Steve had gone on a good drunk, mostly because he kept remembering that Big Bill objected to his drinking. It had settled nothing, least of all his temper. He scrawled his name on the register and was leaning down to pick up his gear when he heard the voice behind him. He tried to keep his hands from making into fists as he turned and saw the two men walking into the hotel. They hadn't seen him yet. He said, "Hello, Walsh."

The man called Walsh stopped as if he had been hit in the stomach. He was about Steve's age, well built but with a look of good living about him. He wore whipcord pants and laced boots and a flat-brimmed hat. His hair was blonde and his eyes were an incredible blue. He regained his composure as quickly as he had lost it, smiled faintly and said, "Hello, Nailor. Heard you had some trouble."

"News travels fast as hell, don't it?" Steve said.

The man with Oliver Walsh, a hulking ape with red whiskers, said, "What's the

matter, Nailor? Drunk again? First you run a wagon over a cliff and now you blow up a bridge."

Steve threw his entire weight behind his fist. It caught the big man on the point of the chin and sent him sprawling back out the door. All the color had drained from Oliver Walsh's face. He started to say something and Steve pushed him aside, stepped over the sprawled body of the big man and went out into the sun. Behind him he heard one of the ranchers say, "He's a sudden man, ain't he?" Steve hurried down the street toward the nearest saloon.

One thing he had to do, he knew, was keep away from Oliver Walsh. If he ever got started on him he might kill the man. It was all right to hate a man, but when it came to the point where you didn't know whether it was because of a girl or something else—. He threw a silver dollar on the bar and ordered a drink. He tossed off the first one, turned and looked out the window and the sign hit him right in the face. BOWES CONSTRUCTION COMPANY. He said aloud, "I don't mind being spit on, but damned if I like to have 'em rub it in my hair." The bartender poured another drink and flicked a fly with his towel.

A full pint later that sign seemed to fill the entire window of the saloon. It kept reaching out, mocking, inviting Steve to fight. Without asking he knew that Bowes had moved into Prineville for one reason—to take over the road job Steve had lost. He still didn't see where Digger Hanak, the man he had hit, fitted into the picture and he didn't much care. Digger had owned a rival freight line when Steve was freighting out of Canyon City. Maybe Digger was freighting for Bowes now, he didn't know. His fight with Digger had nothing to do with Bowes anyway. Steve didn't like Digger and he had promised the freighter he would knock him down every time he met him. He meant to keep that promise. But that damn slick-

haired, high talking Walsh—. He hitched his belt and went back outside.

Maybe if his old partner Wheeler Gaines had been with him, maybe if he hadn't taken those last two drinks. There was always a string of maybes the next morning, but right now he was no more able to help himself than he had been that time he whipped four of Digger's drivers. He went straight across the street to where the sign was hanging and put his foot through the big front window. It made a fine sound.

As long as the window was out there was nothing to keep him from going inside. A desk was in his way so he shoved it against the wall. Papers scattered and a picture fell and broke. He picked up a chair and tossed it through the broken window. A door opened and a bull bellow voice made an unintelligible roar then stopped short. The grey haired man who stood there said, "I might have known!"

"That's right, Bowes," Steve Nailor said. "Thought I'd drop in and tell you what a hell of a swell job your dynamiter did on my bridge."

"Now wait a minute, Steve." Bill Bowes had been a construction man for years and a lot of it was still in his square shoulders, his leathery skin and the pitch of his voice. The heaviest work he did now was picking up the tape on a stock ticker, but he was still all man.

"Don't worry about a thing, Bowes," Steve said, pushing back his hat. "You and your highfalutin' friends could beat any legal action I could start against you. You knew that before you blew the bridge. But there's other ways, Bowes. Slower, but there's ways. I'll beat you flat if it takes the rest of my life. I'll make you eat crow, so help me—"

Bill Bowes took an expensive cigar from his vest pocket, broke it in half and thrust the entire piece into his mouth. He said, "I guess I was right about you, Nailor. You sure ain't worth a damn."

"I'm a little weak against dynamite," Steve said. The heat and the sudden exertion were beginning to catch up with him. The room was spinning. He tried to focus his eyes and had trouble. He tried to maintain a little touch of dignity as he turned and walked out of the office. He walked straight into the arms of two town policemen.

Prineville had one of the most uncomfortable jails Steve Nailor had ever been in. Sometimes during the night rain had sneaked in through a pass in the towering Cascades and stayed just long enough to drench the Ochoco Valley. This morning the sun was beautifully bright and the air was thick with steam. It seemed to Steve that most of the steam had settled right in his cell.

There's wasn't any pacing back and forth, wondering what he had done the night before. He knew exactly what he had done. There wasn't any horrible, gnawing regret, except maybe a regret that he hadn't hit Digger Hanak again. He hadn't been so drunk that he didn't know what he was doing. In fact, he couldn't remember ever having been that drunk.

Steve Nailor liked his booze, there was no doubt about that, but it wasn't a habit that he couldn't break any time he wanted to and it wasn't something that ever got in the way of his work. A few years back, when he was footloose and fancy free, he would work like the devil for three months and then take a week or ten days off to celebrate. When the celebration was over he went back to work broke and that was that. Everybody liked him and he never spent another man's money. It was just Steve's way of working off his excess steam.

But this bust he had been working on for the past week annoyed him. He wasn't getting any fun out of it and the more he drank the more sober he seemed to get. His thinking became sharper all the time.

The only thing wrong with it was he couldn't think of anything except Bill and Lorrie Bowes.

To himself he admitted frankly that he was still in love with Lorrie. So much in love that it hurt all over, something like when a man is coming down with the gripe. Another thing he admitted to himself was that he sure as hell didn't know how to handle love affairs. He didn't know just what it was he had expected Lorrie to do, but while he was shifting his feet and waiting for it Big Bill had decided he was no fit prospect for a son-in-law and Oliver Walsh had moved into the Bowes Construction Company as chief engineer and chief contender for Lorrie's favors. And all this with the hearty approval of Big Bill, who bought a huge house and started living in the grand manner.

When that happened Steve did the only thing he could think of. He got drunker than a skunk and went to see Big Bill. And along about then Big Bill told him off as only Big Bill could. Steve had been doing some freighting for Bowes at the time. A month later he had thrown everything he had into underbidding a road job right out from under Big Bill's nose. Now he was sitting here in a familiar smelling jail cell, his mouth tasting like the inside of a teamster's boot, and the only self pity he allowed himself was to think that maybe Big Bill had been right. Maybe he wasn't the right man for Lorrie after all.

Outside of that he was mad, and it wasn't a good, clean anger that makes a man want to go out and punch somebody in the nose. It was a sore, cancerous kind of thing and it kept forming a bitter lump in his stomach, twisting his thoughts. He had never gotten along with Big Bill because Big Bill was the type of man you had to fight with. But he had had plenty of admiration for the old boy who had run two mules and a scraper into a good sized construction outfit. Big Bill had never

struck him as the sort of man who would stoop to dynamiting a bridge to put a man out of business. Bill Bowes had never struck anyone else that way either, and that was going to make it impossible to prove that the Bowes Construction Company had been behind the dynamiting. Folks would say some likkered-up Injun did it or some drunken construction stiff who was sore because he wasn't getting his regular pay.

Steve smacked his fist into his open hand. No, it was going to be a long, drawn-out proposition. But Steve Nailor had never let any man kick him in the face and he wasn't going to start now. The key turning in the cell door broke his train of thought. He looked up and saw the familiar battered features and the jutting whiskers of Wheeler Gaines. Steve said, "Oh, fine. How in hell did you find me?"

"It wasn't hard at all," Wheeler said, spitting at his toe. "There's only one jail in this town. Come on, you're out again for a while."

"Wait a minute, lover boy," Steve said. "When we sold what was left and divided up our two wagons I told you we were on our own. You've got the same amount of money I've got and that's not enough to let you go around bailing people out of jail. Forget it. I've got some thinking to do and I'd just as soon do it here as anyplace. It's cheaper."

"Where'd you get the idea I'd spend money on you?" Wheeler said. "Lorrie got you out. Come on."

"Lorrie?" The name squeaked a little in his throat.

"That's right," Wheeler said, shifting his cud. "She said if you stuck around here somebody might find out she knew you. Said it was worth the bail money to get you out of town."

Steve eyed the old man suspiciously. "You back with Bowes again?"

"I'm back working for me," Wheeler said. "I'm in the freighting business,

which is where you'd be if you'd lay off the hooch. Come on, get the hell out of here. They got other customers."

Steve combed his bristly hair with his fingers, put on his hat and got to his feet. He winced and said, "I used to have a top on my head." Then he walked through the door and as he passed the jailor he tipped his hat and said, "I'll drop in again next time I'm in town."

"Don't bother," the jailor said.

CHAPTER TWO

Fight—Or Run!

THEY went across the street to a restaurant that served hotcakes the size of stove lids. Neither Steve nor Wheeler spoke, but, following an old custom they had, both men fished four bit pieces from their pockets, flipped them in the air, caught them and clapped them on the back of their hand. They uncovered, peered at them, and Wheeler said to the cook, "My father here, who smells of sheep dip, will pay for the breakfast."

Steve buttered his thick cakes, poured on an ample supply of syrup and started eating. Wheeler, working his knife through the tines of his fork, cut his cakes again and again, turning his plate each time to get a new angle. When they were cubed to his satisfaction he speared several squares and thrust them into his mouth. He chewed vigorously and a peculiar wrinkle started forming on either side of his flat nose. He glanced around sheepishly, thrust two fingers inside his mouth, probed around his cheek and came out with the cud of twist which he dropped between his feet on the floor. Steve said, "Someday you'll remember."

Wheeler Gaines said, "About the same time you get sense. Quit squirmin' like a two-year-old at a waterfall and ask me where she is."

"I don't give a hoot," Steve said.

He paused; "Where is she?"

"Right here in town living in a boarding house and not a very good one at that."

"It's fashionable for young society ladies to see how the poor folks live," Steve said.

Wheeler grunted. "It also happens to be the only place she's got to live."

"I remember something about thirty rooms on Portland Heights," Steve said.

"So do I," Wheeler admitted. "Big Bill tells me it brought a fine price. Enough to practically hold the business together for another month."

"It's funny," Steve said. "I tried all the whiskey in town, but I guess I must have missed the brand you been drinking."

"So it looks as if," said Wheeler, "this job is going to turn out to mean about as much to Big Bill Bowes as it did to you. Only you're young and full of vinegar and Big Bill ain't. Besides which he still has a daughter on his hands waiting for some yahoo to get sense enough to marry her."

"Tell me when to start crying," Steve said.

"He's broke, Stevie. He's been losing money hand over fist."

"So he uses dynamite," Steve said. "He bids short on a few jobs, trying to play idle rich, gets caught with his pants down, then blows up my bridge knowing damn well he can put a quick finish on my job and capitalize on all the work I've done."

Wheeler Gaines put down his knife and fork and turned on his stool. For just a second his hand gripped Steve's forearm and his faded blue eyes held Steve's gaze. "Big Bill had nothing to do with blowing up the Fossil Gulch bridge."

"Because he says so?" Steve asked.

"Because he says so," Wheeler said. "That's enough for any man and you know it."

"Man with no wampum speak with twisted tongue," Steve said. "Old Umattilla proverb."

"You gotta lay off, Steve." Wheeler's

voice was soft but full of determination.

"We dissolved partnership once," Steve said. "We can't do it again."

"I'm gonna haul some of Big Bill's stuff out to the bridge," Wheeler said. "You're gonna help me."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

Steve thought a minute. "Does Bowes know about it?"

"Lorrie does. That's why she got you out of jail."

"Thought she wanted me out of town?"

"If she had any sense she would," Wheeler said. "Digger Hanak is hauling the stuff now and he's holding them up."

"That's the first thing Digger Hanak has ever done I agreed with," Steve said.

"I've got the wagons loaded," Wheeler said. "Yours and mine. We're pulling out of here at noon."

Steve felt the muscles tighten at the base of his jaw. He got off his stool and stood there, his feet spread. He said, "Look, Wheeler. Maybe you think I'm playing. If I haul any of Big Bill's stuff it will be to run it down a gulch. Take it or leave it." He tossed a silver dollar on the counter and went outside into the glare of the street. He had a weak, shaky feeling inside that wouldn't go away.

He started walking up the street toward the Ochoco Inn where he had left his blanket roll and he kept walking faster all the time. He turned in through the court with its round, waterless fountain, batted aside the doors and started across the lobby. Oliver Walsh was leaning against a post, smoking a cigarette. Walsh said, "I want to talk to you, Nailor."

"I don't want to talk to you," Steve said.

"I run things for the Bowes Construction Company," Walsh said. "I let the contracts and I say who does the hauling. I've made a deal with Digger Hanak and it holds. From your past reputation we don't want anything to do with you.

Steve said, "Watch it, pretty boy. I don't like that kind of talk." He hadn't noticed Digger Hanak coming up behind him. Hanak's voice said now, "And if that ain't clear enough you roll one wheel of them loaded wagons of yours over there in the yard and your own mother won't recognize you."

Steve turned his body and his fist caught Digger Hanak flush in the mouth. The big teamster went down hard, but he bounced up just as fast. He drew back his fist for a clumsy haymaker and Steve clipped him on the point of the jaw and put him down for keeps. The same rancher who had been in the lobby last night looked up from his newspaper and said to his neighbor in the next chair, "Habit forming, ain't it?"

Steve looked at Oliver Walsh. The engineer's face was white and his unnaturally blue eyes glittered sharply. Steve said, "Don't never tell me what to do, Walsh. That's a mistake."

He walked back outside, down the street and into a hardware store. With some of the last money he had he bought a six shooter, a cartridge belt and three boxes of shells.

Exactly at noon Wheeler Gaines came out to the loading yard and swung up into the saddle of the nigh wheeler in his twelve mule team. In front of his knee was a scabbard and he drew out the .30-.30 rifle, worked the lever once, spit between his mule's ears, turned and looked back at Steve Nailor, who was fiddling with the trace chains of his own rig. The old man rolled his cud to a comfortable position in his cheek and said, "Are you ready Stevie?"

"Ready," Steve said.

Wheeler Gaines cracked his whip and the leaders leaned into the harness. He gave one tug on the single jerkline, the nigh leader shook his head against the bit, there was a clatter of chain and the six span of mules pulled into their harness

and veered off to the left with the precision of a marching column. Wheeler stared ahead between the row of nodding brown ears. The sun was hot on his face and he started humming a little tune.

This was damn foolishness, Steve Nailor knew. He had set out to break the back of Big Bill Bowes and here he was rocking along on the back of a mule with a jerkline in his hand hauling Big Bill's supplies. The wagons wound out along the road through the valley and started up the long slope through the many switchbacks into the ponderosa pine. The dust was thick and Steve pulled his neckerchief up over his nose to cut out some of it. The wheels of the heavily loaded wagons ground against the rock and the constant jangle of the chains set up a sleep-inducing music. Fifty yards ahead, Wheeler's wagon rolled along steadily and now and then Steve could catch a snatch of Wheeler's song.

The very way he had gone about this thing made a lie of all Steve's threats. He knew himself well enough to know that if he had actually been convinced of Big Bill's guilt he would have gone to the man and broken his neck with his bare hands. All this pussyfooting around and big talk wasn't like Steve in the first place. The cold, bald facts of the matter were that he liked Bill Bowes and he was in love with Bill's daughter. His last minute decision to come along with Wheeler had

been because he figured this was as quick a way to take a look at things as any. But damned if he would give Big Bill the satisfaction of knowing there was some doubt in his mind. Big Bill had accused Steve of never knowing what he was up to anyway.

The wagons climbed steadily and with each mile his argument with himself became weaker. He had been pretty rough with his crew while building the bridge. He had had to whip two of them; he had fired a half a dozen more. Maybe some sorehead had really blown the bridge—he saw Wheeler's wagon stop and then the old man's yell.

THEY were on a narrow stretch of the old road with a cutbank on one side and a fifty foot drop on the other. It wasn't a good place for trouble. Steve kept peering ahead trying to find out what was wrong. Neither he nor Wheeler knew these mules any too well, but up to now they had been performing like veterans. Maybe one of them had stepped across a trace chain and gotten excited—.

He stepped down from his saddle and took time to beat the dust out of his clothes and pull the neckerchief away from his face and he saw the two riders coming down the road toward them. What the hell, he thought. Those horsebackers had plenty of room. The riders pulled up and



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the dust cloud lifted. He recognized Digger Hanak. "So you want to play, do you Hanak?" he said aloud. He loosened his gunbelt one notch and let the weapon drop down on his hip before walking up toward Wheeler's wagon.

Hanak had raised his right hand and he called out, "No trouble, Steve. Just wanta talk to you."

Hanak was a thickset man and his thinking was as thick as his body. He had made a success of the freighting business through a fool's luck, bull strength and a willingness to never question a man's right to have something hauled away. He would take hauling jobs that any man in his right mind would pass up and he never gave a damn who hired him. Some said he got his start a number of years back selling whiskey and rifles to the Indians. He had always had a special talent for putting his competitors out of business until he ran up against Steve Nailor. Hanak was off his horse now and Steve said, "Make it short, Hanak, then get those horses of yours out of the way."

The man with Hanak was tall and thin, dark enough to be a halfbreed. Steve had a feeling he had seen that face before, but he couldn't place it. The man stayed on his horse, both hands resting on the pommel of his saddle. He had a gun belted high around his waist and a rifle thrust into a boot under his right leg. He kept his eyes half closed, as if he didn't have much interest in the proceedings.

Hanak said, "All right, Steve. I'll put it to you straight. I ain't fast enough to whip you with my fists and I got sense enough to know I can't whip you with wagons. There's no damn sense of you and me fighting over hauling Bowes's stuff. There's room for both of us to make a nickle. Maybe more, if you got the sense I think you have."

It didn't sound like Digger Hanak. It sounded almost like something he had been told to say. Wheeler Gaines spit at

Hanak's feet. He said, "Don't listen to this mealy-mouthed son, Steve."

Steve ignored the old man's advice. "Nobody ever got rich on crumbs you tossed away, Hanak. What's your deal?"

Digger Hanak rubbed a dirty hand across his mouth. "Depends some on how much you love Bill Bowes," he said.

"Suppose I don't love him a little bit?" Steve said.

"Might be we could do business then," Digger said. "I don't like the way Wheeler's flapping his ears. Let's go back where we can talk private."

Digger wasn't wearing a gun and apparently had no intention of starting trouble. Steve headed back toward his own wagon and Digger followed beside him. They got into the shade of the wagon and squatted down on their heels. Steve took tobacco and papers from his pocket and made a cigarette. He said, "I ain't got all day, Digger."

Hanak made a mark in the dust with his forefinger then looked up quickly. "You like to know who dynamited your bridge?"

"What do you think?" Steve said.

"Remember Tom Foley?"

Steve thought of the hunchback powder money who had been with the Bowes Construction Company for as long as he could remember. Foley's mind was as warped as his body, but he knew how to do tricks with powder. As long as he was sober and in a good humor he was a top-notch man. The minute he got a few drinks he started remembering things he didn't like about Big Bill. He talked too much but he never did anything about it and people, realizing that his accident had done as much damage to his head as it had to his back, passed if off and waited for Tom Foley to sober up. Steve said, "I had no quarrel with Tom."

Digger Hanak shrugged his shoulders. "I just been hauling for the outfit, Steve, that's all. All I know is a man will do a lot for money and I know if you wanted to

find Tom Foley right now you could find him in Portland. He got a thousand dollars of Bowes Construction Company money in his pocket. I guess Big Bill wanted this job pretty bad. After all, Steve, the man that finishes this job is gonna get the state road job—you know that."

This was exactly the sort of lead Steve had been looking for and yet it made him mad hearing it. He got up suddenly. Hanak got to his feet and backed off a couple of steps. Steve said, "What the hell's on your mind, Hanak?"

"I haul for Bowes," Digger said. "That don't mean I take orders from him. You got commissary supplies and small tools on them wagons. My orders were to deliver just enough to make it look good. I know a trader who'll pay a hell of a good price for the rest of it."

"I know a place in Salem where they lock you up for a long time," Steve said.

"Not on this deal they don't," Digger said. "Nobody is gonna know about it until it's too damn late. When Bowes goes under he's gonna go all the way." Hanak was enjoying the feeling a little extra knowledge gave him. He winked knowingly. "When Bowes is out of business maybe a new construction outfit will start up with supplies and equipment I been splittin' off for them. Ain't that something? Big Bill putting a competitor into business." Hanak laughed. "A man who plays his cards right and gets on the ground floor stands to do pretty good. Maybe there's somebody in the company smarter than Bowes."

"Oliver Walsh?" The cigarette had died on Steve's lips.

"Why in hell should I tell you?" Digger said. "But I will say I've found Walsh an easy man to do business with."

"So that's it," Steve said.

"Maybe," Hanak said. "You want to come along peaceful and see for yourself?"

"Seems to me that's pretty damn dan-

gerous information to be handing me until you know which way I aim to jump," Steve said.

"No it ain't," Hanak said. "Because if you want to play hard to get I got a crew staked out up there ahead on Devil's Elbow and you and these wagons might get tangled up in the damndest accident you ever heard of."

"You could have just set up there behind a tree and picked me off with a rifle as I drove by," Steve said.

Hanak laughed. "One thing wrong with you, Steve. You always been sellin' me short of brains. You and me been fightin' for a year and I been gettin' the worst of it. They ever find you with a bullet in your head who the hell you think they're gonna ask about it. When you go its gonna be an accident with plenty of witnesses. All right, Steve. Now I'm in the driver's seat. What you gonna do about it?"

"This," Steve said. He lifted his fist from the top of his boot and it cracked like a meat ax against the side of Digger's jaw. As Hanak fell there was a flurry of movement up by Wheeler's wagon. The tall man on the horse turned his animal and his hand dropped to his side. At the same time there was the crack of a rifle. The man on horseback stood up in his stirrups, his arms hanging limply. He balanced that way for the smallest part of a second, then slumped over the horn of the saddle. His left foot came out of the stirrup and he fell head first into the road.

Wheeler Gaines was chewing furiously, and he had his .30-.30 rifle gripped in both hands. The old man's face was dead white and there was a stunned expression in his eyes. He kept looking at the dead man as if he didn't believe it. Digger Hanak was trying to get to his hands and knees. Steve reached down, gripped him by the collar, lifted him to his feet and hit him again. Hanak went over backwards, his arms flung out, and Steve ran

to where Wheeler was sitting astride his mule as if frozen to the saddle.

"Thanks, partner," Steve said. Wheeler couldn't talk. Steve said, "Get down off of there and help me unhitch these teams. Put some rocks under the wheels of the wagons. This is as far as we go until we get some snakes out of the road up there ahead."

CHAPTER THREE

Two-fisted Hell

THEORETICALLY Steve Nailor's plan was sound. The only trouble with it was that it didn't work out the way he had planned it. If, as Digger had said, his crew was waiting at Devil's Elbow, there was plenty of time to get the teams unhitched and out of danger before anything happened. Devil's Elbow, a particularly vicious switchback in the road where the mules had to step over trace chains doubling back on themselves, was a good five miles up the grade. There was small chance of Digger's men hearing the rifle shot at that distance and the only way they were apt to come and investigate would be if they became worried about Digger's absence. Steve figured by that time he and Wheeler could be up to a rocky cut he knew about and it would be like shooting ducks in a pond to pick off Digger's men as they came through. He made sure Hanak was still out then went to work unhitching his team while Wheeler, still numb from the impact of having killed a man, fumbled around with his own outfit.

They had barely started when Digger's men, mounted on horseback, came charging around the bend in the road straight down on the mule teams. Steve tried to yell a warning, but Wheeler was caught completely off guard. He walked out into the middle of the road while each of the six riders drew a gun and leveled them at

the old muleskiner's chest. Steve let his own half-drawn gun drop back into its holster and stepped out with his hands raised. There wasn't such sense trying to fight that kind of odds.

One of the men, a driver Steve knew only as Kurt, swung off his horse and walked over to where the dead man was lying in the road. He struggled awkwardly, turning the body over with his foot, then cursed once. "Damn you, Nailor," Kurt said, "I ought to gun-shoot you. Lefty here was a friend of mine."

"He wasn't of mine," Steve said. "Now you got yourself twenty four mules, two wagons and a couple of drivers, what you gonna do with it all?"

"That ain't my worry," Kurt said. "Ask Digger. Where in hell is he, anyway?"

"He's taking a nap," Steve said. He saw now that all of Digger's talk had been just showoff conversation while Digger stalled for time, waiting for his riders to arrive. He had never had any intention of letting Steve in on his deal with Oliver Walsh any more than he had any intention of letting Steve get out of this thing alive. He could believe, though, what Digger had said about Steve's death being an accident with plenty of witnesses. Steve had a hunch that accident was about to happen. He heard a mumbled curse behind him and, turning, he saw Digger Hanak getting to his knees.

Digger crouched there like a huge lizard. Blood had run down from the corner of his mouth and matted in his red beard. He crawled over toward the wagon and, grasping the spokes of the wheel, he pulled himself erect. For a moment he stood there, shaking his head, then his muddy eyes cleared and an ugly grin started forming around his mouth. "All right Steve," he said slowly. "Now it's my party. Kurt! Randy!" He motioned to two of his men with his head.

Kurt seemed to know what Digger had

in mind even before he was told. He grabbed Steve's right arm and bent it back, just as the pock marked man called Bandy came over to grip Steve's left arm. They locked their legs around Steve's legs and pulled back until he thought his arms were going to come out of their shoulder sockets. He was completely helpless.

Digger Hanak made his right hand into a fist, spit on his knuckles, polished them on the front of his shirt. He walked forward, the grin wide on his face. "You said something once about knocking me down every time you saw me." His fist lashed out and caught Steve high on the cheek.

It was a wicked blow, but not one calculated to knock him out. Hanak had no intentions of getting this over quickly. Steve's head jerked back and behind him he heard Wheeler yell. There was a sickening thud and Wheeler's yell was cut short. He struggled once, then gave it up as hopeless.

Hanak studied the job at hand like a sculptor viewing a masterpiece in marble. He stepped to one side, cocked his head and studied his angles thoughtfully. When he had figured exactly what he wanted to do his fist would lash out and land with a twisting movement calculated to tear the flesh from Steve's angular face. He kept working on Steve's nose with light, popping blows, just hard

enough to bring the blood gushing. He blacked both Steve's eyes. It seemed almost effortless, and yet Hanak was breathing heavily, his breath rattling in his lungs.

Steve was nearly unconscious, but once when his head rolled back he saw Wheeler lying there in the road. Wheeler tried to move and one of Hanak's drivers kicked him in the jaw.

All the men had gathered around Hanak now and they stood there smoking, watching the brutal punishment. No one heard the approaching buckboard until it was nearly on them. Steve didn't see it at all. He only knew that the two men holding him had released their grips. He threw himself toward Hanak, wanting to fight. Hanak reached out with one hand and pushed him away. Steve Nailor fell on his face in the deep dust of the road.

He never went completely out and he heard the familiar booming voice of Big Bill Bowes. It didn't make sense, Big Bill being here, but then, nothing made sense. Bowes was noted for the volume of his voice and now it seemed even louder. "What the hell's going on here, Hanak?"

It was a century before Hanak answered. Steve tried to get up. Someone was helping him. They were wiping his face with a cloth. He caught a familiar scent of perfume and he thought, I'm dreaming. They've beaten hell out of me

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and I'm dreaming. It sounded like a girl was crying.

Hanak was fumbling for an answer. Steve could hear him distinctly. "Mr. Walsh was worried about the wagons, Mr. Bowes. He told me I better keep an eye on things—." Again that long, fumbling wait in which Steve could practically hear Digger Hanak's dull brain groping for excuses. Steve opened his eyes and tried to speak and it wasn't a dream. Lorrie Bowes was holding him. She was crying and the tears were running down her cheeks and dripping on his own face. Hanak's answer exploded with the effort behind it. "They was fixin' to run your wagons over the cliff, that's what they was up to. You can see there they had their teams half unhitched. They was going to shove the wagons over and tell you it was an accident. Me and my boys got here just in time."

"Lorrie!" Big Bill yelled. "Get away from that damn pup. I forbid you—."

"Dad you make me sick." It was the same voice, low and vibrant, full of life. Lorrie's arm was around Steve's neck and she lifted him to where he could look into those dark eyes. He could see the full, red lips and her black hair was swept off her forehead the way he liked it. He swayed against her. "Wheeler!" Big Bill was yelling. "Wheeler Gaines! I hired you for this job. I didn't say nothing about this damn renegade freighter. What's he doing here?"

"I told Wheeler to hire him on," Lorrie said. "He's the best teamster that ever worked for you and you know it. He would have finished that bridge job too if someone hadn't blown it out from under him and he would have walked off with the state business afterwards." Steve felt the terrific intensity of the girl vibrating through him. "And if you don't like that," the girl said, "I'm going to marry him whether he's got a job or five cents or anything else or whether he even asks

me. Now what do you think of that—?"

"Lorrie, damn it! I forbid this."

"Keep quiet, you big moose," she said. "You're always forbidding something. Can't you see Steve's badly hurt? Why doesn't somebody help me?"

Steve was torn between his desire to just lie here relaxed, listening to more of the most beautiful conversation he had ever heard in his life and his desire to get up and see if he had enough strength left to whip Digger Hanak. He decided the latter was a little more important. He brushed his battered lips across Lorrie's cheek and said, "Darling I love you. There, I've finally said it, damn it!"

He struggled to his feet and the entire mountain turned end over end. The wagons spun around his head two or three times. He started walking across the sky, upside down and then the road came up and slapped him in the face. He remembered thinking, I guess I didn't feel as good as I thought I did. He didn't know whether he said it aloud or not.

WHEN he awoke he felt the familiar reluctant tug of well-braked wagons going down hill. He was sick to his stomach from the swaying and except for the shade that was over his face he could feel the blistering sun sucking the moisture from his body. He opened his eyes and Lorrie was there. She had rigged a piece of canvas to protect his head. He said, "It's nice here in heaven."

She turned quickly and the happy surprise on her face made her more beautiful than ever. She took a dusty, gunny sack covered canteen and tilted it to his lips. He drank greedily and she took the canteen away before he had had his fill. He lifted his head and saw that he was on top of the load on his own wagon. One of Digger Hanak's men was driving. He said, "How about Wheeler?"

"He's all right," Lorrie said. "He's

right here. Steve raised himself on his elbows and turned. He saw Wheeler sitting on top the load, holding his face in his hands. "He's sick," Lorrie said. She studied Steve's face thoughtfully as if trying to read something there. "What's it all about, Steve? Tell me the truth. I don't care any more. We've lost everything anyway through dad's bullheadedness but I'm not going to lose you. I know it's not right, me talking this way, but you're never going to get around to asking me to marry you and you just keep getting in trouble and I'm getting tired of waiting—."

Steve said, "What does Oliver Walsh mean to you, Lorrie?"

She looked at him quickly. "Is that why you stayed away from me? If it is, my little game backfired. I went to dances with him because I thought it would force you out into the open."

"You women," Steve said. He was thoughtful a long time. "What does your dad think?"

"That you're a skunk and a louse and a lot of things that no lady would repeat," she said grimly. "Which would lead me to believe he likes you. But you threatened to cause him trouble and he knows you well enough to know you don't usually go around making threats unless you plan to back them up. He says he'll have you locked up for twenty years. It's going to be a long time for me to wait."

"Your dad is a bullheaded, half-witted nincompoop," Steve said.

She said, "I'm glad you two understand each other. The future looks pleasant for our children."

He leaned back and rested and enjoyed the luxury of looking at her. He wondered how anything this wonderful could happen to him. It didn't make much difference what Big Bill did to him. There was enough satisfaction just in knowing that he no longer had to keep his hands off Oliver Walsh. He said, "Do they give

you more than twenty years when you kill a man?"

"Don't do it," she said. "It would make it very difficult for me, being married to the man who killed my father."

"Not your father," Steve said. "Oliver Walsh."

"Just because I went to a few dances with him?"

"Just because he's robbing your dad blind, buying twice the equipment he needed and storing it away for his own use, turning in fake accident reports, blowing up bridges—he's been doing it right under your dad's bulging beet nose while that old man of yours tried to get into high society."

"Steve, can you prove what you're saying?"

"The only way I can prove anything," Steve said, "is to beat on a man until it starts squirting out of his mouth. I suppose if I climb down off this wagon Digger Hanak's boy will use that as an excuse to start shooting at me."

"If dad doesn't shoot you first," she said. She was trying hard to keep the tremble out of her voice. "Steve, I don't know what you're talking about," she said, "but I'll go along with anything you say within reason. Dad didn't dynamite that bridge and I know you didn't."

"I want to have a talk with Oliver Walsh."

"Then lie still and relax," she said. "Another hour and we'll be at Fossil Gulch. Walsh is there."

"That's fine," Steve said. "One big, happy family." He was suddenly very tired. He leaned back and closed his eyes and just before he went to sleep he felt her lips on his. He tried to work his battered face into a smile and he remembered nothing else until she shook him awake.

The wagons were on the switchback above Fossil Gulch. Steve drank some more of the water. He cupped his hands and let her pour a trickle into them, then

he splashed the water against his face. He said, "There's a pint bottle in that old sheepskin coat of mine."

"No more of that, Steve," she said.

This time he managed to grin. "Medicinal purposes only from here on out," he said. "Right now I'm sick and I need medicine."

She was reluctant about it, but she got the bottle. He took a good heavy pull, held the bottle up to the light and peered through it. It was still over half full. He gave it a fling and sent it out into the canyon. "I'm well now," he said.

Wheeler Gaines raised his head. His face was battered nearly as badly as Steve's and his eyes were doleful. "Jest because you're turnin' pure ain't no reason for me to," he said.

"I'm sorry Wheeler," Steve said. "But you've got your chewing tobacco for comfort."

Wheeler made an experimental chomp with his jaws and his eyes lighted up some. "I'll be derved," he said. "Still there." He started chewing happily.

The bruises on Steve's face were throbbing but outside that he felt pretty good. The whiskey was beginning to take hold in the pit of his stomach and the blood ran through his veins and toned his muscles. He held Lorrie's hand for just a second. "Keep out of this darling. Keep away from it. It won't be pretty."

The wagons were down the slope and rumbling across to the big yard in front of the long storage sheds. The camp looked deserted and Steve had a sinking fear that maybe Oliver Walsh wasn't here and then he heard the familiar tone of his voice. Walsh was near the wagon, talking to Digger Hanak. "You damned empty-headed fool!" Walsh said. "Why did you bring them here?"

"I couldn't help it, boss," Digger complained. "The old man and the girl came along."

Walsh apparently saw Lorrie for the

first time. His voice was low in his throat and he said to Digger, "Shut your mouth and keep it shut."

Big Bill, who had apparently been following in the buckboard, came around the wagon and they heard him booming, "Glad to see you, Oliver. This is a hell of a thing. We come near losing these two loads, and if we had of, you know what that would have meant. Good thing you thought of sending Digger and his boys out to check up on things."

"I got worried when I heard that Wheeler was letting Steve drive one of the wagons," Oliver Walsh said.

"I never thought Wheeler would turn on me," Big Bill said. "His price was a good twenty percent under Hanak's—hell, Wheeler hauled for me for years."

"We all make mistakes," Oliver Walsh said. Wheeler started to say something and Steve clapped a hand over his vigorously working mouth. Walsh had Big Bill by the arm. He said, "The wagons are here now and everything is all right. I'll be ready to go to work in the morning. I'll send one of the men back to town with you and Lorrie. You can send the sheriff out after Nailor and Gaines. I'll keep them locked up here."

"No need of that, Bowes," Walsh said too quickly. For the first time his voice showed his agitation.

Steve raised himself and peered down over the side of the wagon. He looked straight into Walsh's incredibly blue eyes. He said, "Take a good look, Bowes, if you're smart. I might as well tell you now, Walsh, I'm onto your game. That accident you had planned for me didn't work out and Digger talked too much."

Walsh was as calm as an icicle. "Whatever that means," he said. "Come on Lorrie. I'll help you down." Lorrie looked first at Steve and Steve said softly, "Go ahead. Play it their way until I get a chance to do something. Make sure your dad gets a good look at things." Lorrie

climbed down off the wagon and Oliver Walsh gave her a hand. Big Bill didn't so much as speak to his daughter.

Digger Hanak rode up by the wagon and called out, "All right Nailor, Gaines. Get down off the wagon, you two, and don't try nothin'. I'd still like a chance to gut shoot you two renegades."

Steve and Wheeler climbed down and stood there against the wheel of the wagon. Steve kept feeling the ground with his feet, testing his legs, trying to find out just how much strength he had. He half turned and saw the wrecked remains of the bridge, jagged boards hanging on canted pilings. He thought of the months of sweat and worry that had gone into that structure and of the crew that had stuck by him and left the job short two months pay. He felt like he had strength enough to do whatever had to be done. He looked at the gun in Digger's hand and said, "All right, Digger. It's your pot this time."

Digger took Steve and Wheeler to a tool shed and motioned them inside, following them in. He said, "You might as well know now, Nailor, Oliver Walsh don't let nothin' stand in the way of his plans. You're still due for an accident, you two, and I reckon when they find you under a wrecked wagon it ain't gonna make much difference what your face looks like. There's a little more beauty work I want to do." He lifted the gun

in his hand and hefted it a couple of times. He said, "They say these here things do a right good job."

He started across the small shed and Steve and Wheeler backed against the wall. Wheeler's jaws were working furiously and his eyes bugged out of his leathery face. He kept making a funny coughing sound in his throat. Digger looked bigger and bigger as he moved slowly across the twelve foot space. His face was twisted and he kept raising the gun slowly. When he was within two feet of the men Wheeler Gaines gave a funny cough. His lips pursed and a thick, brown stream of tobacco juice jetted out with force enough to upset a spittoon. It caught Digger Hanak right between the eyes with an amazing splash.

The teamster jumped back, his left hand flying to his eyes. In that second Steve Nailor dove. His shoulder caught Hanak right in the middle, knocking him over backwards. And as the man hit the floor Wheeler Gaines jumped on Digger's jaw with both feet.

CHAPTER FOUR

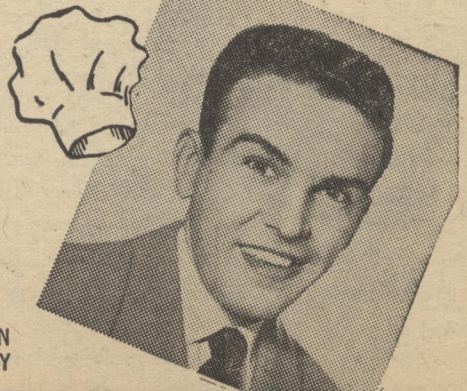
Dead Man's Gap

"HE LOOKS peaceful, don't he?" Wheeler said, spitting close to the prostrate form of Digger Hanak, who lay unheeding.

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"He's prettier without a gun all right," Steve said, scooping up the weapon. "You feel all right?"

"I reckon so," Wheeler said. "I swallowed my cud, though."

"Too bad," Steve said. "In that case you better scout out there by the wagons and see if you can pick up a gun. You'll find the crew over there in one of those bunkhouses. Make damn sure they stay there."

"Stevie," Wheeler said thoughtfully. "Every time you get out of my sight you get into trouble. I reckon I better stick with you."

"I'm gonan go call on a lady," Steve said. "You're too damn ugly to have tagging along. Keep that crew off my back and don't worry."

"If that's the way you want it," Wheeler said. "You have any trouble with that girl you just whistle, will yuh?"

"If I've got any teeth left to whistle through I will," Steve promised. He stepped out the door and dropped to his stomach at the side of the building. The big hard packed yard was deserted and the two wagons stood gaunt and alone directly across from where he was hidden. He called softly, "All right, Wheeler. All clear between here and the wagons. I'll keep you covered."

Wheeler came out of the tool shed and walked quickly across the space to the wagons. He disappeared for a short while, then reappeared, and he had a rifle in his hand. He started walking casually over toward one of the bunkhouses and Steve grinned at the old man's back.

When Wheeler was out of sight Steve stood up, keeping himself pressed closely against the side of the building while he took a good look at what was going on about him. While he was watching a door slammed at one of the shacks on the side of the hill. It was a building that had been used for an office and it seemed logical that Walsh would be there with

Big Bill and Lorrie. While he watched the door opened and Walsh and Big Bill came out. They seemed to be arguing heatedly but he could not make out what they were saying. He saw Walsh shrug, and the two of them started down the slope toward the bridge.

Steve waited until they were out of sight behind a rise of ground, then he cut across behind the long storage shed and worked his way over to the office. Keeping close to the building he got around to a window on the uphill side and peered through. Lorrie was in there alone. She was pacing back and forth and she kept drawing a handkerchief through the palm of her hand. He made a hissing sound through his teeth and she turned toward the window. He saw that her face was white and her eyes were worried.

She gave a glad little whimper that ran through him like quicksilver. "Steve! Be careful. How did you get out? I was coming over to see if I could help. I tried to get Oliver to turn you loose."

"Never mind that now," he said. "Open the door."

She ran across the room and pulled the wooden peg that was thrust through the hasp lock. The peg dangled on a rawhide thong. She opened the door a crack and Steve shouldered his way inside. Steve took her in his arms and held her. Her hands slid off his shoulders and pressed his cheeks. She pulled his head down and covered his bruised face with kisses.

"Dad and Oliver had a terrible argument," she told him. "Steve, it's true. Only about half the equipment we bought and paid for is here."

"What does Walsh say?" he interrupted.

"He says it's all a frameup that you started to get even with dad, and if anything is missing you're responsible."

"Where did they go just now?"

"You know how dad gets," she said. "He wants to look over every square inch

of the job himself once he gets started. He told Walsh he was going to fire him and take over. He says he's going to run his own jobs again, just like he did in the old days. They've gone down to look at the bridge."

Steve felt the fear thick in his belly. He hoped his face wasn't showing it. "You stay here," he told her. "This is just the way I want it—Walsh and your dad alone together. I'm going to have a talk with Walsh and there's a few things I want your dad to hear and then maybe he can get some sense through that thick skull of his."

"How about Hanak?" she said quickly. "He must be in on all this."

"Hanak is very peaceful at the moment," Steve said. "Don't worry about him." He took time to kiss her once more before he went out the door.

Oliver Walsh was no physical giant. There was nothing about him that would make the average man afraid to meet him with his fists. He had a sneering, superior way about him that should have led him into trouble, but as far as Steve knew no man had ever had a fight with Oliver Walsh. There was something in those amazing blue eyes that made a man keep his distance. Steve Nailor had felt it and he himself had stayed away from Walsh even though time and again he had wanted to punch the engineer in the nose. He told himself it was because of Lorrie. Walsh had education, background, a brilliant future with the Bowes Construction Company. He was the kind of man Lorrie should have, so Steve let him alone.

But it was more than that, he knew. He felt that if he ever touched Walsh it would be more than a fight, It would be a life and death matter. That too he had read in those amazing blue eyes.

He hurried down the trail, unmindful of the noise he was making. He knew positively, without knowing how he knew, that tragedy was making up there ahead.

If this thing had gone far enough so that Big Bill was suspecting something Big Bill was going to have to be put out of the way. Perhaps Oliver Walsh hadn't planned it this way, but his hand was being forced. Out there on the shattered bridge—even an old hand like Big Bill could slip in the evening's semi-darkness. Steve rounded a turn in the trail and saw them there ahead.

They were arguing loudly. Big Bill's powerful voice came clearly. "Maybe Steve made off with that equipment and maybe he didn't. What I'm telling you is that I don't like the way you're running my jobs, now that I get a chance to look things over first hand. Either you're no damn good as an engineer or else you're buttering your own bread at my expense. I can't stand any more of it and I don't aim to take any more of it. If I find out you actually been stealing from me, Lord help you, Walsh."

Walsh made some sort of soothing answer but Steve couldn't hear the words. Big Bill said, "Hell, yes. I want to look at it. I wouldn't trust your estimates now if you weighted 'em down with a stack of Bibles." Walsh shrugged and the two men started out onto the bridge.

For a hundred feet out the bridge was perfectly sound, then the floor of it dipped sharply and was strangely twisted. Beyond that were the jagged timbers where the blast had ripped out the entire center section. Bowes and Oliver Walsh walked rapidly and Steve could hear their boot-heels against the planking. He ran down on the bridge, panting now, and he called to them.

Oliver Walsh turned like a cat. Steve could see his face. The engineer made a queer, ducking movement and there was a stab of orange flame. A bullet whined by Steve's ear.

Steve dropped to all fours and lifted Digger's gun from his pocket. He saw that Walsh had moved in behind Big Bill.

Bowes was arguing, waving his arms, trying to move out of the way. Steve called, "Bowes! I'm not after you!"

Bowes started running back toward the end of the bridge. He stopped suddenly, his body stiffening. Slowly his hands went shoulder high. Oliver Walsh had moved up behind him and thrust a gun against his spine. The engineer called out in his well modulated voice, "All right, Nailor. You've stuck your nose into this just a little too far. I had a different plan for you, but I guess one way is as good as another. When the law comes in on the case I'll just say that I shot you after you killed Big Bill Bowes."

"Why you dirty—" Steve's breath was hot in his throat.

Big Bill was still standing there, his hands shoulder high. There was an eternity of silence and then Big Bill's voice came rumbling above the sound of the water far below. "The hell with him, Steve boy. Don't let him bluff you."

STEVE saw Big Bill turn, saw his fist lash out. There was a muffled report from the gun in Walsh's hand and Big Bill staggered to one side. Walsh made a dive for him, his intention perfectly clear. He was going to push Big Bill over. At that moment Steve Nailor fired. The bullet plowed a furrow in the wooden floor of the bridge. It was enough to turn Walsh.

Walsh rolled to one side and fired back and Big Bill fell. His body rolled dangerously close to the edge. Steve got to his feet and started running straight toward Walsh, his gun spitting. Big Bill was trying to get up and again Walsh made a dive for him. Steve fired and he knew that the bullet had nicked Walsh. The engineer screamed like a maniac. He stood there, his face a horrible grimace, and he faced Steve's fire as if he were immune to the lead. The hammer of Steve's gun fell on an empty chamber and Oliver

Walsh still stood there. Only then did Steve realize that Walsh's gun had been empty all this time.

Steve hurled his own weapon and saw it strike Walsh in the chest. He bunched his legs and made a flying tackle and his fist connected with Oliver's face. But Oliver Walsh had a deceiving amount of strength under his well tailored clothes. He rolled away from Steve's blow and countered with a slicing right. He was wickedly fast and although he didn't have the bull strength that lurked in Steve's shoulders, he hadn't taken the beating Steve had taken and his speed and boxing skill more than made up for his lack of power.

They stood there slugging, toe to toe, backing, turning, sparring. They were twenty feet away from Big Bill before Steve realized they were working out toward the center of the bridge.

Walsh tried to break. He managed to get free and get to his knees. Steve lashed out and his fist cracked against bone. He saw Oliver's head go back. It snapped, almost as if his neck were elastic. The blood in Steve's eyes blinded him. He swung again and missed. He got to his feet, ready to kick Walsh in the face if the engineer tried to get up. The blood kept clouding his eyes and it was streaming from the reopened cuts in his face. He waited and nothing happened. He risked brushing his eyes with the back of his hand and a thick, crawling fear hit him in the pit of the stomach. He was standing not three inches from the jagged break in the bridge.

His legs turned to jelly and he dropped to his hands and knees and crawled away from the break. He was still crawling when he came to Big Bill, sprawled out there on the bridge.

Bill Bowes said, "If you'll help me to my feet I'll beat hell out of you—"

They struggled across the bridge together and up the trail. Big Bill had a bad

wound high in his right chest and a wicked gash on his head where he had struck a bolt when he fell. They came into camp and saw the crew standing there dejectedly. They were being guarded by Wheeler Gaines and Lorrie Bowes. Both Wheeler and Lorrie had cocked rifles in their hands.

IT WAS amazing how anxious Digger Hanak was to talk and it was equally amazing how completely innocent he tried to make himself. He knew where every piece of equipment had been sold, he knew where other equipment was being stored against the day when Oliver Walsh could go into the construction business for himself.

Big Bill Bowes, his shoulder bandaged, sat in a chair and grumbled and grunted. When Digger was through, Steve Nailor said, "Now, dang you. Will you admit that you haven't got sense enough to pour sand out of a boot? All the time you were sitting there in Portland in your big house playing like a millionaire you were being robbed blind."

Big Bill's face was taking on a purple cast. "You drunken, no good, stinkin', muleskinnin'—"

"Shut up, both of you!" Lorrie Bowes snapped. "Separately neither one of you has any sense. Maybe together you'd make a pretty good team. I don't want my husband to be a teamster who goes on

a two week drunk every three months and I don't want my dad to lose money faster than he makes it. Maybe you can keep an eye on each other if you're partners."

"Me take him in as a partner?" Big Bill roared. "Why I'd—" He looked at Steve hopelessly. He couldn't think of what he might do.

Steve Nailor said, "Heh! Partner to this old goat? Why before I'd go in with you you'd have to take Wheeler in."

"I won't do it," Big Bill said.

"And you'd have to hire back the crew I had."

"Won't do that either."

"And they've got two months pay coming."

"Let 'em whistle for it."

"All agreed then," Lorrie Bowes said. "You're partners."

Wheeler Gaines came in from outside. He had a very satisfied look on his face. His knuckles were badly torn and there was blood on his fist. He said, "You know what other information that Digger Hanak jest now volunteered? He said poor old Tom Foley wasn't the man who set the powder to blow up that bridge. He said it was Lefty, that jigger I killed up there on the road."

He stopped suddenly and turned to Big Bill Bowes who was leaning forward in his chair, a wide grin on his face. "Hell," said Wheeler Gaines. "Them two ain't listening to me at all."



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*Out on the rim of hell, where death may
be bought for a bullet and the sons of
Satan ride on silent hoofs . . . walk softly,
stranger—or strangely die!*



She grabbed the greener before
the Comanche could accustom
his eyes to the gloom. . . .

By
MARVIN DE VRIES

Summons to Boothill

IT WAS almost lamp-lighting time, one evening late in November, when wild turkeys gobbled again in the brakes along the river. Jim Knowles glanced across the supper table at his wife and saw her sudden frozen look, as if the sound stunned her with terror. This one thing, bobbling through the air with all its false innocence, like a dagger wrapped in down,

turned her to stone. She would never let herself believe that the time for terror was past, that this echo out of their yesterdays was exactly what it seemed, shorn of its lilting mockery and whispering death. Disappointed and dismayed, his eyes slid away from her reproachful look.

"Turkeys," eight-year-old Tommy breathed, a hunter's gleam in his eye. He

glanced at the Greener on the wall and pushed back from the table, but his mother told him sharply to sit down.

In spite of his convictions, Jim Knowles listened intently, taking his time because the old habits of caution still lay heavily upon him. But the brief tension soon ran out of him, and his face creased into pleasant lines. "Yes, turkeys," he agreed with finality.

It gave him solid satisfaction to make a final answer, because it was the end of a dream with all its uncertainties and risks, and the beginning of reality. He had clung to the dream alone with stubborn insistence, even against his wife's silent reproaches and bitter fears. Now, the realities of safety and plenty, of comfort and security, were theirs, and he wanted her to take them to her heart, but she cringed away from his faith and conviction.

It had been a venturesome thing to do, to settle here so close to the Red River, when on the other side savages howled and dervished to their heart's content. In those days fear rode a man like a yoke on his back, and by night he kept his vigil at the gunslots in the walls, eyes stabbing at the darkness outside, hands sleazy with cold sweat. More than once he had listened to turkeys gobbling in the brakes at dark, knowing they were skulking Comanches or Kiowas, with their feathers and their paint and outrage. But now the danger was past, and if the sound put a brief knot in his stomach it was only old habit asserting itself. It wasn't fear that struck at him, as it did at her.

"It couldn't possibly be anything else," Mrs. Knowles said, twisting the sound of her voice into an anxious question.

"No," Jim stated, "it couldn't. But—I'll go have a look."

She raised her hand in sudden protest, then let it fall as though she knew the futility of protest and reproof.

"Let me go, too," Tommy spoke up.

"No," his father said, reluctantly. He reached for the Greener on the wall, thought better of it and took the rifle instead. "It'll soon be dark. I just want to look around." He smiled reassuringly at his wife; "There's nothing to worry about, Martha. You know that."

"Yes, I know," she agreed with her lips, her eyes slanting away from him. "Put on your jacket, for goodness sake! You'll get soaked."

"I won't be long gone," he promised, and went out.

"Bar the door, Tommy," she ordered as soon as Jim was outside.

"It won't work," Tommy mumbled. "The door warped in the wet, and you can't get the bar down."

"Oh, dear, that's right." She sighed briefly as if it were a neglect to her.

"He can't shoot a turkey with a rifle in this light," Tommy muttered, still sulking because he mightn't go, although he understood the reason. "Why didn't he take the Greener?"

"He isn't going after a turkey," his mother stated. "He's just going to look around. That's why he took the rifle." She mulled this over to herself, then repeated; "That's why he took the rifle—of course."

"I don't understand that," Tommy muttered with considerable scorn. "He hears turkeys and it takes him outside, but he's just going to look around."

"No, you don't understand, thank the Lord," she breathed, going to the window to watch.

Somber willows and yellow quakers, making their last soggy stand against winter, slanted down to the bottoms like sorrow and bright folly walking hand in hand to their doom, and she soon lost sight of Jim altogether. He was crafty and knowing in the brush, but there was risk all the same. He knew there was risk or he would have taken the shotgun instead of

the rifle, and the gobbling sound, galloping at her out of the growing darkness, suddenly became fringed with horror again. No man could say when a thing like that slipped away and was gone. Jim couldn't say with certainty, from the sound alone, that this was what it seemed. The last time she had heard it, when Tommy still lay in his cradle, it had been something else. Jim had been out cutting wood, and it had filled the air when morning mist began to lift off the bottoms. Frying out tallow for candles, she had the door standing open to get rid of the fumes. She gave no special thought to the gobbling. It came and went and mingled with other sounds, and was lost. But later a small noise or intuition, incredibly opportune, made her look over her shoulder in time to see a feathered Comanche at the door. He had a war club in his hand, and stepped with moccasined softness across the threshold. In those days the Greener always stood to hand near the stove and she grabbed it before her visitor accustomed his eyes to the inside gloom and shattered him with buckshot from head to foot. The roar of the shotgun brought a startled howl out of Tommy in his cradle; it brought a broken screech from the torn lips of the painted prowler, and pitched him forward on his face.

ANOTHER time when the wild turkeys talked they had all fled for their lives to Krell's Station, all except the Kendricks and Wileys on Tadpole Creek, who had been caught and butchered in their tracks. Lately, because Jim was so sure now it was all past, she was willing to concede that hazard and risk were not the same as folly. Remorse had touched her, because she had been hard with him, whittling at his strength with her stony silences and unspoken accusations. But now once more the turkeys talked in the bottoms, and it all came back like a hand around her throat.

All at once she heard the muffled crash of the heavy Henry, and her heart stood still.

They watched together at the window. Daylight trickled away, clinging longest to the yellow quakers, but it was tricky light and turned familiar things into twisted, unfamiliar shapes.

"There he is!" Tommy cried suddenly.

Their faces touched the glass that had lately replaced the paper-thin hide, misting it over. Mrs. Knowles brushed it away, but saw no sign of movement. Her eyes began to ache with strain, and her hand closed on Tommy's thin shoulder until he winced away.

"What's the matter with you?" he protested.

"Be quiet!" She spoke sharply, putting herself alone to face this trial. *This is what comes of it*, she thought. *This is what comes to a man and his wild dreams.*

Something dark and furtive, as though crouching out of sight, slid along the yellow leaves. Her hands turned clammy.

"Get the Greener," she ordered, pushing Tommy away.

The land slanted up in a turmoil of narrow ridges, and when she lost sight of the furtive figure her eyes whipped wildly along the crests trying to find it again, but it was lost in the dark, and the feathered figure had come near the cabin before she saw it again. He was circling the far side of the corral, and the bonnet of feathers on his head moved along the top pole like a rooster on parade. The rest of him was blurred and formless behind the fence. She cocked the gun and moved to the middle of the room. "Let the door swing open," she told Tommy in a harsh whisper. "Then stand back."

Tommy moved on tiptoe, dazed with shock, but he got the door open without a squeak and stood back. Mrs. Knowles canted her head against the stock and curled her finger around the trigger.

The prowler turned the corner of the

corral and came toward the door, head down, feathers flaring against the sky, his legs wading through darkness. Mrs. Knowles braced herself and lined up the gunsights, but before she could fire he shifted to one side, and she lost track of him entirely. A moment later, in Jim's own familiar voice, he called her name. "Come out here, Martha, and take a look. I got one."

Her knees went weak; the gun slid to the floor. "Put it away, Tommy," she gasped, faint with horror. "And don't say anything about it. I don't want him to know." Then he rushed outside, and the war bonnet had become a tom turkey hanging to the corral post. Jim had carried it over his shoulder, tailfeathers flaring, and fear had done the rest. He stood beside it now, mutely proud of his skill, until he saw her pale face and showed his concern.

"It's nothing, Jim," she answered, unsteadily. "I—I was only worried."

"There wasn't anything to worry about."

"No. I know it now. But you looked so sly when you went out."

He grinned, and shook himself out of

the wet jacket. "I knew you had a taste for turkey, Martha, but I didn't want to get up your hopes until I got one."

She brushed her hand across her forehead. "If you knew they were turkeys, why didn't you take the Greener?"

"I like the rifle best."

"Get that shotgun out of the house, Jim," she stated suddenly.

He looked surprised. "That's not like you, Martha. I've seen the time you wouldn't let it out of reach."

"I want to put that behind me, Jim. You saw us through all that, and I'm glad you stood against me when I tried to break you down."

He flushed with pleasure, and put his hand over hers; they walked to the house, and when they got inside he looked at the Greener on the wall and let a slow smile touch his lips. "As a matter of fact, Martha, that gun isn't even loaded."

"It is, too," Tommy spoke up abruptly. "I loaded it this morning, because I thought I heard turkeys last night."

"Forevermore!" Mrs. Knowles exclaimed. "Why didn't you say so?"

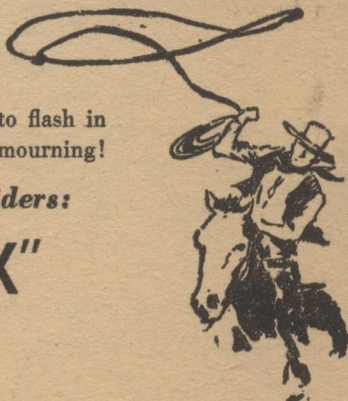
"Well," Tommy answered, "nobody asked me."

The Sonora Kid's longriders crossed themselves in fear whenever the huge black steer with the word "Murder" branded on its hide appeared. For that was the signal, they knew, for some hidden gun to bark along the trail, or knife to flash in the moonlight—and one more señorita to don the black of mourning!

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He covered the streets of Dry Gulch, looking for the man who had bushwhacked him. . . .



Out of a nameless backshoot grave rode the tinhorn of Dry Gulch—gambling a strange instant borrowed from eternity on sixes that thundered: “You’ve made your brag, gents—now say your prayers, for—

THE GUNS SPEAK LAST

By **DAY KEENE**

THE POSITION was strange to Ferrel. He seldom slept on his back. Then never with so many covers. Every muscle in his body ached with his weight.

He tried to turn, and couldn't. There was a smell of leather and sour sweat in his nostrils. His eyelids seemed glued to his eyes. He forced them open with an effort. It was as black as the inside of a hat. The torture in his head and side extended to his lungs. It was growing more difficult, momentarily, to breathe.

The pungent smell of alkali mixed with the sour sweat and leather. He licked his lips. They were salty. He tried to raise his right hand to wipe them and found it was immobile, weighed down by the same heavy substance that held his aching body in a vise.

Then he remembered the shot.

He wasn't drunk. He wasn't in the grip of a hangover. He had just ridden off the trail and up a small rise to survey the country ahead in the last light of the setting sun when the shot came out of

the clump of cottonwood silhouetted starkly against the nearby creek bank. He had seen the white puff of smoke before he felt the impact of the slug. The slug had torn through his right side and knocked him out of his saddle.

That much he remembered. No more.

Now he was on the ground and it was night. It was also deathly still.

I must be dying, he thought.

Then reason came to his aid. If he was dying he wouldn't be able to think so clearly. His mind would be fuzzy. And even dying men could move unless their spinal cords were snapped. And while he couldn't move his hand, he could wiggle his fingers slightly.

His stomach seemed to turn over and he fought a desire to be sick as he realized what had happened. The unknown killer in the cottonwood had followed up his shot. He wasn't on the ground. He was under it. The weight that held him down was dry alkali dust. The leather he smelled was his hatband. The only reason he was alive was because the man who had shot him had dropped his hat over his face before filling in the fresh grave he had dug.

Ferrel tried to breathe even more shallowly to conserve what little air remained inside the grave. At long last it had happened. Being perfectly fair about it, he undoubtedly deserved to die. He had cut a lot of corners. It was the type of death a gambler could expect. But there was always the one last chance. No game was ever over until the last card had fallen.

He lay barely breathing, gathering his strength, coordinating his reflexes. He had no way of knowing how much dirt had been heaped on him. He doubted it was much. If he had been buried deeply he would have suffocated before regaining consciousness. The trail wasn't far away. Now that the railhead had been pushed to Dry Gulch, men traveled the trail almost constantly. The killer would

have had to work fast. But even a foot of dirt would be sufficient. And he would have only the one try.

Stiffening his body suddenly, he arched his back and heaved upwards with his face and shoulders. The pain was so intense he feared he was going to faint. The dry dust fought him like a living opponent—then it gave way and he was sitting in the shallow grave, sucking in great gulps of air.

The white dust drained from his shoulders like water. His hat fell from his face. The sun had set. Only one last red feeler still reached up from below the horizon, as if reluctant to draw the curtain of night.

A prairie dog, frightened by the sudden apparition, popped up out of the earth so close Ferrel could have reached out and touched him, and scampered for its hole. A nighthawk hunting insects swooped low over his head, while down in the clump of cottonwoods bordering the creek, the nighthawk's less agile but more vocal cousin beat at the deepening dark with a joyous *whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will—whip-poor-will*.

By turning on his side and supporting himself with his arms, he managed to get first to his knees, then to his feet. Movement had opened his clotted wounds. His right side was wet. Blood trickled down his cheek and dripped off of his chin. He touched the wound on his head with his fingers. The killer had tried to make certain by firing a second shot point blank but had only succeeded in plowing a long furrow in his scalp.

"An amateur," Ferrel breathed. "Strictly an amateur."

He took a weaving step and stopped as a bullwhip cracked and a heavy freight wagon rumbled by on the trail, less than one hundred yards from where he stood. It might be one of his own wagons. It might not. He didn't dare to chance it.

His horse, of course, was gone. So were

his gun and his wallet. That would appear to make it robbery.

Appear to, he thought wryly.

He stumbled on down the slope toward the creek. The creek was endless miles away. He fell, got to his feet, fell, and got to his feet again. Both his head and side were bleeding freely now. The alkali caked in his wounds made them burn like fire. His strength draining away with his blood, he fell again, and his arms, reaching to break his fall, sank forearm deep in mud. Turning on his good side, he scooped up mud in great gobs and plastered it on his wounds. Then, inching forward a few more feet, he turned on his back and lay in the shallow water, looking up at the first faint stars that were beginning to appear in the evening sky.

THE WATER, spring fed, was cold. The fire died out of his head and side. He was going to live. He knew it. Bob Ferrel had done it again. With all the chips down, he had drawn to an inside straight and filled it.

The night deepened. The stars grew brighter. A harvest moon used the leafy branches of the cottonwood as a green ladder to the sky. Still Ferrel lay in the shallow water, moving only from time to time to scoop up fresh mud and replaster his head and side. The mud stopped the bleeding. The cold water contracted the wounds. But he still had his strength to gain. It gave him a lot of time to think.

Any of a hundred men could have shot him. No man could run thirty freight wagons ahead of a track-laying crew and not make enemies. He had broken a half dozen rival freighters and quarreled with as many more. He paid top wages for top hands, but fired any man without notice who couldn't pull his weight or hold his liquor.

That, along with the roughness of the life, was one if not the main reason why

he and Molly had parted. Molly liked things 'nice.' And it wasn't nice, she insisted, for a man to batter his way to the top over the prostrate bodies of other men.

What the hell am I supposed to do? Ferrel thought. *Kiss them out of my way?*

The word-wranglers and the sky pilots could flower up a life with all the fancy language they wanted to, but until human nature changed the old basic laws of fang and hoof would continue to weed out those unfit for survival. If a man couldn't keep up with or ahead of the pack, let him fall.

He thought on the men who might profit by his death. Chief of them was Jake Eichnar. Jake ran fifteen freight wagons. Jake too was ambitious. Ferrel could imagine the big, hard-headed Dutchman coming for him with a whipple-tree or a length of tug chain and trying to beat his brains out. He could imagine Jake banging a bar and bellowing, "*Gott im himmel!* Only so much a man can take! Get out of my pockets, Ferrel!" then going for his gun. But he could not imagine Jake shooting at him from ambush. That wasn't Jake.

The more he thought about it, the more the same held true of all the other men whom he had fired, with whom he had quarreled or whose freight runs he had absorbed. They were, for the most part, whiskey-soaked, unregenerate sinners who'd fight the devil for a plugged two-bit piece. But all of them were men.

His earlier suspicions were wrong. It had been robbery. The man who had bushwhacked him was probably one of the displaced breeds who hung around the railhead or one of the imported gandy-dancers with a dry gut, payday two months away and in a tizzy to paint the town. Ferrel hoped, whoever he was, that he got the blind shakes and his whiskey turned sour in his stomach.

Only one thing still worried him. If it

had been a breed or a track worker who had shot him, why had he bothered to bury the body? The more he thought about it, the less sense it made. A sensible man, he put it from his mind. He wasn't an association or a railroad Pinkerton. He was a freighting contractor.

It was two hours from the time he reached the creek before he tried to stand again. He was stiff from his long immersion in the cold water. He had little or no strength, but outside of that he felt fine. The slug had gone completely through his side without hitting a vital organ. As for the crease in his skull, he'd had a lot worse headaches. As soon as Doc Haly had sewed him up and he had a pint of Kentucky dew and a four-pound beefsteak in his stomach to replace the blood he'd lost, he'd be as good as he ever was.

That glow in the distance was fired by the bonfires along the tracks and the coal oil *flambeaux* in front of the saloons and hotels and gambling joints in the mushroomed railhead that had been a rendezvous for prairie dogs and rattlesnakes only two months before.

Ripping off his shirt, Ferrel formed it into a crude bandage. Then, wading the shallow creek, he walked slowly towards the distant glow in the sky that was Dry Gulch...

DOC HALY was the exception that proved the rule that all drunken doctors are good if you can catch them sober. Drunk or sober, he was a butcher.

"Yes, sir. You should have used a wad of chawing instead of mud," he informed Ferrel as he took a second threaded needle from the grease-stained silk lapel of his frock coat. "Mud stops the laudable puss." He stooped to admire the wound. "Hmm. This is a dilly, a beauty."

"All right," Ferrel told him wearily. "Take your beard out of it and sew it up. I'll come back tomorrow and you can admire it."

The job finally finished, he sat up on the rough deal table and, taking the bottle out of Haly's hand, anointed the stitches liberally with whiskey.

Haly wagged his head in disapproval. "A waste. An absolutely useless precaution. A white hot poker is the only thing that will really cauterize a wound. Now when I was a surgeon with Lee—"

Ferrel had heard the story before. Everyone for eight hundred miles of track had heard it. "Sure. I know," he said. He got stiffly off the table. "You were the reason why the South lost the war. You killed more men than Grant did."

Doctor Haly recovered his bottle and wagged a filthy finger in the big freighting contractor's face. "Just for that I won't tell you Molly's in town," he said. "I'll let you find out for yourself. I'll let you go home to her with a big hole in your side."

Ferrel clutched him by his coat lapels. "Are you sober enough to know what you're saying? Is Molly in town?"

Haly blinked owlily. "Been in town three days. Looking everywhere for you. An' are you going to be surprised?"

Finding a gold eagle that his attempted assassin had overlooked in his pants pocket, Ferrel tossed it on the table and walked out onto the high board walk which the merchants and dive owners had built to raise the town out of the dust that threatened to engulf it in dry weather and into which they were afraid it would sink when the fall rains began in earnest.

IT WAS one o'clock in the morning, but Dry Gulch didn't run by the clock. The blazing *flambeaux* in front of almost every place of business made the street light as day. The walk on both sides of the street, and the buildings fronting on the walk, were jammed with drunken miners and trippers and riders and owl-eyed would-be homesteaders. Sober-faced Sioux and Blackfeet and long-haired

buffalo hunters rubbed shoulders with gamblers, merchants, windmill and whiskey salesmen, drunken track workers and teamsters.

There was a continuous tinkle of tinny pianos and the blare of horns and the stomping of booted feet. The street was alive with dust and filled with the creak of leather, the pistol-like popping of bullwhips, the neighing and whinnying of horses, the music of clanking tug chains, the groan of imposed-upon wood, and the squeaking of axles in need of grease. There was a smell of burning horn and hair as some smithy fitted a shoe, the sweet sour aroma of beer, the fragrance of frying onions. Superimposed over all was the grunted 'Ha' of the track bosses and the rhythmic thud of steel on steel as the gandy dancers, working in shifts, pushed the steel rails ever westward.

He loved it. But it was, Ferrel thought, no place for a good woman. No wonder Molly detested railheads. Like most women, she couldn't see the forest for trees. She couldn't see that with the crude tools with which they had to work they were building something beautiful, building an empire that would endure long after the sick monarchies of the old country had deflated in total collapse, 'a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,' and that where they went from that start was up to them.

In front of the Painted Doll, one of the girls, who had stepped out for a breath of air, noted his disheveled clothes and white face and caught at Ferrel's arm. "For God's sake, Bob, what happened to you?" she asked.

"I forgot to duck," Ferrel told her, and walked on.

His wagon yard was in the center of town, enclosed in a high board fence to keep the scum that moved with a railhead from stealing the firm of Robert Ferrel blind before his wagons could deliver

the consigned goods they were carrying. It was, Ferrel thought, a screwball business. Most of his trade came from the very source that would put him out of business when enough rolling stock had been collected to carry the mountains of goods that were moving westward with the tide of destiny.

Pete Darney was guarding the gate. "Am I glad to see you!" he said. "Your horse came in four hours ago and a half-dozen of the boys have been beating the hills ever since."

"I was bushwhacked," Ferrel told him. "On that little knoll just above Varnell Creek. Someone got my money and my gun and damn near got me."

"Jake?"

"I doubt it."

Darney spat a stream of tobacco juice into the ankle deep dust of the yard. "We've kept it quiet. Just in case."

Changed into a clean shirt and the black broadcloth suit, new boots, and white sombrero which he kept in the office at the yard, Ferrel spun the dial on the safe and tapped the strongbox for a few thousand dollars pocket money. Then, straightening, he said, "I hear Molly is in town. That right?"

Darney nodded. "That's right. She came in three days ago on the stage. And she was quite put out when I told her you'd gone up to Silver Camp to see about a new hauling contract."

"Oh. What does she want?"

Darney was embarrassed. "Don't ask me. She's your missus, not mine."

His gunbelt was sodden from its long immersion in the creek. Ferrel let it lie and stuffed into his belt the new gold-inlaid Smith and Wesson six-shot rimfire he'd bought for Molly on his last trip to St. Louis. "I'll be back in about two hours," he told Darney. "Did the wagons from The Landing get in?"

Darney nodded at two loaded wagons and the four supine figures wrapped in

blankets sleeping under them. "About two hours ago,"

"Get 'em going by daybreak," Ferrel ordered. "I stopped by Euchre Camp and Hanson is raising hell about those parts for his crushing mill. Besides, with freight rates as high as they are, we're losing money every time a wheel stops rolling."

"Yes, sir."

With fresh dry clothes on his back, money in his pocket, a gun in his belt, and his stomach comfortably filled with steak and good whiskey, Ferrel felt almost normal. *Maybe the old leeches had something*, he thought. *Maybe all of us have too much blood.*

The cabin was unlighted, but the bedroom window was open. He'd built a similar cabin at every railhead along the line. Sometimes Molly would stay in them, but most times not. He hoped she liked this one. She couldn't complain this one was bare. He'd lost a small fortune in freight rates hauling the furniture from St. Louis. And he'd given Dolly of the Bird Cage *carte blanche* to select the drapes and rugs and had them sent on from New York.

The combination looked too fancy to him. But if it was beauty Molly wanted, she could have it. Except for the three years he'd spent in the army, he had never denied Molly a thing that he could give her during their ten years of marriage. But this quest of culture was something new. So was the divorce she had asked for in her last letter. Ferrel chewed on the word. Divorce. It had an unpleasant taste and smelled of failure.

The door of the cabin was closed but unlocked. He opened it and walked in. Finding a lamp, he lit it. The air was stale. The bed hadn't been slept in. Molly wasn't in the cabin. There was no sign she had been there except the question mark someone had drawn in the dust on the top of the piano. Molly hadn't liked

this cabin either. If she was in town she was staying at the hotel.

HE BLEW out the lamp and closed and locked the door. The board walk climbed a slight rise here, and from where he stood in front of the cabin he could see into the torch-lighted Wells Fargo yard. Three sleepy hostlers were readying the horses for the morning stage.

The wound in his side was paining him now. He stopped in at the Bird Cage for a drink to dull the pain. Then he waded the dust of the street to the opposite walk, entered the lobby of the newly built Sherman House and asked if Mrs. Ferrel was registered.

The clerk said she was and gave him the number of Molly's room. Ferrel walked up the stairs and knocked lightly on the green-lumber door of 201. Despite the fact it was after two o'clock, Molly was fully dressed with the exception of her hat and traveling veil. Her portmanteau, obviously packed and ready to be closed, lay open on the bed.

The blonde girl's face was slightly flushed, either from emotion or haste. She took the immediate defensive. "Oh. So you finally showed up. And drunk. I can smell your breath from here. And look at your face. You've been in a fight over some woman."

Ferrel closed the door and leaned against it. "No," he said quietly. "No." Horses and wagons and guns he knew. Words were unfamiliar tools. He was at a loss how to continue, how to deny Molly's allegations. Someone had been lying to her. He said, "Now, Molly," and tried to take her in his arms.

She slipped out of his arms and retreated across the room. "Don't touch me! Go on back to your Dolly at the Bird Cage!" Almost breathlessly now, she continued her hysterical tirade. "Three days I've been waiting for you, stuck in this hor-

rible railhead, while you've been out having a fine time. We're through, Bob. Understand? I want a divorce. I want a good property settlement. And I've brought a lawyer, Colonel Ames, with me to see I get one. He'll see that I live as a woman should live."

"Okay," Ferrel said finally. "Okay. If your lawyer wants to talk to me, I'll be downstairs in the bar."

He turned and left the room. The butterflies in his stomach had come to life again. He fought a desire to be sick. He wished the man who had bushwhacked him hadn't dropped his hat over his face.

Down in the lobby he asked the clerk, "What does this fellow Ames look like?"

The clerk said, "He's big, Mr. Ferrel. About your size. Good looking. An easy talker."

He would be all of that, Ferrel thought.

The clerk leaned across the desk and asked confidentially, "What are you going to do, Mr. Ferrel?"

"Should I do something?" Ferrel asked.

He strode through the lobby to the walk. No wonder Doc Haly had said he would be surprised. He was. It was difficult to believe such a thing could happen to himself and Molly. True, they hadn't been close these last few years. But he had gone on building cabins at railheads, hoping Molly would like the new one, hoping some new interest would fill the void in her life the death of their son had caused. But he hadn't ever figured that interest would be another man.

He fingered the butt of the Smith and Wesson he'd stuffed under his belt. He could kill Ames, of course. At least he could have a try for him. But that wouldn't solve anything. It would only stamp Molly as something he knew she wasn't.

He walked back into the lobby. As he passed the desk the clerk said, "Colonel Ames is in the bar. I believe he's talking to Mr. Eichnar."

Ferrel nodded. "Thank you," he said tightly.

To reach the bar in the rear of the building he had to pass the foot of the stairs. As he did he caught a flash of color and looked up. Her head high, Molly brushed past him without speaking and told the clerk, "Please have someone step over to the express office and cancel the stage reservation for Mrs. Ferrel and Colonel Ames. It seems we will be able to complete our business here after all."

The clerk said, "Yes, ma'am. Right away, Mrs. Ferrel."

Ferrel continued on into the bar. It was, as usual, lined three deep with men. He knew most of them. Most of them knew him. Declining a half dozen proffered drinks, he combed the room with his eyes until he located Jake Eichnar and the man to whom the big Dutchman was talking.

Ames was about ten years younger than he was, in his late twenties or early thirties. He wore his clothes and his gunbelt well. He was undoubtedly cultured, whatever culture was.

But I wouldn't like him, Ferrel thought, *if he was made by Conestoga, warranted all first-growth hickory and painted red and yellow!*

The youthful Colonel smelled of 'staff' to him. He was probably one of McClellan's boys, who'd fought the war back of a desk, beefing about all the hardships the army had to endure due to the stupid directives of that 'uncouth boor' in the White House.

Jake Eichnar caught sight of Ferrel and waved expansively. "Come. Drink with us, Bob. I want you should meet mine new friend, Colonel Ames." The big Dutchman's eyes twinkled. "Colonel Ames vass hero in the war."

Ferrel walked toward the two men slowly. He wondered what guff Ames had been feeding the big Dutchman who had fought his way out of the Bloody Angle

at Gettysburg and up the death-slippery slope of Lookout Mountain without losing one chomp at the cud of tobacco in his cheek, or his perverted sense of humor.

Eichnar continued his introduction. "Colonel Ames, meet mine friend, Bob Ferrel. He too vass officer in the war. He valked with Shoiman to the sea."

Ferrel felt sick. Jake knew. The hotel clerk knew. The whole town knew. All of Section Point Number 16 thought that Molly was carrying on an affair with her youthful and good looking attorney. Jake hoped he and Ames would kill each other so Jake could take over his wagons.

Ames didn't offer to shake hands. He preferred to keep the thumb of his right hand hooked in his gunbelt so that his slightly spraddled fingers hovered over the butt of his gun. "Oh, yes," he acknowledged the introduction. "Glad to meet you, Ferrel. I've traveled a thousand miles to see you on a legal and very personal matter. But we'd best discuss it in private. Say tomorrow morning in your office?"

Finished speaking, he used his left hand to tug a white linen handkerchief from one of his pockets and pat at the perspiration standing on his forehead.

FERREL was disappointed in the man Molly had elected to succeed him. Either Ames was an errant coward or he had more to be frightened of than appeared on the surface. Ames was obviously a pretty boy, a fortune hunter, after Molly's money. Rather after the money he thought that Molly could get out of Ferrel. Still, that didn't explain his fear or why, after traveling a thousand miles to effect a settlement, Ames should book passage on the morning stage for himself and Molly without having completed his mission.

Molly had mentioned a good settlement. But any month in the year a whole hog was worth more than a quarter. Any schoolboy could figure that out. Ferrel

lowered his eyes to Ames' boots. They were fouled with alkali dust. But so were the boots of three-fourths of the men in the bar.

"But wouldn't that put you out?" he asked in response to the younger man's question. "I thought you were leaving on the morning stage."

"Oh, that," Colonel Ames said. "I'll cancel my seat."

From behind Ferrel, Molly said, "I already have."

Without looking away from Ames, Ferrel ordered Molly to go to her room, but the blonde girl shook her head. "No," she said. "I'm a third of this mess. And I've been doing a lot of thinking since you came up to the room a few minutes ago." Her blue eyes thoughtful, she studied Ferrel's face. "You aren't drunk."

"No," Ferrel admitted.

"And that isn't a cut or a scratch on your head. It's a bullet crease."

"That's right," Ferrel admitted. He'd wanted to keep Molly out of this. Now that the fat was in the fire there was nothing he could do but try it. "Where were you about sunset, Colonel?"

Ames pretending to think. "Sunset? Why, I believe I was in my room."

Molly looked at Ferrel. "Why?" she asked.

"I was bushwhacked at sunset," he told her. "On the little rise overlooking Varnell Creek. Someone shot from the fringe of cottonwood along the creek and left me for dead."

Ames broke the silence that followed with an easy laugh. "Now I see what's eating you. Because you recently learned, or have reason to suspect, that as soon as Mrs. Ferrel obtains a divorce, she may transfer her affections to me, you immediately jumped to the conclusion it was I who bushwhacked you. So, like Lazarus bounding out of his tomb, you rose from your grave and hastened here to confront

(Continued on page 127)



RIDERS OF THE PECOS

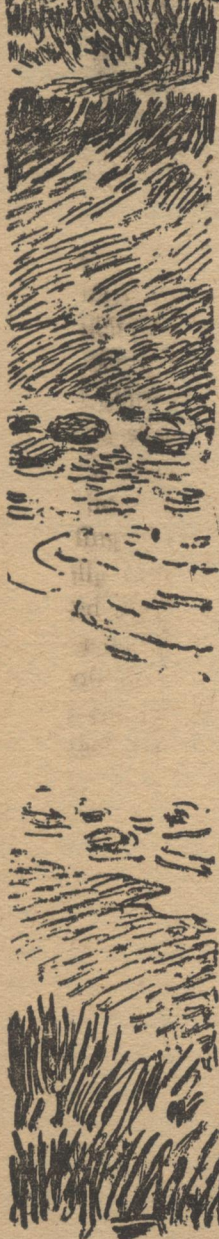
By S. OMAR BARKER

*THE Pecos is a river that has got more sand and mud
Than water runnin' in it, although when it gits in flood,
It can go on the rampage and go roarin' down the draw
As wild as any river that a cowpoke ever saw.*

*But whether dry or rollicky, the Pecos stands for more
Than just a roily river, for along its sandy shore
A heap of men have ridden in the dust of cattle herds
Who left their marks upon the West in deeds as well as words.*

*Ol' Cattle King John Chisholm came across the Texas plain
To carve out on the Pecos his unrivaled cow domain.
His longhorns died by hundreds on the trail from Concho Creek,
His cowboys' tongues swoll up from thirst until they couldn't
speak,*

*But hardship couldn't stop 'em while ol' John rode in the lead,
For the Pecos country called to men of hardy horseback breed.*





*By floating down its waters in his nakedness by night,
Bill Wilson tricked Apaches when outnumbered in a fight
That cost the life of Loving—for whom Loving town was
named,*

*And Goodnight's longhorns "Pecos-trailed" across a land un-
tamed.*

*Of Judge Roy Bean, Jack Potter and the Chief, Geronimo,
Were Pecos men who raised a dust back in the long ago
That took some time to settle—in a Pecos ranch house hid
The outlaw Sheriff Garrett shot—one Billy, called the Kid!*

*The Pecos, as a river, sorta runs to mud and sand,
Yet it gave its name to country that was sure 'nough cattle land,
Where all the tall men riding were a mighty hardy race,
Because, in case they wasn't, they'd have rode some other place!
The Pecos is a river that ain't always very wet,
But it gave a name to cowhands that the cow range won't forget.
Just say "a Pecos cowboy," and it's sure you've said enough
To make it plain the man you mean is extra rawhide-tough!*



*If you can ride under another man's brand, Eddie Brott found—
why, you're hardly fit to die under your own!*

KILLER'S LAND

By KENNETH FOWLER

EDDIE Brott, alias Slick Fork Eddie, alias The Apache Kid, halted his burned out *sabino* at the crest of the ridge and stared back intently across his shoulder for a long moment, his thinned, ice-blue eyes combing his back-trail with a practiced vigilance. But there was no sign of any dust fog, no evidence of any riders back there for as far as the eye could reach, and he paused now, letting the tension ease slowly out of his nerve-pulled muscles, trying to force a relaxing in them that wouldn't come immediately.

Reckon I shook 'em off this morning, back there at the pass. His thinking of this was matter-of-fact; there was no conscious elation in it. This wasn't the first posse he'd outfoxed, but, if he played his cards right with old man Burnett, he might never have to play the hare to another. Time he settled down, anyway. Riding the high-lines, always being on the dodge, for one reason or another, took it out of a man, in time.

Now, forking a sack of Bull from the pocket of his gray flannel shirt, he made a leisurely chore of building a cigarette and let his glance idle forward to the rocky notch ahead of him. The gray shaft of the rimrock arching out over the trail made a granite frame for a sweep of clear blue sky and green, rolling valley land that seemed to stretch out endlessly into the soft September heat haze.

He lighted the cigarette and took a deep, satisfying drag on it. This White-water Valley sure looked like sweet country. A good country for a man to bury

his past in. Bury his past, and insure his future. Eddie Brott's pale, cold eyes squinted against the blue rind of smoke peeling away from the tip of his quirly.

So long, Apach'. Hello, Pop! Remember me? Remember that snuffy-nosed button you larruped the day he come home from the gypsy camp with that raggedy blue eagle tattooed on his chest? That larrupin' was what made me run away, Pop; it gave me big ideas, for a kid just turned thirteen. But I'm through runnin' now. No more big ideas. And no more driftin' and ridin' the bag-line. Honest, Pop. I didn't rightly expect you'd recognize me, right off. But look—here's the tattoo. I guess you recognize that, all right. . . .

Involuntarily, Eddie Brott's hand ran up to his chest, pressing tenderly. Meeting up with that old circus side show artist a week ago, in Custer Junction, had sure been a lucky break for him. His hide still felt sore from the old devil's needle. But it was on him now, and on for keeps. A blue eagle, with its wings spread, and the initial R tattooed in red ink on the left wing, and the initial B on the right. R.B., for Robert Burnett.

Eddie Brott's eyes shadowed as he stared vacantly through the smoke of his cigarette. Bob Burnett had been a good pardner; they'd been through a lot together. And they'd been lucky, until they'd had the running fight with that posse in Gunsmoke Gap, and Bob had taken it. Bob had held back, giving him first chance to make the break out of the canyon, and Bob had been cut down. . . .

Hess' hand was flashing down to his gun as Eddie grabbed a handful of his shirt. . . .



A queer pang stabbed Eddie Brott. He tried to wall up his mind against the past, but like a weak dam the wall kept cracking, and thoughts of Bob Burnett trickled out. Hell, what was he worrying about? Even if he'd had the chance, Bob would never have come back here. Bob had been born a fiddlefoot; excitement had been as necessary to him as drawing breath. Bob would have thought this a pretty slick idea, even if it was against his old man.

It was foolproof, too—every angle cov-

ered. Old Will Burnett hadn't seen his son in more than twelve years, and Bob had still been just a button when he'd scamped off. And he and Bob even looked a bit alike—sandy-haired, blue-eyed, and pole-lean and wiry. The old man couldn't have a doubt, once he saw the tattoo. That would be the clincher.

Eddie Brott flipped away his half-finished cigarette and giggered the *sabino*. Bob hadn't been the sentimental kind, but now and then he'd talked about Drag 7, and

now Eddie began to notice landmarks. He rode down a twisting trail and ahead of him lay a broad valley, knifed by a torrential creek that ran foaming through clumps of alder and shot over rocky drop-offs, crosspatched with old, mossy dead-falls. That would be Whitewater Creek; Bob had spoken of it. A gleam sparkled briefly in Eddie Brott's forward-searching eyes. He was approaching now a shallow canyon, its opening curved like a giant horseshoe. Horseshoe Canyon. Bob had mentioned that, too. Eddie's mouth pinched in, shaping to a wry twist. He was almost home!

The *sabino* carried him towards a narrow *sendero* and presently he skirted a tall rimrock and rode out unexpectedly into a brushy draw. The far end of the draw narrowed into a small boxed canyon, in which a sizable gatherment of cattle were penned up behind a double-width peeled-pole gateway.

Eddie stared at the cattle, then swung his glance to the branding chute alongside the pen, where the remnants of a branding fire still smoldered pungently. A tall, rawboned man wearing brush-scarred *armitas* and a gray Stetson stood with a bootheel hooked back in the lower bar of the holding gate, his attention fixed coldly on a girl who sat saddle a few feet away, staring down at him with tight, anger-set eyes.

Not sure what he might be running into, Eddie cautiously reined in the *sabino* behind a clump of juniper. The girl had a faintly hoydenish look in her faded blue Levis and gray cotton shirt, with only the bright green scarf knotted at her throat to give a touch of feminine flair to the costume. She wore no hat and her chestnut-colored hair gave off reddish glints in the brassy sunlight. She was sorta pretty, Eddie decided, in a thin, taut kind of way.

The man was turned away from him, and keeping his gaze on the girl, Eddie heard her exclaim heatedly, "What I say

is, where there's smoke there's fire! Those cows of ours Dan Duffy cut out of your herd couldn't have got there by accident!"

"Maybe they couldn't, but they did." The man's voice was flat and meager, answering her. "Let Will Burnett keep his silk mended, he don't want fence crawlers. I got no time to be always chousin' back your old kettlebellies."

EDDIE Brott stiffened. Will Burnett! Bob Burnett had never mentioned anything about a sister, but now, his eyes fixed dazedly on the girl, he could see a really startling resemblance.

"Then you'd better make time!" The girl sat her saddle straight as a ramrod; her words whipped down at the man with a brittle vehemence. "I can see two Drag sevens there in your corral right now. I want that gate opened, Oren Hess, and I mean pronto!"

Spunky, Eddy thought, and put a quick attention on the man. Hess had half turned now, and he could see a lean, sharply defined profile—the head of a man with a thin nose, tight, metallic blue eyes, and crow-black hair shaved thinly at his temples into silky sideburns that ran down almost to the line of his high, jutting cheekbones.

"You got any Drag sevens in there," Hess declared flatly, "you'll get 'em when we're ready to make a cut, not before."

"I'll get them right now!" Angrily, the girl booted a *tapadero* away from her, as if about to dismount. "Furthermore, I don't intend to sit here all morning, just whittle-whanging about it."

Gently, Eddie giggled the *sabino*, starting out into the clearing.

"You just better light down and cool your saddle," Oren Hess said thinly. "I ain't aimin' to spook up my whole herd just so you can—"

He saw Eddie, then, and chopped it off, his right foot plumping down abruptly from the lower bar of the gate. At the

same instant Eddie was aware of the girl staring at him, her soft, powder-gray eyes frozen in a look of blank surprise.

Deliberately, Eddie let the *sabino* move up to within a yard of where Hess stood before he halted it.

Hess's flinty blue eyes rammed up at him truculently.

"Who're you?"

"Never mind that." Eddie motioned towards the gate. "You heard what the lady said. Open it."

"You're feedin' off your range, mister."

"Mebbe. You openin' the gate, or will I?"

Hess exploded it: "No, by God!" and his right hand was cutting down as Eddie drove the *sabino* full at him. Tipping forward in the saddle, he grappled a fistful of Hess's shirt; then, as the cowman was slammed back violently against the gate, he used the right toe fender of his stirrup as a fulcrum and dove from the horse, clubbing down savagely with his cocked right fist.

The blow stunned Hess but didn't down him, and now, with a kind of berserk desperation, he spread his arms against the top rail of the gate and launched himself like a wobbling rocket, his head lowered for a butt at Eddie's belly.

Crow-hopping sideways, Eddie clouted down on the back of Hess's neck with his balled fist, then, as Hess lurched and stumbled, bucked up from a crouch like a spring-driven projectile, packing the full value of his weight in a murderous uppercut to the cowman's underslung jaw.

The slugging power of the wallop slammed Hess back against the gate bars again; his ponderous frame hit the middle bar with a smacking crack, and then, his long body a limp dead weight, he bounced forward and dropped at Eddie's feet, spanking up a cloud of hoof-churned dust.

"My," said a voice behind Eddie, "you play rough."

He gave the motionless body of the cowman a measuring glance before he turned. The girl's eyes seemed quite calm looking down at him, but he noticed that her face had gotten a little chalky.

"I let him off easy," Eddie said.

The girl's mouth worked into a shaky little smile. The smile went up into her gray eyes and set off tiny dancing lights.

"I'm Nan Burnett," she said.

"I'm—" Eddie stopped. "Let's get those cows of yours, first thing."

Wheeling, he bent over the still motionless body of Oren Hess and unbuckled his gunbelt, strapping the belt with its holstered gun around his own waist. Then he strode across to the holding gate and pulled the crossbars out of their wooden slots.

Ten minutes later, back on the *sabino*, he had a half dozen two-year-olds cut from the herd of more than a hundred cows penned up in the enclosure, and with the girl helping him, began hazing them out through the gateway.

"Two could've been an accident," Eddie said to her, as they punched the last cow out into the clearing. "Six smells purely like rustlin'."

"It was rustling." Nan Burnett stared around at him with a brittle look. "Our fence wire wasn't just broken—somebody'd cut it." The tightness ran out of her voice then, and her eyes softened suddenly. "I'm sure mighty obliged to you for—"

Eddie followed her glance as she broke it off, and saw Oren Hess lifting groggily to his feet, rubbing his gashed jaw and staring at them with a look of naked malvolence.

With a negligent gesture, Eddie pulled Hess's gun from its holster and jacked out the cartridges. Next he took the gunbelt, methodically extracted all the cartridges from the loops, and contemptuously flung the gun and belt towards Hess.

Hess didn't speak, didn't look down at

the gun. For a moment longer his slitted eyes raked at Eddie, as if he was memorizing his face, then, without speaking a word, he turned and limped over to the corral entrance and began putting back the bars.

Nan Burnett didn't speak until several minutes later, when, herding the six cows before them, they reached the far end of the clearing and came out into a grassy basin.

"I'd better warn you," she said then. "You gave Oren Hess quite a beating. He won't forget it."

Eddie grunted. "Didn't aim for him to."

"You're just riding through?"

"A piece." *Why don't I spit it out?* Eddie thought uneasily. The girl had complicated it; no question of that. But he'd be a fool to turn back now, after all the careful planning he'd done. And once he got this over with, the rest would be a cinch. He'd never have to be always looking back across his shoulder. He'd be done with that, forever.

He glanced obliquely at Nan Burnett as they rode along. She looked younger than Bob—maybe seven, eight years younger. She likely wouldn't remember much. But the old man would. There's where he'd have to step along easy.

"Maybe you could stand a little shock," he said suddenly.

"Shock?" He felt her gray eyes widening on him, blank with surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I was just wonderin'," Eddie said, "how well you might remember your brother."

"My brother? Why, I was only five when—" She stopped abruptly, tensing, and for an instant a look of fear, almost of panic, flared in her eyes. "What do you know about my brother? Why did you ask me that?" she blurted breathlessly.

Eddie avoided her eyes. "Just reckon I was tryin' to break it to you easy."

"You mean you're—"

"I'm Bob Burnett," Eddie said. And suddenly, for no reason he could adequately analyze on the spur of the moment, he wished he could get down on his belly and crawl away from her, like a snake in the grass. . . .

"I RECKON that clinches it," Will Burnett said. He stared at the blue eagle tattooed on Eddie Brott's chest, heaved himself up from the shiny horsehair sofa in a corner of the living room, and then, briefly, his gray eyes hooded, become thoughtfully blank, momentarily.

"Don't see any scars from that beltin', though," he added softly.

"There was only welts," Eddie said. "They healed right over."

"Some scars heal. Some don't," Will Burnett murmured. His tone changed, sharpened. "What you been doin' all this time?"

"Driftin' mostly. One job to another."

"You aim to stay on here, you work. Thirty a month and beans—same as Dan Duffy. You want it?"

"I didn't come for charity," Eddie said.

Will Burnett limped to the front door, and for the first time Eddie noticed the heavy drag in his left leg. He reached out for the latch, then swung around suddenly, sunlight slanting through the upper glass frame of the door striking on his face and starkly accenting its gray fatigue, the sunken pockets in the parchment-thin cheeks.

"I'll ride you over the layout tomorrow," Will Burnett said, "this danged leg of mine don't throw out on me." He gave Eddie another long, studying look. "I don't," he growled, "Duff will," and he opened the door and went out.

A sound of footsteps turned Eddie and he saw Nan Burnett watching him curiously from the hall doorway.

"I've fixed up your room," she said. "You can stow your gear any time."

Eddie jerked a nod towards the front door. "What's the matter with his leg?"

"A horse pitched him, couple years back. He's getting old, Bob. He can't do what he used to."

"Reckon not. Well, thanks. I'll take a little ride around and look over the scenery."

"You'd better take Duff along if you have any notion to head up towards Hourglass."

Eddie forced a grin. It made the muscles around his mouth feel like dried pie crust crumpling. "I won't need Duff. Hess run much of a crew?"

"You're stubborn, aren't you?"

"Some."

Nan Burnett sighed. "Oren Hess only started up here about six months ago. He has a man named Luke Saddler, and a little Frenchy called Shorty Dubois. They're all I know about."

"Well, reckon I'll just snoop around a mite. Be back in an hour or so."

He was at the front door when her voice turned him.

"Bob, you be careful."

Staring back, he had a strong renewed awareness of her prettiness suddenly. She had exchanged the Levis for a dress of crisp dark green calico, trimmed with white rick-rack braid, and her glossy chestnut hair looked freshly brushed and severely orderly, with its plaits gathered neatly at the nape of her neck. *She's pretty as paint*, he thought, and felt a force pulling him that seemed stronger than his will to resist, and a sharp fear threaded him.

He said abruptly, "Don't worry about me," and went out.

It was an hour later, when he was almost to the Drag 7 line fence, that he suddenly spotted the other rider, a thin, hunched little man forking a small zebra dun, and from the brief glimpse of him he'd had earlier in the day, recognized Dan Duffy. But what was Duffy doing,

riding around out here, headed, apparently, for Hourglass range? Could Duffy be in cahoots with Hess? Had it been Duffy who had been nibbling at Drag seven's herd, and here and there sneaking a cow over onto Hess's grounds?

While Eddie watched, half screened by a clump of buckbrush, Duffy swung his horse away to the right and some moments later had gone from sight in a long, brush-clotted coulee. After a cautious interval, Eddie swung the *sabino* that way. Coming to the end of the coulee, he saw the hoof tracks of Duffy's horse heading up towards a camel-backed ridge, some hundred yards beyond. He hesitated briefly, then started the *sabino* in a slow walk, heading it up the shaley slope.

He had made it halfway up the grade when a gun report cracked abruptly against the stillness, followed by the pouncing whine of a rifle bullet. The slope pitched up more sharply here, and Eddie kicked down with his spurs, feeling the *sabino's* haunches bunch as its front hoofs dug in to climb. Before he could reach the crest of the ridge three shots hammered out in quick succession, and he roweled the horse again, feeling it quiver under him.

He was ready with his Winchester as he reached the humped crest of the ridge and plummeted down from the saddle. Staring down into the bowl-like clearing below him, he felt his breath jam suddenly at the sight of two riders high-tailing it for a thick cottonwood motte, some fifty yards to the right. The lead rider was just plowing through as he got the Winchester braced to his shoulder, but he made his bead on the second and squeezed back gently on the trigger.

The man's hands fell slackly away from his reins; at the same instant, crumpling like a dropped sack, he tilted and pitched sluggishly out of the saddle. When Eddie reached him, a couple of minutes later, one look at the rigid, up-staring eyes was all

he needed to know that the man was dead.

Eddie turned the *sabino*, his dour glance making a slow compass-swing around the circumference of the bowl. Off to his left, a stack of greasewood lay piled in a small tepee-shaped bundle, evidently intended for a fire which the wood-gatherers had never had time to light. Beyond the greasewood stood a small bunch of cows, and not far from the cows a single riderless horse, grazing on a patch of gramma.

A cold premonition stabbed Eddie as he started towards the cows. When he was less than a dozen yards away he could spot the brand on the nearest steer—a Drag 7. Then he looked across to the horse and felt a shivery prickle wriggle up his back. The horse was a zebra dun.

Dan Duffy lay in a shallow dry wash, ten yards back from where the run stood idly grazing. When Eddie dismounted and picked up the slack body, it seemed pitifully frail and light as he hoisted it and placed it gently across the withers of the *sabino*.

The gentleness, however, was purely a token gesture, a bow to the solemnity of death. Dan Duffy had been shot through the head.

SOMEWHERE in the dark and silent house, Eddie Brott heard a clock chime five times—a regular, delicate sound that seemed eerily unreal to him as he lay on the bed that once had been Bob Burnett's and counted each muted stroke. Five o'clock. He rose and groped out unfamiliarly from the bed until his right hand touched the black-lacquered Salem rocker where he had put his clothes.

Fishing in the pocket of his breeches, he found a match, struck it, and lighted the lamp beside his bed. Then, hurryingly, almost furtively, he began to dress. He had to make this quick. He wanted no good-bys, no explanations. But he knew, now, that he could never go through with

this. It was rotten. It smelled. It was too dirty, even for him.

He kept remembering the look of shock that had come into Will Burnett's eyes when he had ridden here yesterday, just before dusk, with the dead body of Dan Duffy draped across his saddle. The look of shock, the slow pained expression of withdrawal, and then a sudden total darkness, like candles, abruptly snuffed out. Like Nan Burnett had said, the old man was getting along, and at that moment it had seemed to Eddie Brott that some part of Will Burnett had died—the part of him that could still hope, still dream.

On top of that, he'd had the uneasy feeling that something else was itching the old man—something connected with his turning up here the way he had. He'd fooled him with the tattoo, he was sure of that. Maybe, then, it was just the gall of the old bitterness working in him, and the fear that his son had not come back to him with clean hands. Suddenly he was remembering the old man's warning, "You aim to stay on here, you work. Thirty a month and beans—same as Dan Duffy." That was it. Will Burnett didn't doubt he was Bob Burnett. He only doubted Bob Burnett's motives in coming home.

Eddie Brott's eyes were pinched in a thoughtful stare as he finished dressing. Picking up the lamp, he tip-toed out into the hallway. In the kitchen, he rested the lamp on a cupboard shelf and rummaged around until he had found a couple of dried biscuits and a little jerky. The biscuit crumpled dryly in his mouth as he munched, and he had a sudden sharp desire for coffee. But building a fire now would be too risky. He might wake up Nan, or the old man.

Thought of the girl gave him a sudden queer pang. There was another reason he couldn't go through with this. He'd never known one like her. His own mother, from what he'd been told, had

been a dancehall girl who had married a whiskey drummer. And then the whiskey drummer had run away from her. He'd been only fourteen when Katie Brott had died. And from then on, he'd been on his own. Drifter, roustabout, outlaw. And then he had seen this chance. A chance, finally, to quit skittering around like a tumbleweed, with the law always just a whoop and a holler behind him. This was what he'd have liked—to own some day a little spread of his own, run a few cows, find himself a girl like Nan Burnett, and settle down for good.

Abruptly he blew out the lamp and stepped out into the woodshed behind the kitchen, and then, out in the cool morning shadows of the yard, he blended with them, and became a vague, wraithlike shape, moving up to the corral.

He hadn't told Will Burnett and Nan all of it; not of his suspicion that Oren Hess and his men had been reworking the Drag 7 into an Hourglass brand. But he was certain in his own mind about it, and this morning he aimed to find out for sure. A good man with a running iron could do it slick as grease, and once the hair grew over, you'd hardly notice where it'd been done.

But suspicion was one thing, proof another. Likely Duff had been on the verge when he'd ridden down into that bowl and caught Luke Saddler and Shorty Dubois getting ready for a branding party. But Duff had been too anxious. Duff had slipped his hobbles too quick. Well, he wouldn't make that mistake. No, the Apache Kid wouldn't. And then, for once, he could ride away from a chore with a clean conscience. Someday, maybe, he'd come back. Some day when he could tell them the truth, and look Will Burnett square in the eye. And then, if Nan Burnett still hadn't changed her name. . . .

In the gray half dark he felt himself bang into something. The corral gate. He cursed softly. A man like to forget his

own name, when he fetched up with the dauncy the way he'd taken it.

When he reached the camel-backed ridge, and peered cautiously out and down, into the bowl-like clearing below him, Eddie Brott felt a sharp stiffening coldness stab abruptly up and down his spine. A lanky, gaunted-looking *hombre* in a blue shirt and Cheyenne-cut chaps was hunkered beside the little pyramid of greasewood sticks, and suddenly flame spouted from the peak, sending up a spume of oily-looking smoke.

Luke Saddler, Eddie thought. The man he had whacked out of the saddle here yesterday had been short and stocky, and must have been Shorty Dubois. But where was Oren Hess? A faint frown notched the corners of Eddie's mouth. Saddler, if that was Saddler, had swung around now, and was gathering a heavier stock of wood for the fire.

Eddie swung around to his hobbled horse and slid the Winchester out of its saddle boot. Then, bellied down, he started crawling stealthily around the hump of the ridge and over into a pocket of brush on the far side.

The brush ran halfway down this east slope of the bowl he was on, and each time Saddler turned his back to go for more wood, Eddie wriggled forward a few yards, angling towards a rocky parapet where, some twenty yards ahead of him, the brush petered out at the summit of a short cutbank.

He reached the parapet and was now within pistol distance of Saddler, but when he lifted cautiously to his knees and peered out over the lip of the barrier, the puncher had disappeared. Although he judged Saddler could only have stepped into that patch of tall brush a few yards from the fire, an indefinable uneasiness ran down in him suddenly.

He held the Winchester ready to throw up to his shoulder, feeling unsure and uncomfortable about this now, and conscious

of his nerves pulling tight against the uncertainty of it. And then suddenly the strain of uncertainty became the shock of certainty, but at least shock had a basic reality, and so did the abrupt spurting scream of the rifle bullet coming down at him from the rim above. From the rim above. Not from the brush patch down below him.

CROSS-RIPPED! He had this one solid thought even as he felt the jolting impact of the bullet across his left shoulderblade, and felt the rifle jarred loose from his hands. The punching blow kicked him forward to the rim of the cutbank, and now he welcomed the steep pitch of it as he heaved himself over, just as a second shot blared, and he began rolling down, faster and faster.

A shot cracked from the direction of the brush patch as he struck spongily against a rotted deadfall and moist punk spurting into his face. The fall slammed the breath out of him and for a short moment he lay belly-flat and half stunned, his hand fumbling in a dazedly aimless way for his holster gun. The touch of the cold bone stock against his palm seemed to rouse him, and he thumbed back the hammer as he crawled slowly to the butt end of the log and peered out cautiously.

He held his big Texas Walker uptilted, ready, and at that moment a patch of blue showed through the leafy interstices of the brush and when he saw the brush twitch, saw the nickel-bright snout of the gun poking through—he leveled his arm and pumped one shot.

A blued tongue of flame licked out of the brush, and at the same instant a wider blue showed as Luke Saddler stumbled and was half in view momentarily. Wobbling, he was holding his left hand clapped to his side as he strained to bring up his gun again, but the gun seemed to be an impossible weight, drawing against his arm, and as Eddie fired the arm fell slack-

ly and Saddler's knees loosened and he crumpled like a rag doll.

From somewhere up the slope, brush crackled faintly and Eddie twisted around, the Walker rigid in his fist. He jumped up and ran crouched to the foot of the cutbank. A narrow dry wash ran along it to the right, rock-pitted and cross-stitched with old dried roots; he turned and started up this sandy channel, grabbing handholds on the roots.

He was at the rocky lip of the summit, his left hand clawing for a grip to heave him up and over, when Oren Hess rode suddenly out from a massive boulder, and Hess's Colt was up and covering him before he could blink.

"Just stay like that," Hess ordered flatly. "This'll only take a second, but I don't mind extendin' it a mite."

It had a nightmare quality then, this moment stretching like a taut wire, and the coldness numbing the belly, and the queer hollow humming in the ears, with the mind blank and dead and waiting for it.

The big bay gelding came out of the little motte of cottonwoods to Hess' right, and then it was like a tremendous fantastic bubble swelling and suddenly bursting as the gelding spooked and Will Burnett's rifle went flying.

At this moment, Eddie Brott fired.

In the saddle of his paint pony, Hess seemed to come stiffly to attention, his eyes frozen in a blank look of shock. Then, with a startling abruptness, he fell forward against the neck of his horse,

Lead seemed to sink into Eddie Brott's hands and feet as he pulled against the weight in them and heaved himself up over the caprock.

"Tol'ble shootin'," Will Burnett said.

Eddie's breath was a cramping pain at the bottom of his lungs. He let it out slowly. "Wouldn't've been, you hadn't come along, just when you did."

A slow grin peeled back Will Burnett's

dust-cracked lips. "Heard you rummagin' around out there in the kitchen this mornin'," he said. "Figured I'd better saddle up and kind of trail along after—just in case you run into any kind of a tight."

His gray, peering eyes had a sudden moisture in them. "Kind of proud of the way you handled this, son."

Now, Eddie told himself. *Damnit, tell him now!*

"I ain't your son." He blurted it out flatly, harshly. "I'm a damned fourflusher, and you got no call to thank me for anything."

"Why, now, boy, I wouldn't say that." Will Burnett's voice was surprisingly mild, matter-of-fact. "I got a damned plenty to thank you for, even if I did know you wasn't Bob."

Eddie Brott stiffened, his eyes spread wide in astonishment. "So I put the hair plumb in the butter," he muttered finally. He shook his head slowly, wonderingly. "Beats my time how you savvied that."

"It was from the way you et," explained Will Burnett quietly. "Right-handed. Bob was a lefthander. I cal'lated to cure him of it, and did some. But he

never did get over holding his fork in his right hand and his knife in his left, opposite to most folks." His shadowed eyes pitched at Eddie Brott and he said tonelessly, "Bob's dead, ain't he?"

A clawing lump rose in Eddie Brott's throat. "Yeah. Yeah, Bob went over."

"Figured so. Bob was a wild one. He wouldn't never have tamed down." The gray eyes squinted searchingly at Eddie Brott. "Reckon that's where you and him was different."

"Maybe. Makes no nevermind now."

"Better ketch up your horse," Will Burnett said. "Nan's waitin' a breakfast for us. She'll be a bit on the peck, we don't git back to eat 'er hot."

Eddie stared at him dumbly, disbelievingly. "But I can't—I couldn't—"

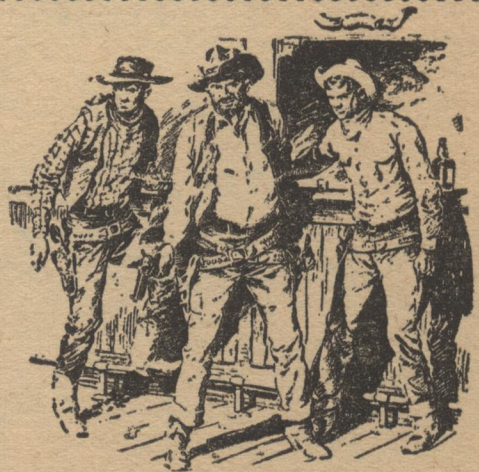
"Hell you couldn't," Will Burnett cut him off gruffly. "Let's git slopin'."

The moisture now was in the eyes of Eddie Brott. Up on the ridge, he saw his *sabino* silhouetted against the skyline. He stared up at it dazedly. Then, abruptly, he wheeled around and started toward it. Home. He was going home. His pace quickened, suddenly. Hell, he had to, now, didn't he? His old man had ordered him!

Death Rides the Diamond D

By Roe Richmond

The gallant Duanes left a seething range war behind them when they made trail out of Texas. But when they reached the Dakota Territory they found themselves trapped in another murderous mêlée from which there was no escape—unless they could persuade rancher Trevalyan to strap on his rusty guns and side them in a killer's conclave.



Don't miss the big July issue with its nine other thrill-packed tales.

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BOOMER, BEWARE!

"We got no room for a gent that's gotta fight to live—for a boomer, mister, lives to fight—an' dies to win!"



When the fight was over, he could just about stumble to his horse. . . .

By ARTHUR LAWSON

BILLY BRIER broke out of the wild plum brush just a hop and a holler behind the running calf, trying to head him back toward the branding fire and yelling like a Comanche to hurry him on the way. But the wild little calf wheeled suddenly, turned back on his tracks and cut off at a right angle while Billy's horse skidded to an abrupt stop. The calf gained a good twenty yards by

this maneuver and took advantage of it by scooting up a rise and over the rim towards Crazy Horse Creek. Thundering after him, Billy shook out his loop. The calf bawled, struck off at another angle, and Billy halted in amazement. He had run right into the middle of a boomer camp that had been so cleverly disguised he had not the slightest notion it was there, though he had been working this

territory for nearly six weeks. The canvas tilts of the half dozen covered wagons were painted a mottled green to blend with the fresh cottonwood leaves. Two pitched tents were of the same color. In a clearing yonder a girl stood in the tough sod holding a mattock. A young man was behind her, looking surprised. Billy saw evidence of an interrupted tussle—but if it had been friendly or not he could not know.

Billy knew sudden fear. This was a boomer camp—and a boomer would kill to keep the land he claimed the Lord had made for him. Boomers were unpredictable. Some were convicts who had come to the Territory to hide. Some were whisky peddlers. Many had failed in the settled states and dreamed of free land and success. Others were fanatics claiming it was sinful to leave this rich land untilled. Only the cowboy had a right to be on the "Unassigned Lands," so called because, though set aside for the Indians, no tribes had been settled on them. But the cattlemen held grazing leases—and the hatred of a boomer for a cowboy was bottomless.

"Evenin', miss." Billy, trying to keep calm, touched the brim of his hat. "This sure surprised me. Evenin', sir."

The girl's eyes were so dark a brown they seemed almost as black as the two long braids that fell over her breast. The full-skirted, dun-colored dress that almost hid her bare toes seemed designed to blend with the earth. Billy judged she would be a couple of years younger than he, maybe only eighteen.

"You didn't surprise me," she said to Billy. "I've seen you a half dozen times in the last couple of weeks. And I can hear your heathen howling a mile away. Now, beat it. Cowboys aren't welcome here."

Billy rode up closer to take a better look at the man who seemed willing to let the girl do his talking for him. His fur-felt hat was pulled low over his eyes. A scanty

stubble peppered his squarish chin. *Another granger*, Billy thought. Then Billy got it quick.

"You're Steve Slade," he said. "You ought to know the Army's thick as fleas in these woods. They'll slap you into jail quicker'n you could swat a fly."

The girl stood straighter. There was a fire in her eyes. Steve Slade neither denied or affirmed Billy's identification. He merely stood stolidly in the earth the girl had turned over. Billy remembered him as a cowboy who had once worked for a rival outfit in the unassigned lands—a cowboy whose branding iron had been mighty careless.

"We all know you cattlemen are hand in glove with the Army," Slade spoke, his voice reedy. "If we move into the Territory, you'll have to get out—and we'll win it sooner or later."

It was strange talk from a former cowboy.

The girl said, "If we're found here by the Army, we'll know you told them of our camp."

It was a threat. Billy reacted with dark anger.

"This country's crawling with cavalry patrols," he said. "Right now Lieutenant Phil Harper's beating the brush about ten miles down-creek. Every day he sends another bunch of boomers under escort to Kansas. He don't need anybody to tell him where you're camping." Billy wheeled his horse. "Give him my regards when he comes for you. The name is Billy Brier—in case you forgot, Mr. Slade."

He rolled spurs and thundered away—and got just a glimpse of a Winchester barrel being hastily drawn back into the dusky interior of a green-painted covered wagon. . . .

AFTER supper that night Billy Brier propped up a mirror before the fire and very carefully shaved the blonde, curly beard he had been growing for the past

six weeks. He washed his socks and long-handled underwear, and took a quick bath in the icy river. Shorty, his partner, looked on cynically. Shorty was an old-timer with a droopy mustache and eyes that were the faded blue of the sky at the horizon. If he had any name other than Shorty, he chose to keep it to himself.

"You get throwed today?" Shorty asked. "You get hit on the head with a rock?"

"Was thinking about going up to Kansas," Billy said. "We got to finish that job wrecking the Oriental. How many days yet?"

Shorty kept tallies on two sticks. One he notched each morning to keep track of the days. The other was his count of mavericks branded.

"Pretty near two weeks," Shorty said. "And twelve more calves. But you'll never make it, actin' that way. Washin' socks and shavin' and jumping in the creek ain't healthy in this country. And whoever heard of washing your drawers when winter ain't over?"

"Trouble with you is you're old fashioned," Billy grinned. He tried to make the next seem casual. "Didn't happen to run across Lieutenant Harper today?"

Shorty had been working the area downstream, where the lieutenant had been camped.

"Did," he said. "He got word that Rufus Nye crossed the border a month ago with three-four wagons. He's got a hunch they're around here somewhere." Shorty's pale eyes were wise. "Seems to me he said there was a gal with the outfit."

"You got to be crazy to be a boomer," Billy said. "And Rufus Nye is crazier than most, I reckon. They thrown him out so often he don't even bounce any more when he lands."

Shorty spat into the fire. "You got to be crazy, all right—crazy enough to head in a straight line for the place you aim to reach. That's how crazy boomers are.

Now, take you and me. Where are we going?"

Billy had to think about that. It had never occurred to him that he was going any place at all. He had always been of the opinion that he was already there. He stood up beside the fire, subconsciously facing toward the bluff where he had surprised the girl and the man he believed was Steve Slade.

"Those boomers are headed straight for jail," he said. "If that's where they aim to go in the first place, it seems to me they could get there quicker by punching the sheriff in the nose."

Old Shorty lay full length on the ground, looking up at the dark sky.

"That ain't the point," he mused. "Rufe Nye's got to go to jail for a principle. Then he can set up a holler that he's not being treated right—and every time he does it, he gets more people hollering with him."

TO BILLY BRIER it seemed a queer way to get results, but even Billy had to admit that it appeared to be working. Not long ago you rarely heard boomer talk. Now you couldn't drop into any back-street saloon on the border of the Indian Territory without getting into a fight with some granger who claimed God had made Oklahoma for farmers, not for cowboys or Indians, and that it was the duty of Congress to open it for settlement.

"And they holler at the cattlemen for the same reason. If you leave the cowboys go on the unassigned lands, why not us?" Shorty went on. "They'll take a shot at you, so you'll shoot back. Then they got something else to holler about. And first thing you know Congress is going to listen and kick us out and let them homestead."

Billy huddled down in his blanket close to the fire. The feud between the cattlemen and the boomers was old and double-

edged. They could never live together in peace. The boomers were settlers, the cowmen nomads, and the Indians wanted no sodbusters or house builders on their land. Billy's laundry steamed comfortably by the blaze. His chin was cold with its beard shaved off.

"And if you had the sense of a calf, you'd stay away from that girl," Shorty added.

"What girl?" Billy asked innocently.

"What girl?" Shorty echoed. "What girl? Washing your drawers in February. It's downright unsanitary."

Billy changed the subject. "Why would Steve Slade be with them? He's no granger."

Shorty sat up, still and alert. "Steve would rob his own mother," he said, "and I don't know why he's with them."

Billy covered a lot of ground in the next few days and brought in many a maverick. He also had time for scouting the bluff where he had stumbled upon Rufus Nye's camp. He picked out Rufus by descriptions he had heard, a big man, well over six feet, with the nose of an eagle and a beard that an Old Testament prophet might have envied. He often rode out of camp on a mule to study the countryside in search of a likely townsite. Billy was looking on one day when Steve Slade and a couple of other men saddled up and headed north.

Only the girl was left behind, and her father; the girl to grub out her garden patch, the father to survey the site he had finally chosen for the town he expected to colonize, the dream capital of a dream state that Rufus Nye expected to father. His companies were gathering on the border, women and children and men enough, he hoped, to force the hand of the government into letting the white man settle on the unassigned lands.

Billy was still on the hunt for mavericks when he crossed a path used by half-wild cattle on their daily trip between water

and grass. Picking was slim today and Billy was restless. He made a wide sweep to the south without finding any unbranded calves, and near sunset he came back to the trail when movement toward the creek would be heaviest. He sensed something wrong. The trail was deserted, and the hoofprints of horses and a mule overlaid those of cows. It was not necessary for Billy to get out of the saddle to read sign. The story was there, spelled out in big print: A cavalry patrol had passed. The troopers had picked up old Rufus Nye on one of his trips away from camp to work on his townsite.

Billy Brier trotted along the trail a while, then left it, and loped his horse in a straight line over the prairie, down to the river again where he forded the stream, to climb the bluff. When he spotted the dark-green-dyed tilts of the covered wagons behind the silver green of the new cottonwood leaves, he halted briefly. Though the sun was low, the barefooted girl still grubbed at the sod with her heavy mattock. Two fat horses stood neck to neck, munching wisps of grass. Alice Nye seemed to be alone, but Billy could not be sure. There had been rifles in the covered wagons the day he so unexpectedly broke into the boomer camp.

Remembering her remark about his heathen howling, Billy stood up in the stirrups and let go with a fierce Comanche yell. The girl dropped her mattock and screamed. A wide grin was spread across Billy's face when he rode into the clearing.

"Oh, you!" the girl gasped. "You—you horrible cowpuncher!" She put a hand to her breast to still her throbbing heart, and her brown eyes were as big and soft as those of a fawn.

"Where's the boyfriend?" Billy's grin was wider than ever.

The girl recovered mighty fast. "He's gone to Coffeyville to fetch down another party. We're going to put so many people

on this land Congress will have to give in."

Billy slid out of the saddle to stand beside her, his high cowboy heels sinking deep into the earth she had turned over. He was surprised to find that she was smaller than he had expected—a good ten inches shorter than his more than six feet.

Billy saw she was beyond argument. The Boomers were all that way. They wanted the empty land so badly they had turned their desires into a cause, almost a religion.

He said, "Steve Slade's no good. We run him out of the Territory for stealing other fellers' tobacco. He's got light fingers—and a free hand with a branding iron."

The girl might not be beautiful with her blunt nose and wide mouth, but Billy could hardly breathe when close to her.

"I don't believe it," she said. "Mr. Slade guided our party to this site. It's everything he said it would be."

So that was Slade's new dicker! Guiding parties for money into the forbidden land.

Billy said obliquely, "Slade rode out yesterday—and today the Army caught your old man."

Alice took the blow with resignation. Too pale, she seemed to Billy, entirely too pale for a girl who worked such long hours in the open breaking up sod.

"The Army always catches up with father," she said. "But I'm sure Mr. Slade had nothing to do with it. Father likes to be caught." She added with disarming frankness, "There's no publicity in not being caught—now go, Mr. Brier. You're not welcome here."

These boomers were fools in Billy's estimation.

"You're all alone," Billy said angrily. "You better come along with me. You can stay at our camp. When we get time off we'll take you to your home."

Alice shook her head.

"This is my home. I'll stay here until father comes back."

"If you come with us," Billy said, "the soldiers will leave you alone. They don't care about us because they know we'll move on when we're told to. But they figure you plan on digging in—and they'll find you sure as sin looks pretty."

"They've jailed us all three times before," she said. "A fourth won't hurt us much." The girl's dark eyes were strange. "When you've dreamed of this land and fought for it as long as we have, nothing will stop you. It's a hunger that's always with you."

BILLY could not put Alice Nye out of his mind, alone up there with only two horses for company. Even dogs and chickens had been left out of this expedition to the Unassigned Lands because in former invasions those creatures with their barking and cackling had spread the news for miles around that the boomers were coming. This time Rufe Nye had not wanted to be found until his many companies were on the march. He had planned on putting more people on the land than the Army could ever begin to throw off.

Billy got out his shaving equipment while Shorty was cooking supper. Shorty took it like a dose of castor oil.

"Progressin' pretty good?" he asked.

Billy pretended not to know what he was talking about. "Got only one today," he said. "A little bitty calf follerin' a Fryin' Pan cow. You seen any Fryin' Pan boys around?"

"No, I ain't," Shorty said. "They're too busy branding little bitty calves follerin' Fiddle Bow cows." Shorty cleared his throat. "But I'll tell you what I did see. I saw Lieutenant Harper pitching a cold camp half a mile down river. They caught Rufe Nye. They're waiting. They must of seen you shave and wash your drawers. All you got to do is ride up to see that

gal tonight and a trooper'll foller you."

Billy looked to the sky. There was still an hour or so of light left in it.

"You mean the Army's camped down there where you saw those antelope a couple days ago?"

"Jest about," Shorty said.

"In that case," Billy said, "I'll shave after supper. Even with a cold camp those soldiers make so much noise they'll scare all the antelope off. We could do with some fresh meat."

He put away his shaving equipment and broke out his Winchester. He dropped a few spare cartridges into the pocket of his jumper.

"Trooper meat's too tough for me," Shorty said. "I ain't got all my teeth."

Billy laughed. "They can keep Rufe Nye," he said. "He's worse than a plain damn fool. I'll be back in maybe an hour." He did not mention Steve Slade.

Shorty sighed profoundly. "That day you took the bath I should of drug you up to Coffeyville to get it out of your system."

Billy went on afoot, along the creek, his rifle ready, his eyes and ears alert. He supposed that the antelope had left long ago, but still he hoped to get one on the way down to make his errand look like the McCoy. When he came upon the cold camp of the cavalry patrol he had not even flushed a rabbit. The guard challenged him, and Billy laughed.

"It's only me—Billy Brier," he said. "Hyah, Lieutenant. How's the boomer hunting? Hyah, Sarge."

Billy knew them all. The men had pitched an "A" tent for Lieutenant Phil Harper and a tarp for themselves at a respectable distance from the commissioned officer. Rufus Nye's gray mule was picketed with their horses. The boomer himself, handcuffed, sat on the ground near the lieutenant's tent, scowling like an outraged eagle.

"Hyah, gran'pa," Billy added cheerful-

ly. "Was looking for some antelope that were down this way a couple of days ago," he said to the lieutenant, "but I reckon you must of scared them off."

The lieutenant was a man caught hiding something. He nodded uneasily to Nye.

"I gather you met this gentleman before, Billy?" he asked.

"Who ain't?" Billy grinned easily. "He's been in and out of this territory so often me and Shorty been thinking of building him a private door. Too bad they caught you, gran'pa."

Nye's fury blazed with the heat of a branding iron, but he kept his mouth clamped shut. The officer's expression eased slightly.

"You didn't happen to see the rest of his outfit?"

The girl would be better off in jail, Billy thought, than stranded alone in the middle of nowhere with half-tamed Indians and half wild cowboys for neighbors. But her father had put her in that spot, and she had chosen to stay there, so who was Billy to act like God?

"Nopel!" he said. He kept his glance carefully away from Nye. "There ain't any others. Shorty and I been working this territory up and down the creek for the past six weeks. The old goat's all alone." He could not resist giving the officer a jab. "If you feel like eatin' some hot vittles, Lieutenant, drop around. Shorty's a damn good cook."

The sergeant masked a grin. The lieutenant smiled formally.

"Thanks, Billy. I'll take you up on that offer—some other time."

Billy Brier gave up shaving every day and stopped washing his socks each night. He kept as far away from Alice Nye as he could, working the other side of the creek from dawn to dusk and slapping the Fiddle Bow iron on everything he saw. Shorty had whittled notches clear down to the end of his tally stick and was going up the other side when a relief party rode

in from headquarters. They had a big gabfest that night, and next morning Billy and Shorty headed for Kansas with checks in their pockets for two months' pay.

Kansas depressed Old Shorty, who had first come into it from Texas in the hell-roaring days of the cattle trails. He and Billy put up their horses in the livery stable and bowlegged down the main street of Coffeyville. Each time they came up from the Unassigned Lands Shorty vowed he would never cross the border again.

"Used to be called Red Hot Street," he told Billy. "From here clear up to the end there wan't nothin' but hotels, saloons, honkeytonks and deadfalls. You could get yourself rolled in a dozen different places in one night. Hell, this is like a church."

Billy stopped to look into a store window where ladies' finery was modestly displayed. Disgusted, Shorty went on, promising to see Billy at the Oriental, where a cowboy could still get plenty to drink despite six years of state prohibition. Billy started into the store, about-faced and crossed the street to a men's store where he bought a new shirt, new underwear and socks, and stiff blue levis. While he had a bath, a shave and haircut in the barbershop the swamper took his boots over to the cobbler to have the heels straightened. Smelling like a lilac bush and strutting self-consciously, Billy made a frontal attack on the ladies' store and was stopped cold at the door. He reckoned that maybe a drink would give him the courage to go inside and buy something for Alice, so he ambled on down the street and into the Oriental with a grin for everybody.

Steve Slade was drinking beer and playing cribbage with one of the Nye outfit at a corner table. Shorty was boring the bartender with stories of the Cattle trail days. He sniffed delicately when Billy lifted a foot to the rail beside him.

"If it wasn't the same hat and boots,

I wouldn't of knowed you," he said. "Bar-keep—another one of them thimbles of drinkin' likker."

"Last time you two was in here—" the bartender objected.

"You got a long memory," Billy complimented him. "But I've reformed. Besides, no full-grown man could ever get drunk drinking out of those dinky little glasses. You'd get a cramp in the elbow before you lifted enough to even give you a breath."

Dolefully, Shorty said, "I can remember when old Walrus McHugh wouldn't give a feller a drink unless he practically promised to fight. This town's gone to pot. Hell—" He raised his voice so the cribbage players in the corner could hear—"they ain't even any men left in this here town. Only a bunch of booming scissors-bills!"

"Now, lissen," the bartender said hastily, "you can have a drink on the house—both of you—only don't talk so damned loud."

Shorty did not have to wink at Billy to show he had won his point. He just went on complaining about the Oriental having degenerated into a fit place for meetings of the Ladies Aid. Billy down his drink. Steve Slade shoved back his chair and came up to the bar backed by his partner.

"We been waitin' for you," he said grimly.

"I alway did like welcoming committees," Billy answered.

In his heavy way Slade said, "The Army got Nye. They burned his camp and flushed out the girl. You were down talking with Lieutenant Harper just before they caught her."

Billy didn't savvy this play. Nye had heard him tell Harper that Nye was alone.

"Just a second, Steve—" he started.

Steve moved with deceptive speed, grabbing Billy by the front of his new shirt and hoisting him up onto his toes. He swung his free fist.

BILLY BRIER would fight anything. He had been known to take on a wild bull barehanded, and had offered to attack a Santa Fe locomotive if they would lend him a cow-catcher in good repair. But Steve Slade never gave him a chance and his partner knocked Shorty out with a beer stein while the bartender put the power of his fat shoulders behind a bungstarter. Times were changing in Kansas. King Cowboy was being dethroned by the granger, the sodbuster.

When Billy woke up he was in the local jail with the granddaddy of all headaches. He felt as if he was looking at Alice Nye through a fog as well as between bars. She said she was sorry.

Alice wore shoes and a hat, a woolen dress and a coat that stuck out in the back like a little bustle. She was elegant and pretty, but Billy had liked her better in her bare feet while she swung her mat-tack behind a screening of cottonwood trees.

"I've been talking to Steve Slade," she said. "I persuaded him not to prefer any charges against you for attacking him last night."

The jailer said, "That's a fact, Billy. You can walk right out of here whenever you wish."

"I like it here," Billy said. He was coldly furious. He glared into Alice's eyes. "I can handle my own affairs. Beat it!" He echoed her farewell from their first meeting.

"I came for two reasons," she said in a hasty whisper. "President Cleveland signed a bill last night opening the Oklahoma lands to settlement and—" her eyes were bottomless blue—"They let father out of jail. He says he doesn't think you told the Army where we were."

She did not say what she thought and Billy was too angry to talk with her.

"Beat it!" he repeated.

The girl left. The jailer did not stop to argue with Billy, but simply left the gate

open. Billy ignored it as long as he could. When his headache subsided and his stomach began to growl, he got off the bunk and wandered out into the sunlight. It was a new day, the third of March. The Unassigned Lands no longer existed. It was now Oklahoma.

It took Billy a while to digest that news. It meant, of course, that the Fiddle Bow, the Frying Pan and the rest of the outfits would have to pull out. Billy got something to eat and went down to the stockyards, where he found Shorty discussing the great news with half a dozen cowboys and cattlemen. They were all for organizing an army and keeping the grangers out of Oklahoma, but eventually the conference broke up and Billy and Shorty saddled their horses for the trip back to their camp. They had no more heart for celebrating.

Glumly they rode south. On the third day they came across a bunch of Frying Pan boys drifting cattle toward Texas, and joined them. All the outfits had men in the territory now hunting cows. They were not choosy whose beeves they found. They headed every cow, calf, bull and steer for the border, where they would hold a big roundup and sort the animals according to their brands. They moved only a few miles a day until the news was brought that the new President, Harrison, had set the formal date for the opening of the Territory. It was sooner than any had thought—high noon of April 22nd.

At Crazy Horse Creek Billy scouted the old boomer camp. Charred remains of the tents littered the site—but surprisingly the camp was not deserted as he had expected. He lay in the brush all day until he was certain that the two men camping on the bluff were Steve Slade and his partner. Steve knew a good spot when he saw it and had come back to stake his claim. Feeling a little better, Billy rode right in on Steve, surprising him.

"Hyah, Steve!" he called.

Steve said, "You got the Nye girl. What more do you want?"

That was news to Billy. It upset his plans. He did not know that the Nye girl was his, or any other girl.

He said, "I don't want her, Steve, or anything else. Just unbuckle your gun-belt."

Steve was bigger than Billy and had whipped him once before. He was pleased to fight with fists. But Billy knew what he was facing this time. They tore up more ground in half an hour than Alice had broken with her mattock in a day. When it was over, only Billy could mount a horse.

"When a girl crosses a feller's horizon," Shorty said disgustedly, "there's no longer any hope. Me, I'd ruther be bit by a side-winder, gored by a bull and caught nekkid in a blue norther."

"Me too," Billy said. "Give me a hand down."

"Feller gets mixed with a girl, nobody can give him a hand," Shorty said. "You're on your own, kid."

WHEN the cattle drive was over, Billy Brier rode back to the border and was astonished at the number of people there. They were camped by the thousands everywhere you could see, in tents and covered wagons, or just on the open prairie. At high noon of the 22nd of April a signal was to be given and the run would be on. Whoever first drove his stake in a quarter section was to own it.

Billy came across Lieutenant Harper. The officer was pretty near the end of his string. But in a couple of hours his worst troubles would be over. By the close of this clear, unusually hot day in the spring of 1889, the Oklahoma Territory would be settled by the white man.

"Hyah, Lieutenant," Billy grinned. Wearily, the lieutenant shrugged. "Funny thing, Billy," he said. "I caught

Steve Slade and a couple other hombres on Nye's old campground. Got 'em in jail until tomorrow. It's a funny thing," the lieutenant added. "Steve was with them when they crossed the border—then he told me where the camp was."

Billy shrugged. It was after the calf had led him into Alice's camp that Steve had turned against the Nyes. He remembered how she had said she had seen him half a dozen times before he had known she existed. She must have been looking—and Steve must have known.

The lieutenant glanced at his watch. "Half an hour to go."

"Half an hour?" Billy said. "Say—you seen Nye?"

The lieutenant jerked a thumb down the line. "His daughter's with him. Wearing pants."

Billy's horse hopped ahead under the sudden pressure of spurs. The lieutenant smiled thinly. Billy fought through the jamb and found Alice. She was in pants, all right, and looked mighty trig. Billy grinned broadly. Rufus Nye held out a big hand.

"I want to shake hands with a gentleman," Nye said.

They shook. And Alice put out her hand.

"I want to apologize," she said.

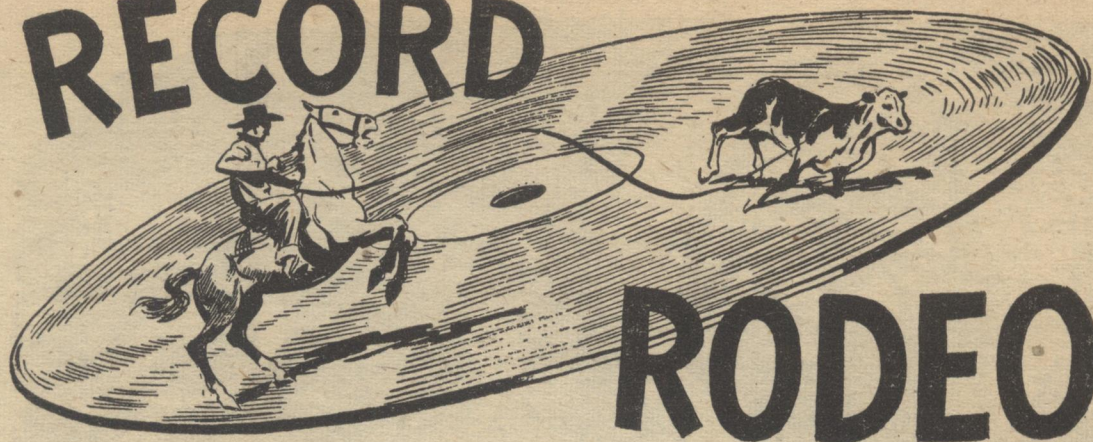
Billy looked deep into her eyes. "Forget it," he said. "One minute to go—and we got to ride fast."

"There are so many people," Alice said. "Do you think there'll be enough land for all?"

"There'll be enough for us," Billy said, and he did not think it necessary to add that Shorty was taking care of them. Shorty was camped on the bluff covering half a dozen quarter sections with a rifle handy to discourage any homeseekers who might arrive ahead of his partner. It was not exactly legal, but it was practical.

A pistol shot crackled along the border. The run was on.

RECORD



RODEO

By Joey Sasso

WE VALUE your opinions on these record sessions, fans, and we'd very much like to hear from you. Sound off, and you may be a prizewinner. For the best letter discussing the reviews in each issue, the writer will receive, absolutely free, one of the best new albums of Western music. The writers of the next two best letters will each find in the mail, with our compliments, one of the latest Western releases. Address your letters to Joey Sasso, care of this magazine, at 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

ANYBODY seen any flying discs lately? If you have, be sure to let us know—particularly any flying Western discs. The boom in prairie pressings has been growing bigger than ever, and it's our guess that the flying kind of disc is the only kind the manufacturers of Western music on wax haven't yet put out. They've been doing right well with the ordinary spinning kind, though. We've been looking them over for you, and this month's crop runs all the way from ballads to boogie, all with a Western accent. Let us know what you think. Here they are:

**STAMPEDE
SOMEONE IN TENNESSEE**
FOY WILLING
(Columbia)

Highly atmospheric doings in the far West are described by Foy Willing and his group in a dramatic presentation featuring thundering hoofs and lots of excitement. Frank Worth conducts the or-

chestra behind Foy and the Riders of the Purple Sage.

**JOLIE BLOND LIKES THE BOOGIE
PASTIME BLUES**
BOB WILLS
(M-G-M)

First it was Ida Red, and now it's Jolie Blond who's gone on a boogie kick! Maestro Bob Wills and his Playboys probably started the gal on her wayward way, especially if they played a boogie beat for her the way they do on the topside. It's country boogie in a hot sagebrush jam session, All Wills and a ten-inch platter wide! The coupler slows the pace.

**LITTLE ANGEL WITH THE DIRTY FACE
WHY SHOULD I CRY?**
EDDY ARNOLD
(RCA Victor)

Eddy Arnold has a new RCA Victor pairing in his inimitable balled style. Eddy has a sure way with ballads about kids, and this is one which will tug every-

(Continued on page 129)



Jute finally landed a blow on Frenchy's jaw that stretched him out. . . .

BLOOD CLAIM

Jute had a blood claim on the green hell of the wilderness, a claim that gave him his life—but there was a string to the gift—just hangrope size!

By LANCE KERMIT

EXACTLY two months after he had been sentenced to hang for the murder of Frenchy La Ramie, a buffalo hunter, the doomed man climbed the gallows at Fern Hill Agency. The Comman-

dant at Fort Kearny, where the trial had been held, had shifted the hanging to the agency so that reservation Pawnees, and especially their renegade brothers who broke out in a rash of violence every so

often, could see without coming under the shadow of the fort what came of cold-blooded murder and rapine.

Jute Doley, a hunting partner of Frenchy's, had a place of vantage and could watch the ceremony and the crowd, but most of it ran past his eyes like running water. The man he watched was Stone-Walks-Downhill, the renegade Pawnee sub-chief, who had declared a one man war against all buffalo hunters; the man Jute Doley had seen, with his own eyes, drive the knife hilt-deep to Frenchy's heart, and proudly add another feather to his loaded *coup* stick. A group of his friends, mostly reservation Pawnees, made a colorful knot in the blazing sun, waiting out the little time that was left to a man whose hands were stained with blood.

Mr. Price, the Fern Hill agent, kept to the shady comfort of the wooden awning fronting the agency building, along with his factotums, a few buffalo hunters and the curious civilians who had come from the fort. A troop of dismounted cavalymen made a protective circle around the gallows, and a joke from one of them ran along the circle like a small ruffling breeze until an officer's sharp voice becalmed them. The busybodies on the little stage fussed and fretted with their last minute chores, as though the doomed man had a schedule to keep. Jute Doley, looking back to the sly moment when all this had started, kept his eyes on Stone-Walks-Downhill, and wondered where the words might be that could change this, all at once, and throw this smooth machinery of law and justice out of gear. Or, if they could be found, whether, in all honesty, they ought to be spoken. . . .

Frenchy La Ramie had owned a cream-colored horse he claimed could outrun any animal on the plains. It was his regular boast that if he ever caught sight of Stone-Walks-Downhill he would run him down like he would a bull buffalo and put a knife in the renegade Pawnee's back.

Jute Doley had heard a lot of this and usually let it slide past for the big talk it was. Sometimes, like now, he raised a small beef.

"You make me sick, Frenchy," he told his partner. "In the first place that animal's only half as good as you think he is, and in the second place, Stone-Walks-Downhill is much too smart to throw himself into a tight, ever, anywhere. And in the third place we don't have time to chew the fat. Set up your guns."

Jute was almost twice Frenchy's size. Like most big men, his movements were apt to be careful, as if he might hurt something. If Frenchy ranted, Jute drawled. He claimed the only thing about him that was hair-triggered was the way he slept. He had blue eyes that could blaze, but usually were peaceful and indulgent. He wasn't especially fond of Frenchy, because he was unreliable and greedy, but they made good business partners because they were both skilled hunters.

They were getting ready to make a stand on buffalo near a small creek at the extreme western fringe of their usual hunting ground. The big herd was grazing in a lush meadow between the creek and a sandy hogback beyond, making their indolent way through the deep grass like clumsy black snails. Occasionally, a fly-pestered animal exploded with wrath and cut a caper, but they weren't aware of danger. It was hot weather, and the Tonkawa skimmers, more for comfort than concealment, kept to the aspen shade. A small breeze, slanting down the hogback into their faces, kept their scent off the herd, the only thing usually that alarmed the dull-witted beasts. Whittling at the edges of a herd like this, turning stampeded and dropping animals where they would create the least commotion, good hunters could wipe out a whole herd in a single stand, and that was what Jute and Frenchy proposed to do.

The Tonkawas were jumpy as froglegs

on a hot griddle because of all the scare talk they had been hearing about Stone-Walks-Downhill, but Jute and Frenchy paid no attention to the edgy grumble. The greased swivel of Jute's tripod was coated with sand so the heavy weapon squeaked and rasped when he swung it back and forth, but he soon got it cleaned to his satisfaction. His spare ammunition went into a handy cup on the tripod.

"Next trip I'm goin' to fetch me a softy chair and hire me a boy to load, so all I got to do is pull the trigger," Jute stated with a mild grin.

Frenchy, usually ready to cackle at any small joke, didn't give this one any notice. He was staring past the herd to the high hogback beyond, his face twisted with helpless rage and fury. "*Sacre!*" he groaned, pointing an angry finger. "*Nom de Dieu!* Make a look."

Jute made a look, and didn't like what he saw any better than Frenchy did. An Indian on a paint horse had come up from behind the hogback some distance to the north and was following the ridge toward them at an easy lope. As soon as he got into the breeze slanting down on the herd, it would catch his scent and bolt. Frenchy grabbed his spare gun and took aim.

"Cut it out," Jute warned mildly. "There may be a million more behind the ridge. Use your head."

"*Sacre Bleu!*" Frenchy smouldered. "He make the stampede! He play the joke on us."

Jute shook his head. "He doesn't know we're down here."

"*Voila!* He know it now then," Frenchy flared, and fired a shot.

Jute knocked the gun aside, and the shot went wild. The Indian, naked to the waste except for a totem of some kind on his chest and feathers in his hair, had come some distance down the slope, and he must have figured he couldn't get back to safety behind the ridge ahead of another bullet, so he didn't try. With haughty arrogance,

or plain stupidity, he pulled up and watched the commotion between Jute and Frenchy, leaving it to Jute to save his life.

Frenchy tried another shot, and Jute knocked the gun aside again. Frenchy howled with rage and tried to brain him with the butt of the weapon, swinging it like an axe. By now, the herd was on the move, picking up speed and raising a cloud of dust between the two hunters and the Indian on the hillside. It was his chance to get safely away, but he didn't take it. Instead, he rode down through the dust to see the fight, making a peace sign to the stunned skimmers to keep them from bolting.

Jute noticed the gesture and let his surge of anger at Frenchy run its course. Frenchy was full of wild fury and quick as a shadow, but Jute finally landed a hard blow to his jaw that stretched him flat on the ground in a senseless heap. Then he turned to face the arrogant-eyed Indian, knowing, the moment he saw the discolored, star-shaped scar on his cheek, who he was.

THIS was Stone-Walks-Downhill, the renegade Pawnee sub-chief, who picked new blossoms for his *coup* stick from buffalo hunters' heads. It would have been a good idea to let Frenchy have his shot, but it was too late now, and when the Pawnee started making his sign talk, he was, in spite of his arrongance, effrontery and proud style, accurate and fair. It made long talk, but, briefly, he was ashamed that he had ridden in under their guns completely unaware of his danger, and they could have shot him down. He conceded that Jute had saved his life and he vowed, when occasion arose, to pay him back in kind. His eyes smouldered with contempt and hate, belying his fine talk, but it was talk that could be depended on, because his vanity would hold him to his word.

Jute answered flamboyantly, showing off his skill. He knew his listener could speak and understand both English and French, but out of wilfulness and disdain he had chosen to use sign, and Jute had to follow his cue for his own pride's sake. It was a fine *parlavez*, entirely dependable and honest, but Jute saw the scalping knife lurking behind it. Stone-Walks-Downhill would keep his word—once—to even even the score. Then, for vanity's sake, he would hunt them down again and redeem himself of this moment of folly and shame. Jute Doley would come to see, in the near future, how close he had guessed at the truth.

He and Frenchy headed east with their wagons and skimmers. Frenchy didn't know who the Indian was, and Jute didn't tell him. It would have made him still uglier. The Tonkawas knew—Jute could tell by their hurry and shifty-eyed fear—but they talked about such matters only among themselves. Frenchy had a sore jaw, but exaggerated it out of all reason, pretending he could hardly eat, patting and probing at the swelling, and claiming there were bone splinters under the flesh. Jute tried to talk him out of his gloomy sulk, pointing out that his hairbrained flareup might have cost them their scalps, but the rift between them widened.

Frenchy got into the habit of bunking down alone in a secret place away from the fire, as if he expected some kind of treachery from Jute. Jute tried to talk him out of it, but it didn't work.

"You make to cut my throat—zzzt!" he charged, pointing at Jute's knife. "That I can see."

"Frenchy, you're crazy."

"*Oui*. Crazy like a fox."

"Everybody knows we're partners. I got to account for you when I get back."

"You make beeg lie for that."

"How could I? Those skimmers are watching us all the time like a flock of buzzards."

Several times Jute heard Frenchy prowling around in the dark, making small, stealthy sounds that threw the Tonkawas into panic. Once, his patience exhausted, Jute went after him, knowing where he had bedded down, but he found him sound asleep in his buffalo robe, or pretending to be. Then one morning Jute's Bowie knife was missing, and he blew up. "I don't know what the idea is, Frenchy," he said, "but if hadn't slept through it, I would've killed you in your tracks. Now give me that knife."

With commendable restraint Frenchy pulled out his own knife and asked whether it was Jute's. Jute shook his head. "You know damned well it isn't," he flared. "I've got my initials carved on the handle of mine."

"Exact," Frenchy stated, pocketing his weapon. "Thees ees mine. But thees I say. I do not prowl. I do not steal. But if I make for take your knife, I cut your throat besides. *Mais oui!*"

"Don't come near me again, that's all. Frenchy. I don't know how you did it without waking me up. Usually you make enough racket to wake the dead, but after this I'm sleeping with my eyes open. Just remember that, and cut out the prowling. You got the Tonkawas scared stiff right now and the first thing you know they'll pull out some dark night and leave us in the lurch."

"You crazy."

"If I am you drove me to it."

Jute made a sound guess about the Tonkawas. Several nights after Jute's knife disappeared, they pulled out, soundless as cloud shadows moving along the grass. Jute hadn't heard a thing, and it made him boil to think that this once, when it would have been profitable to stay awake, he had slept through it. But Frenchy raised the biggest howl, because they had run off with his cream-colored horse. He put his hand to his forehead in a gesture of unbearable anguish and raved and ranted

like a madman. He promised himself the pleasure of slitting their throats, one and all, and wanted to take Jute's saddler and go after them, but Jute wouldn't let him go alone.

"They'll head for the fort, and your horse'll probably be there when you get back. Now cool off."

"*Mon Dieu!* I cut their throats—I keel them all!"

"First," Jute stated practically, "we'll get these wagons on the move. We can't stay here."

Frenchy got his horse back the same day, but it didn't improve his ugly mood any. It was lying in their path on a sandy hillside with a bullethole through its head, and a bloody moccasined trail led across the sand to the grassy meadow below. Frenchy jumped down and followed the tracks, raving again.

"Come back here, you fool!" Jute yelled. "Look into this a minute."

Frenchy didn't stop. Jute got down, frowning. There were no other hoof tracks. Frenchy's horse had come down the slant alone, and he was convinced the Tonkawas would have stuck together. Gunflame had scorched the hair around the bullethole, proving the shot had been fired at close range, proving, because there were no other tracks, that the rider had done it himself. It was a puzzle worth looking into before a man went off half-cocked on the trail of trouble the way Frenchy was doing. A man wouldn't set himself afoot in a place like this without a good reason, and Jute couldn't find one. The blood-spattered moccasin trail was another puzzle. Had the rider shot himself, too, and then lurched down to the willows that grew along the creek below? He could have been shot from a distance, but the horse wasn't, and the two things didn't fit together. Jute was full of questions, but the answers weren't here, and he finally followed Frenchy down the hill at a more cautious gait.

AT THE edge of the willows, he called, but didn't get an answer. He didn't hear a sound, and followed Frenchy's tracks a little further into the brush. Then a rifle prodded him in the back and he knew he had stepped into a trap—a trap set by the Pawnee renegade, Stone-Walks-Downhill.

Frenchy had done the same. He wasn't gagged or tied, and Jute's anger boiled. "You could've let out a yelp and kept me out of this," he flared. "I might've done something. But no, you wanted me to get the full dose, same as you."

Frenchy didn't answer. He had the shakes. His face was chalk white and his arms had a queer hang to them, as if the bones were broken. He might be putting on agony as he had done with his jaw, but it looked real, and once, when he tried to lift his hand, he winced with pain. Stone-Walks-Downhill had probably crippled him. Jute wouldn't put it past him. But the animosity between the two hunters had grown to such proportions Jute couldn't find it in his heart to waste much sympathy on his partner.

"You got it wrong, anyway, Frenchy," he went on. "I can walk outa here alive."

"Ha!" Frenchy scoffed.

"I've got his word," Jute stated. "He said so the time he spooked our buffler herd." He twisted his head toward the Pawnee. "Ain't that right?"

Stone-Walks-Downhill didn't answer, probably getting some pleasure from letting Jute sweat it out. But he didn't seem to mind the talk, although his eyes gleamed with the cold ferocity of a wildcat. Disdain, contempt and hate stalked across his face, and some hoarded secret, far more dangerous than any of the rest, twisted his mouth with sly mischief. The star-shaped scar on his cheek gleamed whitely against the brown skin.

"Hees word!" Frenchy scoffed again, his thin voice wobbling. "Ha!"

"He'll keep it," Jute insisted. "He's

got too much puff to go and break it."

Stone-Walks-Downhill suddenly held up his hand and brought them to silence. His rifle watched them like a one-eyed cat in the brush, but it cramped his style with his hands, so he used doggerel French and worse English. But he made himself understood and cleared up some of the puzzles. Ever since that day Frenchy had almost shot him off his horse he had trailed them. He had prowled around their camp at night, terrifying the Tonkawas and finally driving them off. He had stolen Frenchy's cream-colored horse the same night to set this trap. He had shot it down in their path, and taken its blood to make a trail to the willows. He knew Frenchy would follow recklessly to get a shot at the Tonkawa he supposed had stolen it, but Frenchy had fallen into the trap and lost the strength of his arms and what little courage he ever owned.

"You got to do something," Frenchy begged suddenly, speaking to Jute.

"For you?"

"*Oui*—for me."

"You got a lot of crust to ask."

"You nevair tell me it was thees *chien* we see on the hill," Frenchy accused.

"You know it now," Jute answered roughly. "What's the matter with your arms?"

"He break the bones weeth the club," Frenchy whined. "In the name of heaven, do something!"

"Like I said," Jute stated, "I got my way out of this spoken for."

"Maybe yes, maybe no."

The Pawnee renegade didn't seem to mind this side talk either. His harangue went right on, and his fury grew. Honest passion suddenly flamed in his eyes, and he was a man with a shining purpose, to save his people from destruction at the hands of roaming buffalo hunters, who raped the earth and everything on it with their mad guns. Stone-Walks-Downhill was his name, and he had picked it him-

self when he came to manhood because n man could change the path he had chosen.

Jute Doley saw his chance. Caught up in his own oratory, the renegade Pawnee let his rifle sag. Then he grabbed it in one hand and made violent gestures with it. Jute figured a man could make one swift lunge and get at him before he could throw down on them again. He could make a try for the knife the Pawnee carried in a sheath at his side.

He weighed one thing against another, Frenchy's ugly spleen against the fact that they were partners, the Pawnee's word against the likelihood that he would break it.

Time was running against him, and then, suddenly, it had all run out, which, he was honest enough to concede, was likely what he wanted it to do. Stone-Walks-Downhill came to the end of his harangue. His gun bore down on them again, and Jute's chance to make his play was gone. With a savage motion the Pawnee ordered Jute to one side. Then he strode forward. Frenchy went to his knees, and tried to raise his hands, but Stone-Walks-Downhill strode through them. His gun swung toward Jute, holding him back. His free hand grabbed the knife, and Frenchy La Ramie went down under the blow. Stone-Walks-Downhill left the weapon there and straightened. Jute saw his own initials carved on the handle and knew at last how his knife had disappeared. In that case the Pawnee had spared his life once before, when he crawled up on him in the dead of night and stole his knife. This was the sly mischief playing so maliciously around the Pawnee's lips. Jute should have made his play, for his own sake as much as Frenchy's. The Pawnee held the gun steady, his finger curled around the trigger. Sly mirth tugged at his lips again as he eyed Jute down the barrel of his gun, sly mirth and venom.

(Continued on page 130)

TALES of the

by LEE

"BIG NOSE" GEORGE

ONE OF THE MOST PICTURESQUE BAD-MEN TO HIT THE COLORADO SECTION IN THE 1870'S WAS A BLACK-BEARDED GIANT WITH A GREAT NOSE THAT THRUST OUT FROM HIS HUGE FACE LIKE THE FLAMING BEAK OF A PREDATORY BIRD. HE SPORTED GOLD BARRINGS AND CALLED HIMSELF GEORGE PARROT, WHICH SHORTLY BECAME "BIG NOSE" GEORGE. AFTER PERIODIC DISAPPEARANCES FROM TOWN--WHEN SOMEBODY WAS ALWAYS ROBBED BY A LONE MASKED BANDIT--HE WENT ON COLOSSAL SPREES.

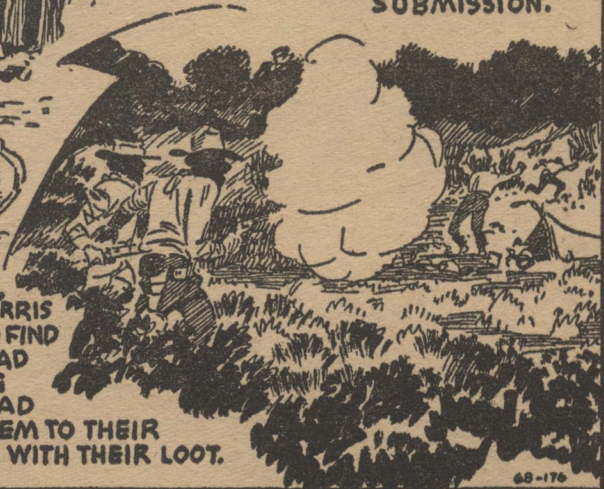


IN '76 HE TEAMED UP WITH A PRETTY LEADVILLE DANCEHALL GIRL WHO WHEELED INFORMATION ABOUT THEIR MOVEMENTS FROM WELL-HEELED PATRONS AND PASSED IT ON TO BIG NOSE. THEIR TAKE WAS GOOD, UNTIL ONE NIGHT GEORGE'S MASK SLIPPED, AN EARRING SHOWED, AND THEY HASTILY MOVED ON TO CHEYENNE.

TO ESTABLISH HIS TOUGHNESS, BIG NOSE TACKLED A BIG FRENCH-CANADIAN TRAPPER. THEY WERE BATTLING EVENLY UNTIL THE TRAPPER TORE OFF ONE OF GEORGE'S EARRINGS--AND PART OF THE EAR WITH IT. BELLOWING WITH RAGE, BIG NOSE BEAT HIM DOWN AND KICKED HIM INTO SUBMISSION.



ON A TIP SUPPLIED BY THE GIRL, BIG NOSE AND "DUTCH CHARLIE" BURRIS STUCK UP A STAGECOACH, ONLY TO FIND THAT TWO OTHER ROAD AGENTS HAD BEATEN THEM TO IT. COLLECTING SOME JEWELRY THE OTHERS HAD OVERLOOKED, THEY TRACKED THEM TO THEIR CAMP, SHOT ONE AND MADE OFF WITH THEIR LOOT.

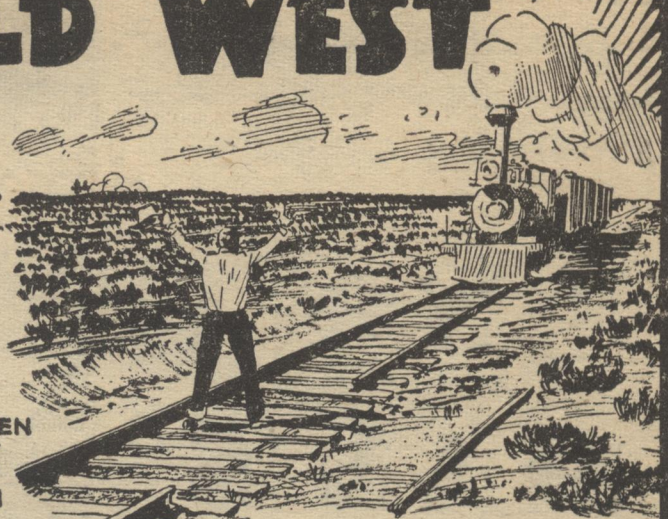


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— OLD WEST

AFTER COVERING DEADWOOD, THEY HIT UPON THE IDEA OF DERAILING AND ROBBING A UNION PACIFIC TRAIN. GEORGE AND CHARLIE LEVERED OFF A RAIL NEAR CARBON, BUT A SECTION HAND DISCOVERED IT JUST IN TIME.

AN OUTRAGED POSSE TOOK UP THEIR TRAIL. TWO POSSEMEN WHO OUTDISTANCED THE REST WERE AMBUSHED IN A CLUMP OF TREES AND MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD. THE BANDITS ESCAPED OVER THE LINE INTO MONTANA, BUT WERE ARRESTED WHILE MAKING A TOUR OF MILES CITY BARS AND RETURNED TO CARBON, WHOSE WRATHFUL CITIZENS PROMPTLY STRUNG CHARLIE UP TO A TELEGRAPH POLE.



BIG NOSE WAS SPIRITED AWAY TO RAWLINS, DULY TRIED AND SENTENCED TO HANG. ON MARCH 20, 1881, HE LURED THE JAILER INTO HIS CELL AND KNOCKED HIM COLD. BEFORE HE COULD ESCAPE, HOWEVER, THE SCREAMS OF THE JAILER'S WIFE ATTRACTED AN ANGRY MOB THAT PROMPTLY ESCORTED BIG NOSE TO A CONVENIENT TELEGRAPH POLE.

THEY SAY BIG NOSE DIED HARD, BUT NOT BEFORE HE'D TAUNTED THE CROWD BY PROMISING "HIS HIDE FOR SHOE LEATHER" TO ANYONE AS TOUGH AS HE'D BEEN. THEY SAY ALSO THAT THERE ARE SOME ODD AND PECULIAR ITEMS MADE FROM BIG NOSE'S SKIN STILL KICKING AROUND RAWLINS.



*He could not live as a free man
—nor could he die—save as a
coward—until he'd bought, with
his last bullet, his right to—*

NO MAN'S RANGE

By L. P. HOLMES

(Conclusion)



THE story until now: Bill Thurston and his partner, Si Chiles, are cutting and freighting timber poles near Carson City for the new transcontinental telegraph line. While Bill is driving a wagonload of poles down Calamity grade, his brakes fail. He crashes into and destroys a wagon carrying Abner Starr, his wife, and a young girl named Kip Sharpe.

Bill discovers that his brake beam was nearly sawed through. Someone is out to get him. He takes the Starrs and Kip Sharpe to Carson City. There he and Si decide that Graf Broderick, who supplies the Pony Express and would lose his business with the completion of the telegraph line, is behind a number of "accidents" which have happened to freighters like Bill and Si.

Bill confronts Broderick in his office and warns him to keep clear. Broderick orders his wagon boss, Rube Morlan, to get Bill.

They fight, and in the scuffle a gun goes off, wounding Bill, but he knocks Morlan out. On Broderick's desk Bill sees an invoice for five cases of rifles. As he leaves the office, Kip Sharpe enters it.

What about those rifles? And what is Kip Sharpe's connection with Graf Broderick?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Guns Speak

BILL THURSTON awakened to a day of plentiful activity. His wounded side was stiff and sore and he could not help in the repairing of his wagon brake and the loading of the other Thurston & Chiles wagons. Si



A bullet whistled past him in the darkness and he went for his gun. . . .

Chiles, spry as a cricket despite his stiff leg, was everywhere, giving orders, straightening out details. Bill could do little more than look on.

Abner Starr approached him. Bill remembered his promise to replace the emigrant's smashed wagon and said, "Come on, friend. I'll show you the wagon I said you could have."

Starr said, "That ain't so necessary. Sarah an' me, we ain't too feverish now to get across the mountains to Californy. Fact is, our horses ain't got enough in 'em right now to haul a wagon across. We'd already found that out, which was why we were headin' east again instead of west

when you run across us. Right now, what I need more'n anythin' else is a job. I hear talk and I see things. You fellers are set to haul poles out across the desert. You're gonna need grub wagons and such to go along. How about me an' Sarah runnin' a grub wagon for you? I kin drive an' help Sarah cook. We'll earn our wages."

Bill hesitated. "It's not going to be an easy chore, friend. The desert is always the desert and the Goshiutes and White Knives are causing trouble. Your wife would be safer here in Carson."

"Where I go, Sarah goes," said Abner Starr simply. "It's allus been that way.

We ain't afraid of neither the desert or Injuns."

"You've spoken to Mrs. Starr about this?" Bill asked.

Starr nodded. "Sarah was the one who got the idea and sent me to talk to you."

"We could use you," Bill admitted frankly. "How about that girl, Kip Sharpe?"

Starr shrugged again. "She's got her own ideas an' affairs. All she wanted was to get to Carson. She joined up with us at Keenan's Bar. She'd come across the Sierras by stage and her money run out. She offered to work her way if we'd bring her to Carson with us. She's a right nice girl, but closemouthed about her own affairs."

"I'll speak to my partner about that grub wagon deal," said Bill. "There he is yonder. Come on."

"I'm agin takin' women into a rough job in rough country," Si Chiles declared. "But from what I've seen of her, yore wife is somethin' extra special, Starr. If it's all right with Bill, it's all right with me."

"Then it's a deal," said Bill. "That Conestoga I was going to give you will be as good as any. But you'll need a better team of horses than those you got. We'll pick a team from our corral."

Activity around the corrals heightened. Wagons rumbled over to the huge piles of poles to be loaded. Men sweated and horses fretted. Then long whips cracked, horses surged into their collars and the first wagons began to draw away, loaded to capacity.

Besides the pole wagons, other outfits were toiling out into the east. Wagons loaded with coils of wire, with cross arms, insulators; wagons loaded with tools and men, with batteries and carboys of acid, with Caton keys and other equipment for relay stations, chuck wagons and wagons loaded with bedding rolls, tents, sawed lumber, with hay and grain for horses.

On one of his rounds, Ben Rabby, the

supervisor, stopped where the Thurston & Chiles wagons were loading. "Don't you boys start droppin' poles until you get past Siwash Springs," he said. "Our own wagons will spread poles between here and Siwash. We'll have survey and diggin' crews waitin' for you out past Siwash."

Ben Rabby grinned, a hard, tight reckless grin; the grin of a capable man facing a tough job and welcoming it. "They're comin' out of Salt Lake to meet us," he added. "We ought to hang our heads if they beat us to Egan Canyon."

Bill Thurston and Si Chiles sent their wagons away, one by one. Finally only Bill's wagon was left, brake beam replaced and ready to roll.

"No place for you, joltin' out the miles on that wagon with a bum side," declared Si. "I'm takin' over your outfit. You come along in my buckboard, which'll make easier ridin' an' give you a chance to skitter up an' down the line of haul an' keep things movin'. You better throw our beddin' rolls in back. See you along the road to Siwash Springs."

Before Bill could argue, Si went up on to the load, yelled at the team and went lumbering away. Bill hitched a team of broncs to the buckboard and drove over to the cabin.

He got down and went in, stopping short just inside the door. Kip Sharpe sat on the edge of one of the bunks, hunched over forlornly. On the floor at her feet was a worn old canvas grip-sack, limp with meager contents. Her face was downcast and her eyes suspiciously red. She dabbed at her nose as Bill entered, then looked at him defiantly.

"If—if I want to snivel a—a little, it's my own b-b-business," she declared, a small wail in her voice. "I—I could have earned m-m-my way, too."

"If I knew what you were driving at, I might figure some kind of answer," Bill said.

"I w-wanted to go along with the Starrs. B-but Mr. Starr wouldn't let me. He said as long as he was driving his own wagon on his own business I was more than welcome to come along. B-but this time he was driving y-your wagon on your business, so he had no right to have me along T-that leaves me here, just as you see me. And I can't stay here I—I got to get out to Egan Canyon."

"Was that why you went to see Graf Broderick last night?" asked Bill. "You wanted to get a ride out on one of his supply wagons, was that it?"

Her head jerked in a little nod. "And all I found in that office was a mean looking man with a face like a fox and two other men on the floor, all b-bloody and senseless. You did that!"

"Yeah," admitted Bill. "I reckon I did. Sorry I had to spoil your talk with Broderick, but that's the way things go in this country. Now if you'll just get off that bunk, I'll take those blankets. Got to throw together some sleeping gear for my partner and myself."

She got up and stood forlornly against the wall, grip-sack dangling in one small fist. Bill made up blanket rolls, took them out to the buckboard. He took a scabbarded rifle down off a wall peg and slung that behind the buckboard seat.

"Just why must you get to Egan Canyon?" he asked abruptly.

"Just—just because," was her muffled answer. But her eyes came up to meet Bill's glance fairly.

"A woman's answer," said Bill. "Which means nothing to me."

He went out, stowed the rest of the gear in the buckboard, swung to the seat. But he hesitated at kicking off the brake. Before him was the picture of Kip Sharpe, forlorn and dejected. A gust of impatience swayed him.

"If you're comin' along," he yelled, after a moment, "get a wiggle on! I can't hang around here all day."

For a moment there was no response. Then she appeared in the cabin door. "You mean me?"

"Do you think I'm hollering just to make a noise?" snapped Bill. "I can't leave you stranded here like a lost puppy. You'll earn your way, all right. I'll see to that."

She scrambled up beside him lightly, pushed her grip-sack under the seat. Bill kicked off the brake and they were off in a swirl of wheels and a cloud of dust.

For some time they rode in silence. Then she said, demurely, "You are really a very kind-hearted man, Mr. Thurston."

"Ask Graf Broderick if I am," growled Bill. "I smashed Rube Morlan's face in with a chair and I gunwhipped Broderick silly. And if you rile me enough I'll whale some respect into you, too. Last night, according to you, I was a big, clumsy oaf. Now I'm a kind-hearted man, so you say. I'll tell you what I am. Just a softheaded ninny, taken in by a few tears and a forlorn look. Now I got you to look after, along with the rest of my troubles."

There was another silence. Then, "You have many troubles, Mr. Thurston?"

"I'll have plenty," shot back Bill. "Plenty—before I see poles laid to Egan Canyon. The White Knives and Goshiutes will see to that, no doubt. And I'm not forgetting Graf Broderick, either. Now quit asking questions!"

Bill set his jaw and stared straight ahead.

THEY caught up with the Starrs and the grub wagon about a mile out of Carson. Bill swung the buckboard alongside and motioned Abner Starr to rein in.

"You forgot something," Bill said. "I brought it along. You got room for it, Abner?"

Ab Starr looked a little bewildered, but Mrs. Starr's fine eyes shone thankfully. "I'm awfully glad," she said. "I was hali

sick, worrying about what would happen to her, alone back there in Carson. There's plenty of room for her on the seat here with Ab and me, Mr. Thurston."

Kip Sharpe hesitated. "I'd like to—to get to Egan Canyon as soon as possible."

"You made a deal with me back in Carson," reminded Bill. "You said you'd earn your way. You'll earn it helping Mrs. Starr and Ab. You'll tend fire, cook grub, wash dishes and all that sort of thing. You'll get to Egan Canyon as quickly on that grub wagon as you will any other way. So—swap over!"

She climbed out of the buckboard without another word, but paused a moment before turning away to the Conestoga. "You may be a kindhearted man in some ways, Mister Bill Thurston," she said tartly. "But in others you're still a big oaf, shoving people around. So I'll tend your darned old fires and I'll cook your darned old food and wash your darned old dishes. But the day we get to Egan Canyon, I'll get even with you!"

She turned her back and climbed up the Conestoga wheel. Bill kicked off the brake and the buckboard surged ahead once more. Now if that wasn't a contrary female for you! Just like her to pull all kinds of feminine wiles on a man to get him to do her a favor. Even make a bargain with a man and then, when you went to hold her to it, get full of sass and contrariness again. Si would probably give him hell for bringing her along, and rightly so, too.

Within another mile, Bill Thurston forgot about Kip Sharpe, at least for a time. For out here things were taking place that made a man's blood quicken. Here already were pole-setting and wire-stringing crews at work. Here a line of little stakes ran endlessly out and ever out to the east, across alkali-whitened flat, over sage-covered rolling ridge and on to other flats and ridges. At every one of these stakes a trim, tapered pole lay and little groups

of men were toiling with diggings tools.

Bill stopped to watch one of the poles being raised, dropped in a waiting hole, trued up and tamped in firmly. Hardly had the pole-setting crew moved on to the next stake and a man with climbing irons went expertly up the pole while a wagon pulled by, uncoiling a gleaming thread of wire behind it as it went. Back a few hundred yards Bill could see that wire already looping from pole to pole in long, graceful sweeps, shining in the sun and singing softly to the dry push of the desert wind.

A shout up ahead jerked Bill's attention that way. Here a horseman came speeding, mount running full out and the rider waved his hand to the laboring line crews as he sped past. A Pony Express rider, cutting down the miles between Fort Churchill and Carson. Bill wondered if that lean, racing rider realized that with every pole planted and every foot of wire strung, he and his kind were just that much closer to being history.

The Thurston & Chiles wagons lumbered heavily into Siwash Springs that evening. Horses were unhitched, watered, tied to feed racks. Fires sprang up and weary men spread bedding rolls beside them. At a larger fire Abner Starr, his wife and Kip Sharpe gave out hot food and steaming coffee.

Si Chiles viewed the girl in both surprise and concern. "Didn't know she was comin' along," he said testily to Bill Thurston. "Thought just the Starrs figgered in the deal."

"Couldn't leave her stranded in Carson," said Bill briefly. "For some reason of her own she's anxious to get to Egan Canyon. She offered to work her way. She seems to be doing a pretty good job at it."

"Only one trouble," observed Si Chiles thoughtfully. "She's young and she's pretty and out in this country young and pretty women are few and far between."

Hope she don't cause any trouble among our men."

"She won't," assured Bill quietly. "She's a lady and most of the men will recognize that. Any that don't, I'll convince."

Old Si threw a quizzical glance at his young partner, smiled briefly to himself and let it go at that.

The next night the wagons rolled into Fort Churchill, dropping poles as they went. Here Ben Rabby caught up with them.

"You've been moving," he told Bill and Si heartily. "Got another proposition for you. Frankly, from here on out, it's Injun country. Fact is, some Goshiutes chased a Pony Express rider up to within half a mile of town. Now, your wagons move in a bunch. Together you make a strong enough force to discourage Injun attack. I'd like to have you load up with poles here at Churchill and head right on east. I can use little one or two wagon outfits to fill the gaps of poles still needed between here and Siwash Springs, where there's no Injun danger. If you accept my proposition, it means an extra two dollars on every pole you lay down. How about it?"

"Speakin' for myself," said Si Chiles, "it's a go, Ben. That's what Bill and I are out here for, to make money. How about it, boy? The men will be willing, I know, for we can cut 'em in on that extra money."

"Suits me if it suits you, Si," Bill said quietly. "Go around and give the boys the word."

Bill went back to the grub wagon to tell the Starrs about what the next day held. The evening meal was over and he found things already cleaned up and in order. The Starrs showed no worry over the future project. Bill looked around for Kip Sharpe.

"Where's the girl?" he asked.

"She slipped away uptown on an er-

rand of some sort," answered Mrs. Starr.

"She shouldn't have," Bill said grimly. "This camp is just as wild and tough as Carson, even worse."

He headed away toward the center of the town, half angry at the girl for stirring worry in him and half angry at himself for knowing that worry. He would, he vowed, give that young lady a supreme talking-to when he found her.

He didn't find her, not right away, but he did find something else. It came at him out of the half dark, between two flares of light which pierced the street from open doors. A harsh, hate-filled yell. And then the rolling thunder of a gun, crashing again and again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hell on Wheels

A BULLET whistling past his head and another slamming into the dust at his feet, sending a stinging cloud upward, jerked Bill out of his daze.

He hardly knew how the Dragoon Colt gun Si Chiles had given him got into his hand. Yet it was there and the heavy recoil of it was driving his elbow back again and again and the stabbing, crimson flame of it lashed the dark.

That wild, wicked yell broke suddenly and into one of those light flares a man came lurching, a burly man with half his face bandaged. Full in the light he swayed, then toppled face down into the dust. Bill recognized him as he fell. Rube Morlan.

A shooting scrape and a dead man in the dust were not upsetting to Fort Churchill. It was that kind of a town. It had seen its dead men before. There was a momentary period of excitement, of morbid curiosity, and then the town went on about its wild business. Bill Thurston was hardly questioned. The evidence was plain. Two men at odds had met. Both had done some shooting. Now one of them lay dead.

It was an even break, which satisfied everybody. Everybody but Bill Thurston.

He headed back toward the wagon camp, tight strung and cold inside. It was the first time he'd ever killed a man. He didn't like the feeling.

On the outer fringe of the town, ragged and murky. Off to one side Bill sensed rather than saw movement. Instantly he was faced that way, gun in hand, his command ringing harshly.

"Come out of there!"

A figure approached, small, hesitant. The stars gave just enough light for Bill to recognize her.

"You! What are you doing here?"

Kip Sharpe's answer was muffled. "My business. I—I have some rights!"

"You've no right to worry people. If I hadn't come hunting for you, that—back there—wouldn't have happened."

She whimpered a trifle. "Some things you don't understand. Nobody does—but me. I finished my work before I left. Can't I move without your permission?"

"I brought you along," growled Bill. "I feel responsible for you. What is this business of yours?"

"I can't tell you—not yet."

Bill had begun to cool down. Maybe it was the relief at finding her. "All right," he said gruffly. "Let's get back to camp."

He left her at the grub wagon, where the fire was beginning to die out. Then he sought out Si Chiles and told him about the shootout. Si clucked his tongue.

"You got the dangest knack of blunderin' into things, boy. That could have been purely personal on Morlan's part because of the goin' over you gave him at Carson. Still again, it might have been another try by Broderick to put you out of the picture. Anyhow, I was right when I told you to carry a gun."

They were up and at it while the morning stars were still bright in the eastern sky. By the first flush of day, wagon teams were harnessed and hitched into

place and wagons were rumbling up to the pole loading yards. Everyone was a little grim, realizing what lay ahead.

Fort Churchill was the outer fringe of things. From here to Salt Lake there was nothing that could be called a town or settlement by the widest stretch of imagination. Nothing was out ahead but an occasional Pony Express station.

"Keep close-bunched, boys," warned Bill. "You all got rifles. If the Goshiutes make a try at you, you know what to do. Above all, don't get separated, not even by a couple of hundred yards."

They had better luck than they thought. The day passed without incident as did the second and third. A week went by. The hauls were long and hot and dusty. They reached a point where the Silver Mountains were closer than Fort Churchill and Mike Frazier, who had set up a camp in the Silvers, had poles waiting for them there.

They strung poles up and through a low pass in the Silvers and headed out into the ever wilder country beyond. Bill Thurston's wounded side had healed. He was strong and fit again, and so took over one of the pole wagons and put Si Chiles back in the buckboard. But this arrangement lasted only a couple of days. One of the teamsters, grown a little careless, got caught by a rolling pole as it was being unloaded and had a leg broken. Bill Thurston took the injured man several miles to the north in the buckboard, flagged down a Butterfield stage slogging wearily through, and sent him back to Fort Churchill.

That left them short a teamster, so both Bill and Si had to take over a pole wagon. There was only one free person left to drive the buckboard. Kip Sharpe.

She did a good job of it and made a fine picture in the eyes of weary, lonely men as she sped the buckboard up and down the line of wagons, carrying orders and instructions to various drivers.

They left the Silvers far behind and Mike Frazier moved his pole-cutting camp up into the mountains north of the Shell Creek Pony Express station. The surveyors laid their line right past Shell Creek and went on. Bill Thurston and Si Chiles settled on the Shell Creek water as a base camp for a few days.

The station was merely a couple of rough buildings and a corral, yet it was good to see them, for they represented a certain solidity and permanence in this empty wilderness. The teamsters and the express station crew visited back and forth, swapped meager bits of gossip and information and news.

Indian threat was the most important topic. The pole wagon men heard that the express station at Egan Canyon had fought off two attacks, one by Goshiutes, the other by White Knives. The station at Victory Pass had had a really tough go, losing two men and a third wounded. There were anxious miles ahead.

The Starrs kept close to their chuckwagon, but one day Kip Sharpe slipped up to the express station and had a few words with an express rider, westbound. When she came back to the chuckwagon and the fire, she was very sober, but with a certain glint of inner excitement in her eyes.

THAT evening one of Graf Broderick's supply wagons rumbled in to the Shell Creek station. Two men rode the box of it. The driver and a lank, cold-faced man whose left shoulder drooped at a crooked angle, as though it had been broken at some time and improperly set. He wore a long, black gambler-type coat and under it, strapped low against his right leg, hung a heavy and ready gun. He came down from the station to the wagon camp, just as dusk was settling in.

"Wilkins is the name," he said, his voice as cold as his face, introducing him-

self to Bill Thurston. "Want to look over your men."

"You're looking for somebody?" countered Bill.

"I'm looking for somebody," was the chill answer.

"What's his name?" asked Bill.

"The name don't matter. I'll know him when I see him. He's out in this country somewhere and I aim to find him."

"I might ask to see your authority," Bill reminded.

"You see it," was the almost insolent reply. "Right here." Wilkins tapped the butt of his gun.

He moved away, from fire to fire, his frigid glance touching one man after another. In the end he shrugged. "No luck here. No offense intended—and forget it."

He headed back up to the station through the shadows.

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Si Chiles. "Cool customer that. And tough. I don't scare easy, but I'm glad he's not lookin' for me."

Back in the gloom beside the chuck wagon, Kip Sharpe crouched, her face white and strained.

That night Bill Thurston awoke suddenly and wondered why. Lifting on one elbow in his blankets, he searched the vast darkness with eye and ear. He saw nothing, but once he thought he heard, dying in the distance, the faint rattle of wheels. He continued to strain his eyes and ears, but when no other foreign sound reached him, put the whole thing up to fancy, dropped back into his blankets and slept again.

The next morning Bill knew it hadn't been fancy at all. For Kip Sharpe was gone and so was the buckboard and the buckboard team!

Bill Thurston's first reaction was anger. Then came anxiety, ceaseless and gnawing. He picked up the tracks of the buckboard and followed them for a way. Straight east they ran, into that bitter and

dangerous wilderness beyond the camp.

Si Chiles was first angry, then philosophical. "Ain't a thing we can do about it, boy. She's gone, and that's that. Ain't no way I know of we can ketch up with her. Even if we had a good saddle bronc, which we ain't, I doubt a man could ketch up with her now, what with the start she's got. I can't figger it. And though if I had my hands on her right now, I'd be mighty tempted to whale her good, I'm sure hop-in' she don't run foul of none of them White Knives or Goshiutes. I got to admit I was growin' right fond of the lass."

Bill didn't say what he thought. But Si had hit the nail on the head. The Indian threat. Until now, Bill had hardly realized how much it had meant to him to see Kip Sharpe, slim, agile and brown, busy about her duties in camp and along the weary miles of the far hauls. He had come to watch for her and know a strange, deep comfort in her presence.

"I'm going after her, Si," he said in sudden decision. "I'll get a saddle bronc at the express station. They got a corral full of them."

Mrs. Starr was weeping softly and Ab Starr volunteered the information that his rifle was gone from the grub wagon.

Bill gave Si no chance to argue his decision. He caught up his own weapons and hurried up to the express station. A raw-boned Scot, Angus Stuart, shook his head gloomily at Bill's story.

"Between here and Egan Canyon the country is fair crawlin' with bloodthirsty heathens, muster," he said. "The girl must have been mad. But I'll not refuse you horse and saddle."

Graf Broderick's supply wagon had gone on in the early dawn, and the stranger, Wilkins, had gone on with it. Within five miles Bill Thurston caught up with it and passed it.

This wagon could dare the Indian threat, for it carried two men, both heavily armed. Except from ambush of some

sort, the Goshiutes or White Knives would hardly dare open attack on it, for they were not of the sterner warrior stuff, like the Sioux and other tribes of the great plains beyond the Rockies. But a girl—

Bill hammered the miles down, picking up the buckboard trail and sticking to it. This was a good horse under him, a horse especially picked and trained for stamina and speed. It knew how to run and keep on running. On horseback Bill figured he was making at least twice the speed the buckboard could attain. Maybe—

Bill lost count of time. He knew horses, so he did not try to run this gallant one beyond its limit, though the urge in him was for greater and greater speed all the time. He did not ride blindly. His head swung constantly and he watched on both sides as well as ahead of him. It would be the height of folly to ride into an ambush himself.

But the country continued to lie empty and mocking and lonely. The sun, climbing higher, laid increasing heat across the world. Foam began to build up about the edges of Bill's saddle blanket. But the horse under him still ran easily and surely.

The way sloped up to a low pass, dropped down into rougher country beyond. And then Bill saw the buckboard.

It seemed he saw so many things almost simultaneously. The buckboard, swung athwart the mouth of a little gulch. One of the team was down on the ground in its harness. Yet he could see a third horse, on the up-gulch side of the buckboard. He saw something else. A gout of gunsmoke swirled past the buckboard and he heard the thin, ringing crack of a rifle.

CHAPTER SIX

Red Fire

ABRUPTLY he saw more. A movement in the sage right ahead of him, a movement that became a Goshiute brave, stocky, very dark, wild,

handling a rifle with unaccustomed clumsiness. The Indian showed surprise and consternation as he tried to scuttle out of Bill's way, realized he could not make it, so swung up his weapon.

It belched smoke and pale flame, but the lead flew wild. Then Bill was upon him, the lunging shoulder of Bill's horse crashing into the Goshiute, sending him spinning to one side. And Bill, with his Dragon Colt gun, shot him to death as he lashed by.

Strange, guttural yelps of alarm lifted from the cover to Bill's left and Bill whirled his horse that way, crashing through the sage, carried away by a wild, bitter fury. He saw more Goshiutes, dodging and running like startled rabbits, and he worked on them with the Colt gun until it clicked empty. He overtook one dodging figure and beat it to earth with a savage smash of the empty gun. Then he swung his rifle up from its place across his saddle and looked around for another target.

From behind him came a yell, exultant and reckless. Bill twisted, stared in a moment's amaze. Another rider was racing in to join him, a lean young figure in the outfit of a Pony Express rider, waving a belt gun. Bill did not understand and did not try to at this time. It was sufficient that here was help. Bill crashed on through the sage, hunting for more Goshiutes.

There were none. Doting on surprise for their own attacks, nothing threw as much consternation and dismay in the Indian heart as surprise against them. Bill's savage, deadly arrival had been all of that. The Indians were scattered and fleeing.

"Far enough, friend," called a voice at Bill's side. "If you chased 'em clear to Canada you couldn't lick 'em any worse than they are right now. Besides, they might luck a slug into you. Let's stop here."

Bill reined in, glimpsed a distant lag-

gard among the fleeing Goshiutes, snapped a shot with his rifle. His target went down, flopped for a moment, lay still.

"If they've harmed a hair on the head of Kip Sharpe," rasped Bill harshly, "I'll run 'em through the hottest pit of hell."

"They haven't," reassured the Pony Express rider. "Outside of being scared out of her wits, Kip is all right."

Bill threw his first full glance at this Pony Express rider and saw a lean, brown young fellow with reckless eyes and a ready smile.

"You know Kip?" demanded Bill.

"I ought to," was the reply. "She's my kid sister. And you could have knocked me dead with a feather when I stumbled across her holed up behind that buckboard in the gulch, doing her brave darndest to fight off that gang of Goshiutes. All the time I thought she was safe in Sacramento, on the other side of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Let's get back up there."

Kip came out from behind the buckboard to meet them, rifle in her slim hands. Tears were running down her face.

"All the time I turn sissy and b-b-bawl," she whimpered. She looked at Bill defiantly. "I know I'm going to c-catch f-fits. But I don't care. I've found Tony and n-now I can warn him about that m-man, Wilkins. Tony, Wilkins is coming up somewhere behind us, on a supply wagon. I c-came all the way from Sacramento to w-warn you."

"Wilkins!" exclaimed the express rider. "Snap Wilkins! That crooked gambler. I thought I left him dead in Sacramento. You're sure, Sis?"

"I'm sure. He didn't die. And I heard of the threats he made, how he'd follow you to the ends of the earth and k-kill you. I knew he'd pick up your trail, sooner or later. So I set out to warn you. I met Mr. Waddell in Hangtown and he told me you were riding the express between Egan Canyon and the Poison Flat station out in

the Utah Territory I had to warn you."

"That's right," nodded Tony Sharpe. "That's my route. But when I hit Egan Canyon this morning my relief was down sick, out of his head with some kind of fever. So it was up to me to come on through to Shell Creek. And thankful I am, too, for I met up with you when you sort of needed a man around. Sis, you wouldn't be a Sharpe if you hadn't taken all these wild chances to help out your brother, but there'll be no more of it, understand? You stick to places of safety."

"I'll see to that," growled Bill. "From now on I'll see to that."

"But, Tony," quavered the girl. "What about Wilkins?"

Tony Sharpe's lips thinned. "We'll worry about Wilkins when the time comes. I beat him to the draw once. I can do it again if I have to. Right now, I got to get this mail through." He slapped the leather *mochilla* under him, then looked at Bill Thurston. "Your word that you'll look after Kip, friend?"

"My word, if you need it," nodded Bill. "We'll be seeing you a little later at Shell Creek."

Tony Sharpe leaned from his saddle, kissed his sister. "When I meet that freight wagon you speak of, I'll swing wide enough so Wilkins won't recognize me as I pass," he promised. "When we get together at Shell Creek we'll figure out some answer for him."

He waved a hand, set the spurs and raced away into the west. Kip stared after him, twisting her slim hands.

Bill got out of his saddle, examined the down horse of the buckboard team. It was dead, killed by a heavy rifle slug.

"The—the Indians killed it, just before you came," volunteered Kip Sharpe timidly. "W-what are you going to do?"

"Get the harness off it and hitch this horse I've ridden in its place," said Bill. He tried to speak harshly, but his tone was milder than he thought.

It was quite a chore, getting the harness off the dead animal, harnessing the express pony and maneuvering the buckboard around. Before they were ready to go, the Broderick freight wagon came lumbering in out of the west. In his long, dark coat and twisted shoulder, Snap Wilkins made Bill Thurston think of a vulture, perched up there beside the driver.

The freight wagon rumbled closer. Bill Thurston had things about ready to roll. Now, back there where the freight wagon loomed, a rifle spat from a thick clump of sage. Bill whirled at the sound, just in time to see Snap Wilkins rear fully erect on the wagon, then topple headlong and heavily to the ground. The driver of the wagon set his brake and began smashing furious lead into that clump of sage. Bill Thurston, gun ready, ran out that way.

He came in on the stage clump cautiously, found everything still. He also found a Goshiute brave crumpled over a rifle. The teamster came hurrying over, yelling, "Did I get him?"

Bill nodded. "We just had a brush with quite a bunch of Goshiutes here. This one must have been wounded and was hiding in this sage clump. When you came along he tried one last shot."

"He made it good," blurted the teamster. "He got that feller Wilkins dead center. Now I got a dead man to haul into Egan Canyon. This country's gettin' tough, mister."

Bill picked up the rifle the Indian had used. It was new and bright. "I think," said Bill thoughtfully, "I'll keep this to remind me of this ruckus."

He went back to the buckboard and told a white-faced Kip Sharpe, "We'll be rolling, now. And if you ever run away from me again on any excuse, then I will get rough."

"Wilkins," murmured the girl. "I saw him fall."

"He's dead," said Bill quietly. "Now you and your brother can forget him."

BACK to Shell Creek rolled the buckboard. Bill had a little trouble with the express pony at this unfamiliar job at first. But the animal was intelligent and soon it was jogging along as though it had been pulling a buckboard all its life.

Kip Sharpe was a small, quiet figure beside Bill Thurston. Not a word did she say all the way to Shell Creek. Then, when they pulled into camp, she finally spoke.

"You'll go up to the station and tell Tony about Wilkins, please?"

"I'll tell him," nodded Bill.

Kip Sharpe slipped from the buckboard and ran into Mrs. Starr's arms. Bill Thurston left a curious Si Chiles sputtering with a terse statement.

"Tell you all about it later, Si. Just one thing to remember. The girl's all right, a little thoroughbred."

When Bill went up to the Pony Express station there was a spring wagon and team standing out front, and Tony Sharpe was there, talking to a big, bearded man with flashing blue eyes.

"I think your sister would like to see you, Sharpe," said Bill. "And you can forget about Wilkins." He went on to tell of Wilkins' death.

Tony Sharpe drew a deep breath. "Bless that one Goshiute, anyhow. He sure took a load off our shoulders. Our first ruckus came when he tried to crook me in a card game. He was a good hater, Wilkins was. Say, I didn't get your name, friend. Anyhow, meet Mr. Russell. He's one of the big bosses of this outfit."

"Thurston's the name," said Bill, shaking hands with the bearded man. "Glad to know you, sir. I'm one of the crowd hauling pole for the telegraph line that'll put you people out of business."

Russell smiled grimly. "Part of the game," he said. "We've no complaint."

Tony Sharpe hurried away toward the pole wagon camp. Bill lifted the rifle he was carrying. "This is the rifle the Goshi-

ute killed Wilkins with, Mr. Russell. Now I know that Graf Broderick supplies your stations with a great deal of material. Are rifles included in that supply?"

Russell frowned. "No. Another outfitter supplies all the weapons for our riders and station crew. Why do you ask?"

"Back at Carson, the night before we left, I had reason to be in Broderick's office. I glimpsed an item on an invoice. It read, 'five cases of rifles.' I'm wondering if this is one of those rifles?"

Russell looked very stern. "That's a serious implication, Thurston."

"I know it is," nodded Bill. "But I think I know Broderick better than most." He went on to tell of all the incidents calculated to slow up and delay telegraph pole delivery. He told of the sawed brake beam on his own wagon.

"All that couldn't have been just coincidence," Bill ended. "Look at it this way. Broderick has had a rich business, supplying your stations. But that business is done the day you quit operating, which will be the day the first message clicks over the telegraph wire. It would be to Broderick's interest to delay that day as long as possible."

Russell pinched a pursed lower lip with thumb and forefinger. "You draw a devilish picture, Thurston," he growled. "But it ties in—it ties in."

"Ties in with what?" asked Bill.

"The sudden upsurge of Indian trouble between here and Egan Canyon, plus the fact that my men report that the Goshiutes in particular seem to have acquired guns from somewhere, instead of the bows and arrows they used before. Plus the fact that, until that incident today which you told of, there's been no record of a Broderick freight wagon being bothered by the Indians."

"That was one of those things, Mr. Russell," declared Bill. "Here was a Goshiute, wounded and dying from a brush with white men. A wagon comes

along, carrying two more white men. As a final act of revenge the Goshiute gets off one more shot."

Russell nodded. "The more I think about it, what would Broderick be doing with five cases of rifles? He doesn't run a general supply establishment, his business is virtually entirely with us. We didn't get the guns. Who did?"

"I've been wondering about that, Mr. Russell—until today," said Bill.

The flash in Russell's eyes deepened. "Let me have that gun. I'll take it back to Carson with me. It's numbered. I'll have our people trace it back to the manufacturer if necessary. And if we find it was delivered to Broderick, I'll run him off the face of the earth!"

Once more it was evening. Tony Sharpe had long since headed back for Egan Canyon and Poison Flat with the express. Kip Sharpe was a small and sober figure, crouched by the dwindling cooking fire. Supper was over, chores cleaned up. In the morning the pole wagons of Thurston & Chiles would be rolling down the miles again. Mrs. Starr had drafted the help of her husband, the two of them carrying armfuls of freshly baked bread up to a thankful welcome at the Pony Express station on the knoll. Si Chiles was over at the teamster's fire, talking over the next day's work with the men. Kip Sharpe did not stir when she heard Bill Thurston's step coming up behind her.

"Mr. Russell of the express outfit is heading back for Carson in the morning with his spring wagon," said Bill. "I think it would be a good idea if you went with him."

Kip did not answer, so Bill went on. "We've been lucky so far. But starting tomorrow we're moving into country where we're bound to run up against Indian attack. I'd feel better if I knew you were safe in Carson."

A couple of tears trickled forlornly down her cheeks. Her voice was muffled.

"Now you're a big oaf again, pushing people around. I—I'm sorry I stole your buckboard and went on ahead, but it was something I had to do. You know that now. Haven't I earned my way—done my share of the work?"

"You'll have little chance of seeing your brother much until this job is done," argued Bill. "You could wait for him at Carson."

"I don't want to go back to Carson," she wailed. "I want to be out here."

Bill was nonplussed. He didn't know how to handle this. He dropped down beside her, took one small hand in both of his. "I'm not mad about the buckboard, Kip. I understand everything now. But I'll worry about you. Yes, you have done your share of the work. You've earned wages, and I'll see that you get them, and there'll be enough to keep you comfortably at Carson until Tony's job is through and he can join you there. Let's be reasonable about this."

"W-what's reason got to do with it?"

Of a sudden that auburn head of hers was burrowed against Bill's shoulder.

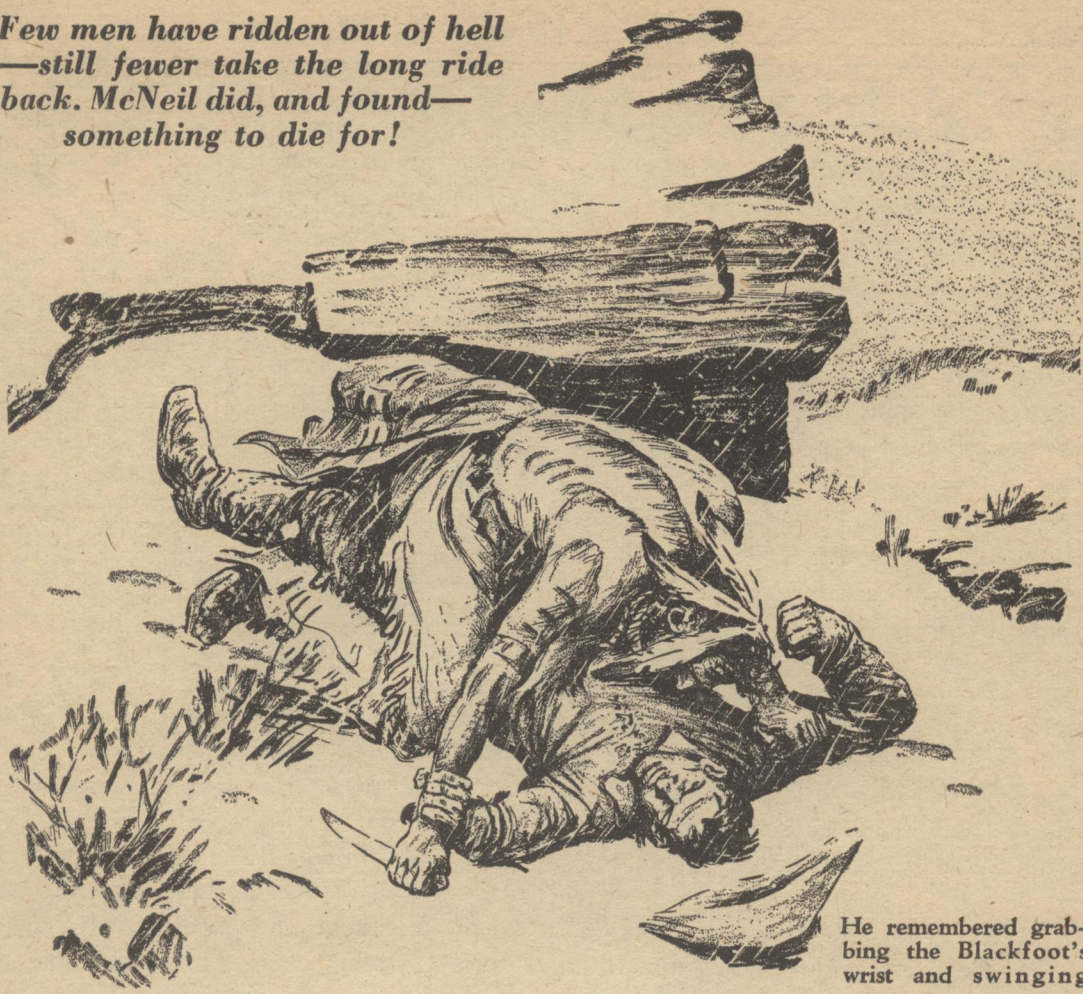
In time they drew a little apart, staring at each other. Magically her tears were gone and she was smiling up at him, impishly. "At last," she murmured. "At last the big oaf understands why all I care about in the world is right out here in this country, why it is here I'm going to stay. Well, Mister Bill Thurston, aren't you going to say nice things to me?"

Bill did his best. He was a trifle incoherent at first, but evidently what he said was entirely satisfactory and convincing. She snuggled deeper into his arms.

The dusk deepened. Out to the east, night was rushing down across long and dangerous miles, miles they would have to travel, but together. Graf Broderick—who was Graf Broderick? Russell would take care of Mister Graf Broderick.

The first stars came out, and never had they seemed so bright.

*Few men have ridden out of hell
—still fewer take the long ride
back. McNeil did, and found—
something to die for!*



He remembered grabbing the Blackfoot's wrist and swinging up. . . .

WHITE HELL- BRIGHT GLORY

By COSTA CAROUSO

HE LAY sprawled on the reddened snow, staring through the stinging flakes at the gathering dusk, and he thought, *In less than an hour it will be dark. There's still hope they won't find me.*

He had tracked the wounded antelope into the pass at noon, and shortly after the wan sun had faded into the sullen sky and the first sharp flakes had come spitting down the wind. Alerted by the roll-

ing echoes of his shot, the Blackfoot scout had crept behind him and aimed carefully. There'd been no warning. There had been only the smashing impact against his hip, powerful as a steel-shod hoof, and the frozen ground rising drunkenly to meet him.

He remembered the Blackfoot's face, contorted with savage triumph, and the gleaming blade striking downward at his throat. He remembered his hand clamp-

ing on the Blackfoot's wrist, and then the sound of thudding fists, wracked tendons, and tortured breathing, the smell of sweat and blood and fear. The rest was blurred by the red haze of agony.

He'd wavered between consciousness and oblivion since he killed the Blackfoot, wasting his failing strength in the vain effort to drag his shattered body forward, and to find some core of meaning in his living and his dying.

He closed his eyes with weariness, and when he opened them again the sky was suddenly darker, and he thought, *that isn't night you're looking at, McNeil; that's death.* His flesh no longer cringed from the biting cold. Long ago numbness had set in, and then a tingling warmth and a drowsiness that he could not fight away. For a moment, before he sank into the blackness, the dim images of the past flashed before his eyes with a sharp and pitiless clarity. . . .

SHANE McNEIL saw the captain of the wagon train walking toward him across the compound, and he lowered his burden of brushwood to the sandy ground to await the older man's approach, displeasure tightening his wide mouth and etching deep furrows between his brows.

Zebulon Modine stopped before him, measuring the tallness of his rangy frame and the width of his shoulders, and noting the restless, driven quality in his eyes and the rebellious set of his lips. "Son," he said quietly, his voice startlingly soft for a man of his huge size, "my daughter tells me you are not planning to settle and claim land."

"She spoke the truth," McNeil answered. "I'm not."

Modine's eyebrows lifted. "It's none of my business, of course, but what are you planning?"

"It isn't," agreed McNeil. He bent and lifted the load of brushwood, then

strode away toward the cooking fires.

"Just a minute—" The wagon captain placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder, and Shane McNeil turned, eyes narrowed.

"Your daughter claimed my promise bound me to stay with the settlers. 'You aim trying to hold me?'"

Modine shook his head. "Your promise bound you to help with the work of the wagon train, and to share in its defense. It said nothing about after we arrived. I have no intention of forcing you to stay."

"You couldn't," McNeil stated. "No one could."

"But I'd still like to persuade you," Modine went on, ignoring the belligerent words. "The community will need every man's strength to survive and grow."

"I have no interest in your community," McNeil said. "I'm moving on."

"On? On where?"

"Anywhere!" snapped the younger man, impatient now. "Anywhere away from the stink of people's greed, and the filth of their towns and cities!"

"Greed didn't bring these people here," Modine murmured.

"Maybe not," McNeil retorted. "But it'll sure as hell show later. And I want no part of it." Without waiting for a reply, he shifted his load brusquely and walked toward the cookfire.

When the evening meal was finished, McNeil didn't stay to take part in the hymn-singing. He crossed the compound, stepped over a wagon tongue and walked slowly into the prairie dusk, savoring the pungent scent of sage and the sweet smell of warm grass that wafted up as his boots crushed it.

He filled his pipe from his meager supply of tobacco and lighted it, staring westward at the distant, snow-capped peaks, trying to capture the usual thrill of anticipation, which he somehow couldn't feel tonight. The clear, ringing voices of

the women came to him above the deeper tones of the men, and McNeil found himself trying to single out Melissa Modine's voice. Impatiently he sought to turn his attention away, but the flickering shadow of the fire kept teasing at the corners of his eyes, and for the first time there was no friendliness in the brooding darkness of the prairie. The warmth and light of the fire pulled him as strongly as his need for solitude.

"What are you afraid of, Shane?"

McNeil wheeled, startled by her voice. For a moment he was speechless.

"What are you running away from?" Melissa's wide gray eyes were luminous, and McNeil noticed that she was very pale.

"Afraid?" he laughed shortly. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"You—you seem to mistrust people," Melissa said hesitantly. "People who want to be your friends."

For a moment McNeil felt the need to unburden himself—to tell her of the father whose will and body had broken when his partner swindled him of his last penny. Of the widowed, invalid mother he had struggled to provide for since he was twelve. And of the merciful release of death, and his own liberation. But he said none of these things. A man didn't show the scars of his wounds to others. Instead he said, "Where there are many people there is always evil. If there is anything good to be found in life, a man must find it alone."

McNeil slipped out of camp in the gray stillness of dawn with only a brief nod of the sleepy, red-eyed sentry. A dog followed him a few hundred paces into the prairie, but when McNeil took no notice of it, it turned and bounded back to camp.

The pack on McNeil's back was heavy, but an eagerness welled inside him each time he lifted his glance to the purple hills, and his steps were quick and light over the dew-wet grass.

He felled timber and he built his cabin. He planted his corn and he hunted and fished. At night he reloaded cartridges, melted and molded the flattened slugs he had dug out of the game he'd killed. He went to bed early and slept with satisfaction. He had faced the wilderness alone and learned its harsh lessons. He had survived.

Sometimes, when the air was clear, he could look across the faded autumnal land and see the distant haze of smoke from the fires of Modine's settlement. *Let them huddle together*, he thought scornfully. He was free, and no price was too great to pay for freedom. Not even loneliness, not even Melissa.

IT WAS the imagined touch of Melissa's hand on his forehead that shocked McNeil out of his delirium and back to consciousness. He remembered instantly where he was, relived the nightmare that had happened, and breathed a prayer of thankfulness that the warrior he'd killed had not been found and no avenging party of braves was searching him.

He struggled to his feet, took one step, and then his right leg folded under him as though it were made of cloth and he pitched into the snow. He lay still for a moment, gritting his teeth against the pain, then began crawling forward. He wasn't more than a mile from his cabin; even if it took him half the night, he knew he could make it.

The strain on his left leg and arms was terrific and every few moments he had to pause and gasp for breath. After a few moments he would drag himself forward again, but each time with an increasing reluctance. He felt a strange desire to cease all effort; to sleep and let the white blanket of snow cover him. It was a long time before McNeil realized that the questions which had clamored for an answer till he lost consciousness were still un-

answered, and were fettering his movements, holding him back.

He knew that if the Blackfoot's slug had gone three inches to the left, his spine would be broken and he'd be dead now. He knew that if the wind which was guiding him back to the cabin suddenly veered, if he misjudged the snowcovered terrain, he'd wander aimlessly all night and be dead by morning. And no one in this world would be any richer for his having lived in it, and no one would be any poorer for his having died.

His lips twisted bitterly. *It's the kind of life you wanted*, McNeil told himself. *You're luckier than most. Not everybody gets what he wants.* He reached his arms out and pulled himself forward, reaching out and pulling forward again.

His first shocked thought, when he reached the hill's crest and stared down at the red glow where his cabin had been, was that without shelter he wouldn't survive the night. He lay face downward looking across the blizzard-lashed land and gradually the emptiness, the desolation closed in on him, making him painfully aware of his insignificance, his helplessness. He could struggle on, find shelter perhaps. But it would be wasted effort, he knew. As soon as he stopped moving the cold would finish him.

His second thought brought a gasp to his cracked and bleeding lips. When the storm ended the Blackfeet would see the smoke-haze over Modine's settlement, and the sky for miles would be blackened with the smoke of its burning. He'd never seen the results of an Indian raid, but he had heard enough to imagine them. He shut his eyes to blot out the grisly picture, but it was still there, behind his eyes.

He began to curse aloud, with a slow and deadly fury. He cursed the Blackfoot who had smashed his hip, he cursed himself for not watching his backtrail. But most of all he cursed because he would not be standing beside Melissa when the

first painted redskin rode screaming toward the stockade.

After a while his fury subsided and he began thinking with a semblance of reason. *If I could only use my legs!* he thought. *If I only had a horse!* Somewhere to the south lay Fort Phil Kearney. It wasn't more than thirty miles to his knowledge, and with a horse under him, he was sure he'd find it. And then the thought came to him: *The Blackfeet have horses!*

From the crest of the hill he searched the horizon in all directions. The wind lashed at his upraised face, tore the breath from his mouth, brought stinging, blinding tears to his eyes. But he saw nothing. He dragged himself painfully down the slope, then worked his way up to the next crest and searched the valley. Nothing.

Again he crawled down the wind-buffed slope, and again he clawed himself up to the hilltop. When he reached it he could barely raise his head to look around him. He probed the darkness before him carefully, saw nothing. He swiveled on his left elbow to search the rest of the horizon, and then he saw what he had feared he would never see—the wavering points of light that marked the redskins' camp. With a moan of thankfulness he reached out his hands and clawed himself toward it.

When he approached the camp, he warned himself to caution. A hundred lives depended on his success, a hundred would lie dead tomorrow if he failed. He wouldn't fail, he promised himself. For the first time his life had significance. He was no longer free, and he was no longer alone. A hot exaltation gripped him.

The Blackfeet lay close to their fires, wrapped in buffalo robes already mounded over with a thick blanket of snow. McNeil didn't stop to estimate how many warriors were in the party. He inched slowly toward the tethered ponies, hoping his grotesque, wavering shadow wouldn't startle them before he was close enough.

McNeil grasped a horsehair halter rope with a swift movement and yanked it from the ground, then put his full weight on it and pulled himself erect. The pony snorted with fear, heaved its neck violently, but McNeil's fingers were already locked in its mane, and as the pony wheeled and bolted into the night, dragging him along, he fought his way painfully onto its back.

A yell sounded behind him and a rifle crashed out, then another and another. A moment later the sound of hoofs came to him above the moaning of the wind. He bent lower against his mount's neck, coaxing it faster with his voice and his hand.

Each lunging stride the pony took sent agony through McNeil's body. He felt a wetness against his flesh, and he didn't know if the bullet wound and the knife slashes had opened again, or if it was the sweat of pain. He stopped finally, listened carefully. There was no sound except the moaning of the wind and the hissing of the flakes against his pony's steaming flanks. Fort Kearney was to the south somewhere, but which way was south?

I'll have to be by guess, he told himself as he urged his pony on.

As he rode the fury of the wind increased. It pierced through his clothes and battered his flesh until it became numb. His hands were utterly without feeling, but his face ached as though it had been lashed with a rawhide whip. He could no longer tell from where the wind struck him. It seemed to hit him from everywhere. It seemed that it was inside his skull, moaning like a sick dog. He let the pony turn away from the wind, praying he could stay on its back, praying that when dawn came he would still be alive.

It was a nightmare of pain, a nightmare without end. Nothing changed. The pace of the pony was always the same. The shriek of the blizzard was the same.

The darkness was always the same.

GRADUALLY the blackness faded and the sky became a dullish gray. The screaming of the wind grew quiet and a ghostly silence fell. McNeil brought the pony to a halt, cold despair spreading inside him. With the stopping of the wind, the snow fell lazily in great soft flakes. It was impossible to see more than twenty yards.

He rode in zig-zags, then in wide, sweeping curves in both directions. Every fifty yards he came to a halt and shouted, listened for an answer. There was no sound in the vast frozen wilderness except his pony's labored breathing. It was as though the world were empty of all human life; as though he were the last survivor. Yet he knew that far to the north the Blackfeet were shaking the snow from their buffalo robes, checking their rifles and moving toward their shivering ponies; knew that somewhere nearby the men of Fort Kearney were snoring peacefully in their bunks, calmly assured of the vigilance of the sentries. The thought came to him that he could pass within yards of the fort without seeing it, and his shouts became louder, edged with a sharp note of desperation that was close to madness.

He heard a dull *boom*, vague and remote as a bell tolling beneath the sea, and he brought his mount to an instant halt.

It was the sunrise gun! he thought bitterly. *It was a cannon at Fort Kearney, and I don't know from which way the sound came!* He screamed then, screamed again and again, till his voice broke to a meaningless whimper. And then he heard it—the sweetest sound that he had ever heard—the stirring bugle notes of reveille! He was sobbing with joy as he kicked the pony forward. . . .

The sentry took one look at his blood-crusted clothes and wildly haggard face and dropped his carbine from its challeng-

ing position, ran forward and caught him in his arms as he toppled to the ground.

"Good Lord, man!" he gasped, leading him to the guardhouse. "Lie here while I fetch you some whiskey."

"Sound the alarm," McNeil said weakly. "Blackfeet . . . Modine's settlement."

The troopers were ready to ride in less than twenty minutes. Captain Horn looked at McNeil carefully, then shook his head. "I can't let you go," he said. "It's against common sense. You couldn't stay in the saddle."

McNeil thought desperately, wondering how he could persuade this tight-lipped, hard-eyed fighter to let him follow the troopers, when he himself could barely understand the force that drove him.

"There's a girl," he told the captain, his voice strong, though he felt his cheeks burning. "I've got to go to her. You can tie me on the saddle if you want, if you're afraid I'll slow you down, but you've no right to stop me."

Captain Horn considered. "I guess you're right," he said at last. "It's your life. I guess you can do whatever you want with it."

McNeil watched him raise his hand in a signal to the bugler, heard the bugle notes thrill into the quiet air. A trooper helped him into his saddle, and he thought, *Any man can do whatever he wants with his life. Use it or waste it.*

He was never to remember clearly the details of that dash across the white-blanketed prairie. There was the bitter cold and the pain; there was the anxiousness and the fear. There was the dizziness and the nausea that swept over him like waves of fog, and then there was the crashing of rifle fire.

He saw the red flames licking through the black pall of smoke, he saw the painted redskins wheel in fury and charge the troopers with lowered lances. He heard the shouted curses and the dull thud of bullets striking flesh. Then there was

nothing before him but the contorted face, grimacing triumphantly, the upraised arm, and the sweeping curve of the tomahawk. McNeil lifted one arm protectively over his head, yanked on the reins with all the strength of the other. There was a crashing impact as his mount wheeled and he felt himself plucked from the saddle as though by a giant hand, and thrown brutally against the frozen ground. Then there was nothing at all. . . .

IT WAS the sound of footsteps that wakened him. The bed he was lying in was warm and soft, and he tried to drift back to sleep again.

"Don't you think two day's sleep is enough?" a woman's voice asked.

McNeil turned slowly, looked into the luminous eyes of Melissa Modine. "The Indians—" he began.

"They scattered. Captain Horn says he doubts the survivors will ever think of coming back." She approached the bed, sat carefully on the edge.

McNeil tried to speak, failed, and the silence deepened. "Melissa—" he blurted. "Yes?"

"Melissa, I guess you were right that night when you said I was running away from people who wanted to be my friends. I think maybe it was because I knew I had nothing to give in return. But now—I've done a lot of thinking, and if your father would still take me into the settlement, I—"

"It's cruel of me to make you go on talking, when it's so difficult for you, Shane," she said. "I know exactly why you came back. You were considerably more talkative all the time while you were delirious, and not a bit hesitant. I wonder if you meant all those things."

"What things?" McNeil asked, puzzled for a moment. Melissa didn't answer, but she reddened slightly, and McNeil smiled. "Never mind," he said. "If you'll help me, I can figure them out."

THE GUNS SPEAK LAST

(Continued from page 77)

me. No. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but it wasn't I who shot you."

Ames started to turn to face the bar and Ferrel spun him around again. "Then how did you know about the grave? How did you know I'd been buried? I haven't told anyone that. Not even my own boys."

Molly's voice was barely audible. "No wonder Raoul told me you wouldn't be back, possibly for several weeks, that I might as well return to St. Louis and file for my divorce there. No wonder he asked me to describe you. No wonder he had me ask Pete Darney what color horse you were riding. He didn't mean for you to come back. He wasn't in love with me. He was in love with your money."

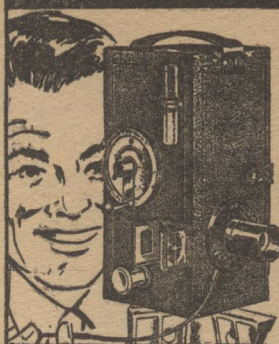
Without touching Ames, Ferrel said, "Turn and face it, son. Anything that is worth having is worth fighting for. Worth dying for."

His back to Ferrel, Ames continued to cling to the bar. Jake Eichnar spun him around. "A man is talking to you. Und I mean a man. Glad would I be to see Bob Ferrel dead. It would be in mine wagons more freight und in mine pockets more money." The big Dutchman spat his contempt. "But better I should play a piccolo in the Bird Cage as I should spidt on any man vould steal another man's wife, shoody at him from ambush, und den expect to marry his widow und make a profit on the deal!"

Standing with his legs spread slightly and his white Stetson pushed to the back of his head, Ferrel said quietly, "This is it, Ames. If you're a man, go for your gun."

Great beads of sweat stood out on Ames' cheeks and forehead. He lifted his thumb from his gunbelt, then, hastily, hooked it back again. His eyes agonized, he searched the impassive faces of the men leaning with their elbows on the bar. He could expect no help from them. "I

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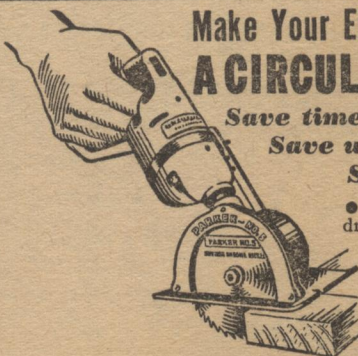
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

—can't," he admitted finally. "I don't want to die. I'm afraid."

Ferrel removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Then, reaching out, he slipped Ames' gun from its holster, dropped it to the floor and jerked his thumb at the door. "The stage connecting with the cars heading east should be about ready to leave. See that you're on it, Colonel."

Moving one foot ahead of the other with an obvious effort, like a man moving in a dream, Ames walked the length of the bar. Ferrel stopped him in the doorway.

"But before you go, you'd better un-butter your bread. Tell Molly you lied about me."

Ames swallowed hard. "I—lied," he told the girl, and left the bar.

Wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her dress but holding her chin high, Molly turned to follow. Ferrel threw out a big arm like a big dragline and drew her back to him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Averting her eyes, she admitted, "I—don't know. Does it matter?"

"Yes," Ferrel said. "To me. I've a cabin I want you to look at. And I think you'll like this one, Molly. It has a piano. And a whatnot. And white curtains in the window. And—"

Molly stopped his lips with her fingers. "It doesn't matter. I'll love it. I've been a fool. Such a fool." Her slim shoulders shaking, she buried her face on his chest.

Jake Eichnar swung his belly to the bar and motioned the others to do the same. "Drink!" he bellowed. "Drink!" He cocked a big finger at the far corner of the bar and a piano tinkled through the smoke. "Und dot's right, professor. Make music." The big freighting contractor looked in the back bar mirror and grinned at what he saw there. "What's the trouble? Didn't any of you gentlemen ever see a man kiss his wife before?"

RECORD RODEO

(Continued from page 99)

one's heartstrings, as the country balladeer tells all about the little kid with the smudges on his face. The backing is just down Eddy's lane, a real love ballad.

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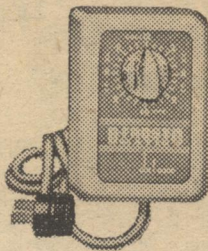
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 105)

"You're too smart for me," Jute told him grimly.

"Oui," the Pawnee agreed. "Now—you go."

THIS hanging at the Fern Hill Agency was a small thing on a wild and turbulent frontier where life and death stood so close together. Last minute things went wrong, and the crowd could laugh. Ordinary conversation filled in the waiting. Some of it drifted at Jute Doley where he stood and held his patience.

"—Shot his horse and stabbed him with that knife—"

"—Them Tonkawa skinkners don't say much, but they always know what's goin' on."

Bits of gossip and fact that had come out on the trail, some tossed contemptuously aside as too incredible to believe, others picked and raveled until a man could hardly see what they were.

Even at this late date Jute was honest enough with himself to admit he could have saved Frenchy's life, but a man got lost in his thinking at a time like that, and the Pawnee renegade had known it.

The tension suddenly grew, because all the mistakes had been made and corrected, and there was nothing more left to do. In the brief moment that was left, Jute and Stone-Walks-Downhill faced each other for the last time. There was fire in the Pawnee's look, bold fire and blunt hate, and the old arrogance and vanity, and the same honest passion that had stirred him so in the willows by the creek. But sly mirth overlaid it all, and Jute finally had reason to understand that too, because the vantage point on which he stood suddenly dropped out from under him, and became a trap through which Jute Doley went to his death for the murder of his partner, Frenchy La Ramie.

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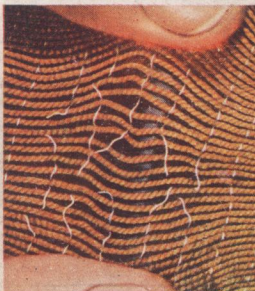
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