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NEXT ISSUE OUT JULY 3rd!

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 24, No. 2



JULY, 1951

Two Big Novels

1. **SHOOT, CRAWL—OR DIE!**.....*Steve Frazee* 16
"You can turn brother against brother, friend against friend—but preacher, don't turn yellow!"
2. **WESTWARD THE FREEDOM**.....*William R. Cox* 88
A giant from over the seas—a terror-on-wheels riding Westward—was John Grant!
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Smashing Western Fiction

3. **WRONG WAY GRAVE**.....*George C. Appell* 34
The King had one last chore: to find the men whose ghostly guns were barring him—from his grave!
4. **ENOUGH ROPE**.....*Bob Obets* 45
There's two ends to a gun and two ends to a rope—and Judge Bell had the wrong end of both!
5. **CROSS-RIPPED!**.....*Kenneth Fowler* 53
All his life he traded bullets for bread—but in Sunset Wells, the prices were higher!
6. **FOR SALE—ONE BULLET**.....*Wallace Umphrey* 61
The dream he'd buried years ago haunted Luke Apkey again—through the smoking sixes of his brother!
7. **DRIFTER—DRAW OR DRAG!**.....*Gene Austin* 67
"There's two ways out of town, stranger—drift or die!"
8. **TRIGGER SIZE**.....*Lance Kermit* 71
The badman's gun and the marshal's heart had one thing in common—they took the same size bullet!
9. **MAN FOR HELL**.....*W. Edmunds Claussen* 79
"Welcome to Trail's end, mister, where a grave comes easy—but livin' comes hard!"

Departments and Features

10. **ON THE TRAIL**.....Boothill gold mine.....*The Editors* 6
11. **DEATH TRAILS CALLING**.....Twice scalped.....*M. Kane* 14
12. **CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ**.....Belly up.....*Hallack McCord* 33
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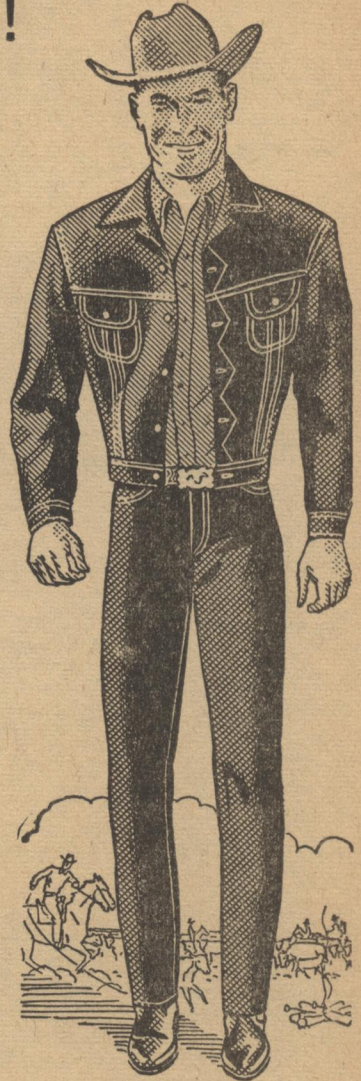
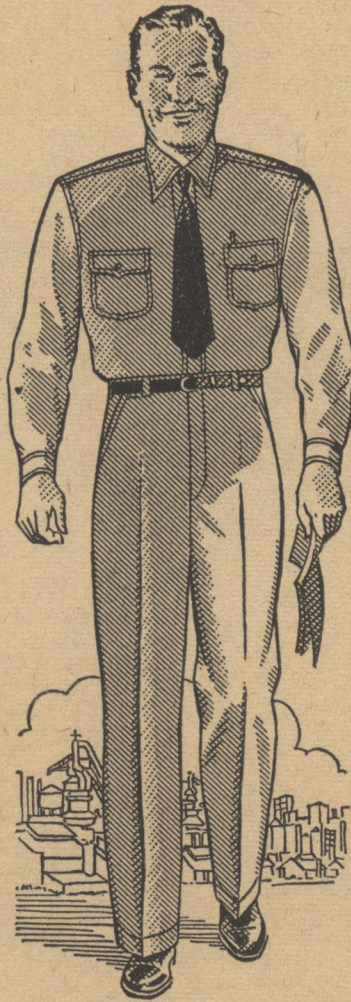
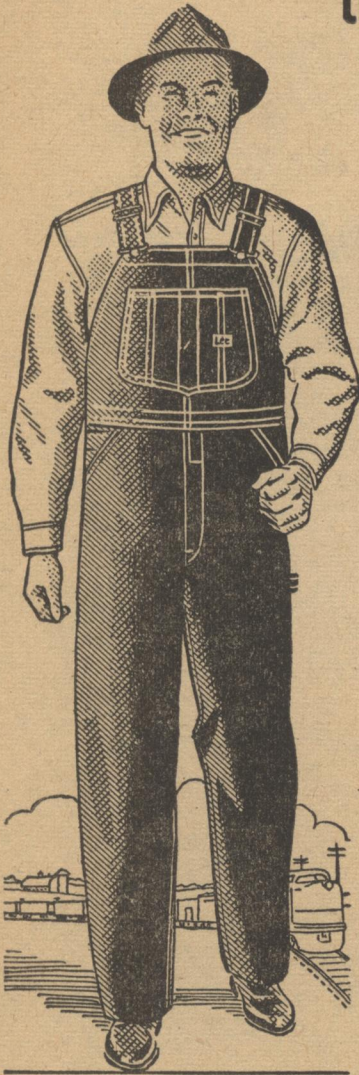
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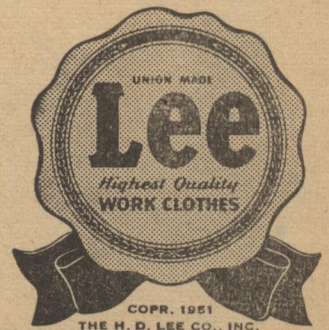
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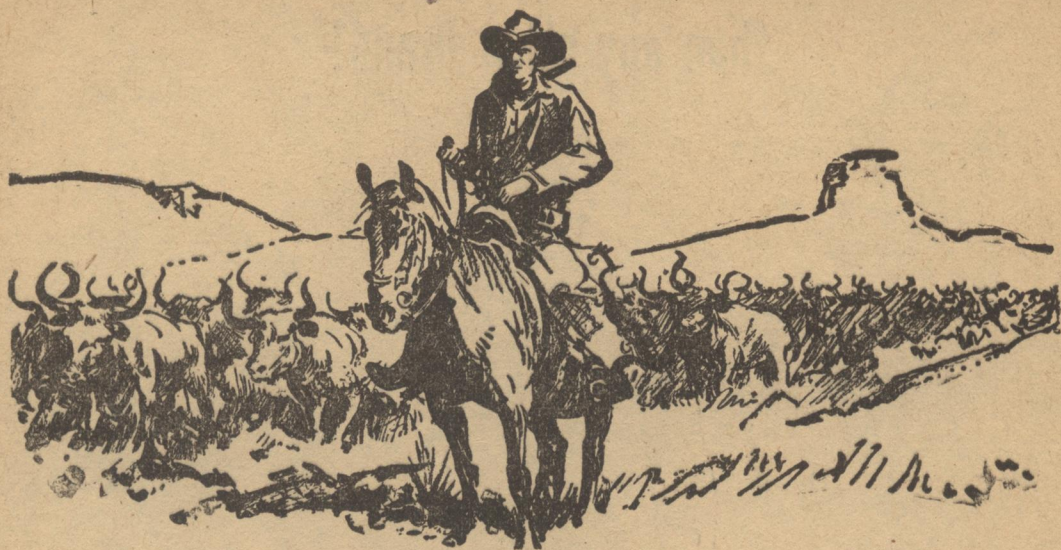
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● ON THE TRAIL ●



HOWDY, GENTS. It's time for the big palaver again, so light down, pull up an old fence-rail, and we'll swap tales of the Old West. We have another Frazee yarn for you, *Shoot, Crawl—or Die!* which is everything the title promises, and a ghostly tale of bullet vengeance by George C. Appell called *Wrong Way Grave*, that'll stand your hair on end.

But first, let's hear from you on your favorite subject . . . the building of the great West.

Dear Editor:

A man who's proud of his brand should be proud of it anywhere.

In Nevada, long ago, men from every range were welcomed by one of the gaudiest sights ever seen in that mountainous state. A friendly entertainer, seeing what store the cowmen set by their brands, ordered a dress from Chicago, with every brand in the West embroidered on it in gold braid. The outfit, made of black satin, and with its multiple heraldry hand-worked down to the last faithful curlicue, is said to have cost four hundred dollars.

Yours truly,
Karl Budd
Ojo Caliente, New Mex.

Here's a story with a sad ending, but a mighty happy beginning and middle.

Dear Sir:

I am a regular reader of your magazine, and have no complaints to make about the quality of your stories. Instead, I'd like to pass on one of my own.

She didn't say where she'd come from, and nobody asked. She came into Prescott, giving

the name of Lida Winchell, and she opened a saloon. She served the best liquor, she claimed, west of the Mississippi. Maybe it was true. Gamblers, miners, and cowboys forgot other places, but they remembered Lida's Place. She understood advertising, before the word had common usage. Other saloon-keepers were content to bank their gold or spend it—Lida converted it into diamonds, the bigger and showier the better. She didn't hide them. She wore them, anywhere, morning, noon or night, half a million dollars worth, flashing all over her, on the board-walk streets of Prescott.

Some said she had acquired this stone or that, from the stickpin of a murdered man. Diamond Lida, as she came to be known, didn't care what Prescott said. Some day, she would move on again. She would find a brighter spot, serve better liquor, wear bigger diamonds—somewhere vaguely further west.

And in the meantime, up and down the trails, she enjoyed that showier thing than diamonds—publicity. It was good for business.

Prescott left Diamond Lida, before Lida left Prescott. The town changed from a wide open dot on the plains, to a respectable city. Lida's Place, like hundreds of less famous but similar places, was simply outgrown in the change. When she looked out, toward the horizon, Lida could see no more frontier—and when she looked within, there was only old age. But she still had her diamonds.

Her fame died out with the generations. The little old lady in the ragged black shawl, selling pencils on Prescott's street-corners, no longer like even the derelict end of anyone's westerling dream. But Lida's dream was still an unspent force when she died.

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

Among the other debris in her tumbledown shack, city authorities discovered half a million dollars worth of diamonds, and carefully kept ledgers, giving the value and purchase date of each. Word leaked out somehow that another half million dollars' worth, accounted for in the ledgers, had not turned up in the shack.

The rush to Lida's Place started all over again. Men with pickaxes and shovels retraced every inch of real estate in which she ever had been involved. They dug up the foundations of her old saloon, they ploughed the land around the miserable shack she had died in. Claims were actually staked wherever Diamond Lida's magic steps had trod.

None of her lost fortune ever was found. But old-timers, remembering, suspect it may have financed some vicarious frontiers—that Lida, when she suspected she would never find that better and more westerly place herself, may have sent someone younger instead, with a fortune in diamonds for grub-stake.

Sincerely yours,
Peter Forrester
Los Angeles, Calif.

Here's a letter from a pal in Casper, Wyoming, who wants to pass on a compliment or two. We're willin'.

Dear Editor:

I am a man whose sympathies are usually with the underdog . . . in this case, the Indian. It makes me very happy to see stories in your magazine which take a fair view of the native American.

I am enclosing a little story that your readers might like, about the unfair treatment that we have often given the red man.

This young Cheyenne was growing reconciled to white men's ways, figured he might even enjoy life, and prosper on the reservation. One day, a white rider approached his tepee, leading a beautiful chestnut horse, which he offered for sale at a bargain price. Delighted, the Cheyenne made the purchase.

To his chagrin, the horse was taken away from him by a federal marshal, the next time he visited the Indian agency. It fell upon the agent to explain to his tricked charge that the chestnut horse had been a stolen one—that when white men dealt with one another, they demanded and received bills of sale.

A month passed. Another rider came to the Cheyenne's tepee, and offered him a bay mare. The wily Cheyenne insisted on a bill of sale before parting with a penny.

But the next time he rode to the agency, the marshal again took his horse. Outraged, he presented his bill of sale.

In it, one John Doe certified that he had on that date sold to the Indian one stolen bay mare.

Yours truly,

Stan Orleans
Casper, Wyo.

Here is one from a Texan who wishes to defend his home state against rumors.

Dear Editor:

Rumor notwithstanding, the Panhandle was a law-abiding place from way back—and Judge Roy Bean, in the early days, was its law. One time, they hauled a pilgrim into his court, on charges of carrying a concealed weapon.

A man had a right to carry a gun when traveling, the judge ruled, in a decision which was to affect local history—and if he wasn't traveling, then, how in hades could he be said to be carrying it?

The case was dismissed. But not forgotten. Soon after, a cowboy got a little high in Pecos. Still determined to observe the law about carrying concealed weapons, he tied his six-shooter to the end of a rope, and rode all over town with it, shouting, "Don't step on my tail, boys! Open those doors, and let me an' my tail through!"

They opened the doors. Just a quiet, law-abiding town.

Truly,
Jim Hutchins,
Fort Worth, Tex.

That brings us to a tale of courtship—Western style.

Dear Sir:

I'm one of those guys who think the West is far ahead of any other region of the country in no matter what field. Even courtin'.

Some men build palaces for their darlings. Others offer diamonds. It remained for a Westerner to make the grandest offering a man ever turned a woman's head with.

It happened in a boomtown, where folks were subsisting on canned beans and high hopes, mostly. The hero of this story, a prospector, was in love with a girl who seemed to prefer another. He went to the hills, and by good fortune, made a lucky strike before his sweetheart had married his rival. Upon return, he remembered the girl's nostalgic longing for fresh eggs.

Just before Christmas, he bought up all of that product already in the territory, or in shipments on their way. For a week, no one in town saw an egg at any price . . .

Until Christmas Eve, during the Christmas ball, with the whole town present. The prospector, pointing to the lady he loved, quietly ordered a waitress to serve her a hundred thousand dollars worth of scrambled eggs.

The order was served.

He won the lady.

No one knows who ate all the eggs.

Yours truly,
George L. Smith
Denver, Colo.

And an interesting, little-known fact. . . .

Dear Editor:

There is a place in Colorado whose name
(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

is sometimes puzzling to visitors. Hard to reach, but easy to see, it enjoys the title of Mount Washington. Natives will explain that it is the exact altitude above sea-level, as the peak of that other Mount Washington, in New Hampshire, the tallest mountain in the northeast.

Colorado's Mount W., however, is no mountain at all—in fact, it isn't even a plateau. It is only the very deepest and lowest point of a natural hole in one of the plains of the Rockies.

Just another high-sounding title.

Sincerely yours,

Jack O'Mahoney
Brighton, Colo.

Bill Willis sends us a shortie in a lighter vein.

Dear Sir:

American is the language spoken west of the Missouri. Record has it that a Montana schoolboy, years ago, was quizzed as to the indentiv of Benedict Arnold.

"He was one of our generals," said the button. "And he sold his saddle."

The kid passed.

No kidding.

Bill Willis
Reno, Nevada

And we follow this up with an amusing incident sent in by a regular reader.

Dear Editor:

I enjoy your letter column greatly. We who are interested in the legends of the West appreciate this source of new tales, and the chance to swap our favorites. Here's one of mine.

There were parts of the old Southwest where the life was too tough even for a dog—but men lived there, and home isn't home without a pet. And so, some folks kept king-snakes around the house.

These less than lovable creatures were not chosen as warning of their owners' affinities. Far from it. The king-snake is harmless to man. But he is the natural protection against his more evil cousin, the rattler. In those days, duels to the death were sometimes arranged, for spectators' amusement, between a captured rattler, and one of the ranch's house-pets. The king snake always won.

It's a queer kind of picture you get, of a cozy little fireside on the range—with the pet snake coiled up next to the poker, and all hands comfortable in rocking-chairs as evening fell. Yet that's how it was.

Sincerely yours,

Warren Roberts
Tuscon, Ariz.

From Cheyenne, a pal writes of free money and whiskey in the old days of the West.

Dear Editor:

Few cowhands died rich. Much has been said about the fleecing they took in trail towns—about how their pay vanished in keno and poker and faro, when they lost. Pleasanter, and less known, is what happened to their winnings, when they won.

An optimist with a few thousand dollars in his levis didn't want to save it. He wanted his fun there and then. Hence rose the custom of buying a town. A winner, or a group of them, would simply place his money on the bar, and announce to all present, strangers and friends alike, that the town was open. After that, as long as the money held out, no drinks had to be paid for in any establishment in that community—all meals were on the buyer—all entertainment.

Cheyenne, Wyoming, a pretty big place, is said to have been "bought" once, for an evening, by a fun-loving syndicate of cowmen. The price was thirty thousand dollars.

Truly,

Ralph Baker
Cheyenne, Wyo.

Must have been quite a party. Here's another good one.

Dear Sir:

One of the funniest wind-ups to a stage holdup took place in an innocent Iowa town. A banker there, whose son had been West for a spell, proudly put an exhibition of solid gold bricks in his window for the local folks to gape at. They were his boy's, he explained. The boy had staked a claim that pained out, and sold the claim for the bricks. People commented on the lucky young man's modesty as much as they did on the bricks themselves. He kept pleading with his father to take the gold out of the window, and to stop bragging altogether.

Later, they found out why. Someone came along to tell the father that mines generally are paid for in cash—and that by a coincidence, the Homestake mine in Nevada had been missing just such a quantity of gold bullion, since a holdup at Canon Springs.

A Homestake investigator, apprised, arrived in Iowa, claimed the bricks, and departed. But the modest banker's son, who had had to watch his loot on display on a public street for weeks, never was seen again. He may have gone further east.

Sincerely,

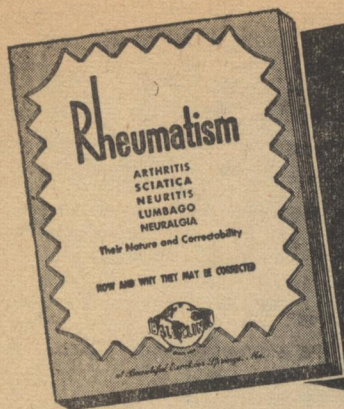
Len Barnett,
Chicago, Ill.

Gold brought a lot of people out West in their search for riches—and it also brought a lot of West out of the people:

Dear Editor:

It happened during the Gold Rush. Pickaxes and pokes were alike forgotten for an hour as the gold-thirsty miners gathered to pay last respects to a comrade who had died. As the funeral sermon was being preached

(Continued on page 12)



FREE BOOK on ARTHRITIS · RHEUMATISM

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If you suffer the aches, pains, and discomforts of rheumatism as manifested in **ARTHRITIS, NEURITIS, SCIATICA** or **LUMBAGO** and if the many remedies you have tried failed, then **SEND TODAY FOR THIS FREE BOOK** which fully explains why drugs and medicine give only temporary relief and fail to remove the causes of the trouble—**USE COUPON BELOW.**

Because rheumatism is a constitutional disease, it is practically useless to treat it with ordinary methods. Drugs and medicines that give only temporary relief from aches and pains will not suffice toward correcting the causes of your trouble.

Rheumatism is nearly always complicated and all bodily functions and vital organs of the body are usually involved. It is futile to treat one or even several causes—unless all are taken into consideration, you cannot expect to get better.

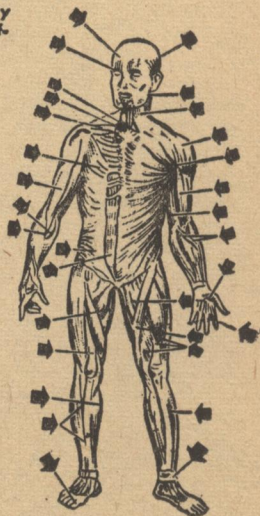
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Chart Shows Affected Parts of Anatomy — Any One or All Parts Designated By Arrows May Be Affected.



HOW TO DETECT IT

STIFFNESS—with or without pain
STIFFNESS — in morning, evening or all day
PAIN — localized or general
PAIN — periodically or continuous
JOINTS — creak or click
JOINTS — swelling
JOINTS—heat

JOINTS — tenderness
JOINTS—redness
JOINTS—
DEFORMITY
MUSCULAR TENDERNESS
GENERAL RUN-DOWN CONDITION

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City.....Zone.....State.....

NOTE: Zone Number Must Be Filled In

(Continued from page 10)

and the gravediggers were doing their somber duty, an unforeseen crisis suddenly arose in the proceedings—one of the gravediggers struck paydirt!

For a moment, the miner-mourners looked at one another wildly, while two warring instincts fought within each breast. It was the preacher who saved the occasion, by announcing loudly and solemnly, "Funeral postponed! Every man for himself!"

And they all began digging.

Frank Harmon
Abilene, Kansas

Dear Editor:

A settler woman, married to the operator of the trading post at a Navajo reservation, once found herself hostess to a party of tourists from the East, intent on seeing the West at first hand. The dudes, male and female, trooped into her little store, only to fall awkwardly silent when a contingent of squaws arrived, evidently drawn by curiosity about the palefaces.

For an unnatural interval, the tourists stood against the east wall, uneasy, unspeaking, watchful—and the Navajo women, just as silent, stood at the west wall, staring. The mistress of the trading post, at a loss for word or gesture, simply stood between.

And then, almost simultaneously, a lady tourist at her left and a squaw at her right murmured a courteous comment to her, each in her own tongue, more or less to normalize the painful silence. What the white woman said, in English, was, "My! Aren't they just like children!"

What the Navajo woman said, in Navajo, with equal kindness, was exactly the same thing.

Leah Harrison
Taos, New Mexico

Here's the latest Bill Longley legend:

Dear Editor:

When they hanged Bill Longley of Texas for more killings than he bothered remembering, he was asked if he had any last words. Bill looked out at the crowd, thought awhile, then addressed himself to his friends, if any happened to be present. He warned them against trying to avenge him, and that was the last he said.

He knew what he was talking about, if an old yarn about him is true. One of the notches in his gun would never have been there if a certain hombre who rode with the Vigilance Committee hadn't had such a vengeful, ornery spirit, a few years earlier. Weird as it sounds, Bill Longley's fatal hanging wasn't his first. He'd been hanged once before, by the Committee. And that would have been that, for the Committee and Bill both—except that one of the riders, in a savage mood, turned back

to pump a load of lead into Bill's swinging body.

You don't take such careful aim at what you think is a dead man. One of the bullets, Bill said later, sliced through the rope he was swinging from and saved his life.

Instead of being grateful for the favor, Bill was peeved. He felt his would-be executioner had shown a mean attitude—and some time later, Bill exacted a terrible penalty. The Vigilance man must have thought it was Longley's ghost who came riding after him, disarmed him and strung him to an oak . . . and when Longley in his turn shot at the hanging body, his aim wasn't sloppy.

And so, at his second hanging, remembering the first, he gave his final advice. It may have been followed. No one after him was hanged for trying to avenge Bill Longley. Or else, he may merely not have made many friends.

Mitch Lessing
St. Louis, Missouri

To wind up, here's a cheerful affirmation that the Old West isn't quite as dead as it would seem to be. There's always the modern version of the oldtime buffalo hunt:

Dear Editor:

The West doesn't change as quickly or easily as we sometimes think. In the shadow of the Big Horns, in Montana, the buffalo still roams over a vast area. And the braves of the Crow tribe still hunt him down in organized parties.

This huge herd, possibly the largest living remnant of an almost extinct animal, is not the result of any scientific effort at conservation on the white man's part. Far from it.

Fifteen years ago, for the first time, Crow Indians on the Montana reservation found themselves with a superintendent of their own race, instead of a white man. His first official act was the procurement, with tribal funds, of seventy-five buffalo. Watchful care brought the number up to a thousand within a few years, and then open season was declared. These modern-day hunters allow themselves a bag of about 250 a year.

Only two changes mark the passing of years on the plains. Instead of arrows, the hunters use rifles. And should you dream of seeing the chase, complete with painted ponies and the stampeede dust of the frightened herd, better change your dream. The braves now hunt from plunging, charging jeeps with four-wheel drive!

Barney Samuels
Butte, Montana

Well, pardners, that brings us to the end of the trail. It's been mighty good palaver-ing with you, and keep those letters coming.

THE EDITOR

When You Learn The GENCO Answers to—You'll want to benefit from Carl Genco experience in

WHY HOW

You should **NOT** brush your hair
 You should **NOT** massage above hat band
 You should **NOT** wear tight-fitting hats
 You should **NOT** give up because other treatment "Techniques" have failed! . . .

You owe it to yourself to learn all the benefits of the Genco Formula-Method that is absolutely different than any other so-called "treatment techniques"—it explodes several theories on massage, brushing, combing, etc. If you are worried about hair loss, then learn the "Why and How" of these exclusive formulae that have definitely brought renewed hair growth to thousands of users.

HERE ARE PROOF CASES!

TELEPHONE WORKER—Troubled by bald spots, now a full, healthy head of Genco-revitalized hair. Mr. Leo Lubert, Pittsburgh, Pa.



BEFORE

AFTER



BEFORE

AFTER

SALES EXECUTIVE—From partial baldness, now a full healthy head of hair. Mr. Anthony Michalski, Lawrenceville, Pa.



BEFORE

AFTER

MARY ANTONELLI, HOUSEWIFE—After baldness, has regained a healthy, lustrous growth of hair. McKeesport, Pa.



YOU MAY HELP SAVE FALLING HAIR and REGAIN REVITALIZED HAIR

WITH TIME-TESTED GENCO FORMULA
 NOW AVAILABLE FOR THE FIRST TIME
 FOR MAIL-ORDER HOME USERS!

Yes, you'll want to learn for yourself how you, same as thousands of other men and women can definitely enjoy the regaining of revitalized hair & scalp health by professionally-tested-and-proved use of the Genco formula. The exclusive Genco treatments using these formulae will convince you it can be done! They're not overnight "CURE-ALLS" but scientifically-planned formulae that go to the "root" of your baldness trouble and do the job of stopping falling hair, dandruff, etc. **IT CAN BE DONE**—Scores upon scores of users attest by "Before and After" conditions, that following the Genco treatment using the exclusive Genco hair and scalp formula, they no longer even worry about lost hair or falling hair—they have permanently regained revitalized hair, stopped dandruff, and scalp itch.

WHAT THE GENCO METHOD IS—In short, the Genco method prescribes, according to your scalp condition (see coupon below), the use of one of two complete Kit combinations of exclusive non-greasy, non-irritating, scientifically-controlled "Cleanser & Liquid" and "Cleanser & Ointment" formula. These formulae go to the "roots" of baldness conditions—and when properly applied by the exclusive Genco-below-the-hatband treatment they definitely help stop dandruff, falling hair, receding hair line, and in many authenticated cases Genco-method users have actually regrown hair and regained lost hair.

IF BALDNESS WORRIES YOU—Act NOW! Don't be discouraged because other "techniques" have failed to do what Carl Genco can do for you. Our low introductory kit \$15 price is little to pay to regain hair.



CARL M. GENCO 22 Years of Success

Discoverer of the amazing Genco formula and treatment, Carl Genco has won the thanks of men everywhere, in every walk of life, for his result-producing method and formula. No wild claims to regrow hair for everyone, for in some cases, baldness has been neglected too long. Carl Genco definitely claims that the Genco method can regain for you hair that is still alive but not vitalized—and partial baldness can be stopped.

EASY TO USE

These exclusive Genco formulae are not mystery applications—just a few days of diligent application according to the complete instructions given you with your order and you'll realize how simple it is to enjoy success, at home! Clean, non-sticky, odorless. Complete kit lasts 6 to 8 weeks—order today!

22 YEARS OF TESTED & PROVED SUCCESS BACKS-UP THIS GENCO "HOME KIT" OFFER

UNCHALLENGEABLE PROOF The Genco laboratories have authentic proof with unchallengeable "before and after" pictures, that men and women, going bald, already bald, or having hair and scalp troubles have regained revitalized hair by using the Genco method and

formulae. The identical successful formulae and treatment method that has cost as high as five and ten times the "Home Kit" price is now available for mail-order buyers—a result of mass acceptance of the Genco success. Remember—no price is too high to regain hair!

SEND TODAY—Booklet Given with Each Order!

ORDER BY MAIL TODAY!

When you order, you get a complete "KIT" consisting of thorough instructions on the exclusive Genco method, and one of two (depending on your scalp condition—see coupon) Cleanser and Liquid/Ointment formula. You get an average usage of 6 to 8 weeks from your Home Kit Order. Special \$15 price is for everything—PREPAID!

Carl M. Genco Laboratories, 1312 Woodbourne Ave., Pittsburgh 26, Pa.

Send me at once, in plain wrapper, the complete Home Kit of Genco Hair & Scalp Formula & Method Instructions. I enclose \$15. ☐ Check; ☐ Money Order (send postage prepaid). If you send COD ☐ I agree to pay post-man \$15. plus gov't. postage costs.

My scalp condition is:
☐ Thinning hair ☐ Falling hair ☐ Oily scalp and hair
☐ Complete baldness ☐ Bald patches ☐ Excessive dandruff
☐ Annoying itchiness ☐ Dry scalp and hair ☐ Partial baldness

Please print name and address clearly in margin
 or on separate attached sheet of paper.

Check Your Trouble


Genco specialists are trained to send you the proper kit with proper instructions to correct your scalp-condition trouble. Fill in coupon completely when you order. Remember—you save Gov't. C.O.D. & Postage charges when you send check or money order.



*Fortunes are soon to be lost—a
life is lived to the death—this was
the creed of the West's first Smith,
who heeded the—*

Death Trails Calling

By M. KANE



HE WAS an earnest, raw-boned young man, with a surprising amount of education, who couldn't stand lacking the answers. He plunged into the Rockies before they were part of the West, in the days when the West, and the world itself, ended at St. Louis. He went, he thought, looking for beaver—he might have gone, with equal foreknowledge, to the moon. He was opinionated, stubborn, young, and as it turned out, stronger than grizzly bears, or than hunger and thirst. He was Jedediah Smith, the most erudite of the mountain men and, in some ways, the blindest.

He was twenty-eight when he bought out the wilderness claim from William Ashley, hitherto the emperor of the North American fur trade. With Bill Sublette and David Jackson for partners, and a dozen-odd seasoned trappers as hands, the new sovereign entered his domain. The *voyageurs* carried a minimum of liquor and tobacco. In a career that appealed to the roughest of men, Smith remained a scholar and thinker. As far as he could, he carried his Shakespeare and his Scriptures with him.

As long as he lived, no one successfully had the last word with Captain Jed Smith.

A bevy of she-grizzlies tried it, to their sorrow, on one of the mountain trails. The grizzlies disposed of, Smith was discovered to be retaining one of his ears by mere threads of skin. He asked his men one by one, to do the re-stitching job. Would they let a mere bear get away with this? By sheer moral suasion, Smith at last coaxed the toughest of them all to pick up a needle.

He kept the ear as long as he kept the rest of his scalp.

The Mexican governor of California also tried to argue with Smith, when the explorer reached that far off province. The gringo papers, he complained, were not in order. The eighteen seedy-looking adventurers, for all he knew, might be spies, cutthroats, assassins. They were asked to leave the province at once, and not by the northern route through the game-rich mountains toward Oregon, but the way they had come through the desert, to the east.

Smith, the businessman, had fared rather badly en route—his supplies were down to rags, he had trapped no beaver, he and his companions existed by courtesy of the padres at the Mission San Gabriel. But he had named the empty places on the map, he knew more answers than the governor did, and he meant to have the last word. After a protracted exchange of diplomacies, the mountain men finally left the settlement. A little eastward, the wilderness swallowed them again. They turned northward.

Legally, the land about them belonged to Mexico. Smith knew a better law. The land was his, bought from William Ashley sight unseen, secured by right of exploration and suffering. The year was 1827. He proceeded gloriously naming everything in sight. He saw the Sierra Nevadas, and he called them Mount St. Joseph, after the hospitable padre who had entertained him in California. He crossed the Stanislaus River, and christened it the Wimilchi. He went

(Continued on page 111)

Be Protected ^{in case of} SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

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Individual or Family Eligible . . . Birth to Age 70

This is it! Sold only by mail! America's newest and greatest Hospitalization Plan. Amazing coverage! Lower cost! Good anywhere in the U.S. It's exactly what you need!

If you get sick or have an accident, you may go to any recognized Hospital (Rest Homes, Sanitariums, Government Hospitals, excluded). Your NORTH AMERICAN Policy will pay for Hospital Room, Board and General Nursing Care at the rate of \$150.00 PER MONTH. What's more, you can stay as long as necessary. There's NO TIME LIMIT. Now, in case you need SURGERY, due to sickness, accident or disease . . . the Policy pays lump CASH for 74 specific SURGICAL OPERATIONS. What a help . . . what a blessing it is to fall back on this kind of coverage in time of need.

LOOK WHAT ELSE YOU GET!

For ACCIDENTAL DEATH Policy pays in lieu of other benefits \$500.00 . . . with a special provision giving 4 times the amount—or \$2,000.00—for death resulting from accident while traveling on a common carrier. But this isn't all. For still more protection, seldom included in ordinary Hospitalization—you and insured family members also get POLIO coverage in lieu of other benefits—\$500.00 to cover HOSPITAL BILLS, \$500.00 for MEDICAL TREATMENT, \$500.00 for ORTHOPEDIC APPLIANCES.

Then, too, there are liberal Benefits in lieu of others for accidental LOSS OF HANDS, FEET OR EYES; Benefits for EMERGENCY HOSPITAL TREATMENT for accidents involving no confinement, etc. Imagine all this wonderful value and coverage at a rate for adults of only about 3¢ a day, 1½¢ a day for children to age

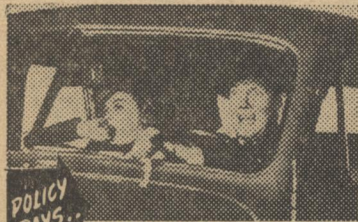


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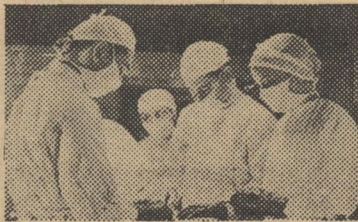
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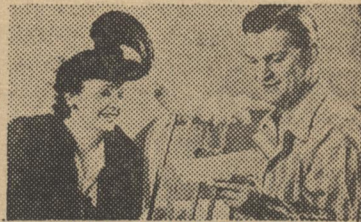
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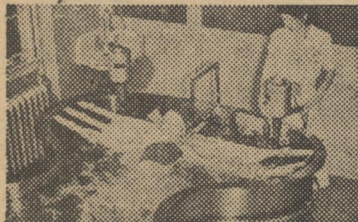
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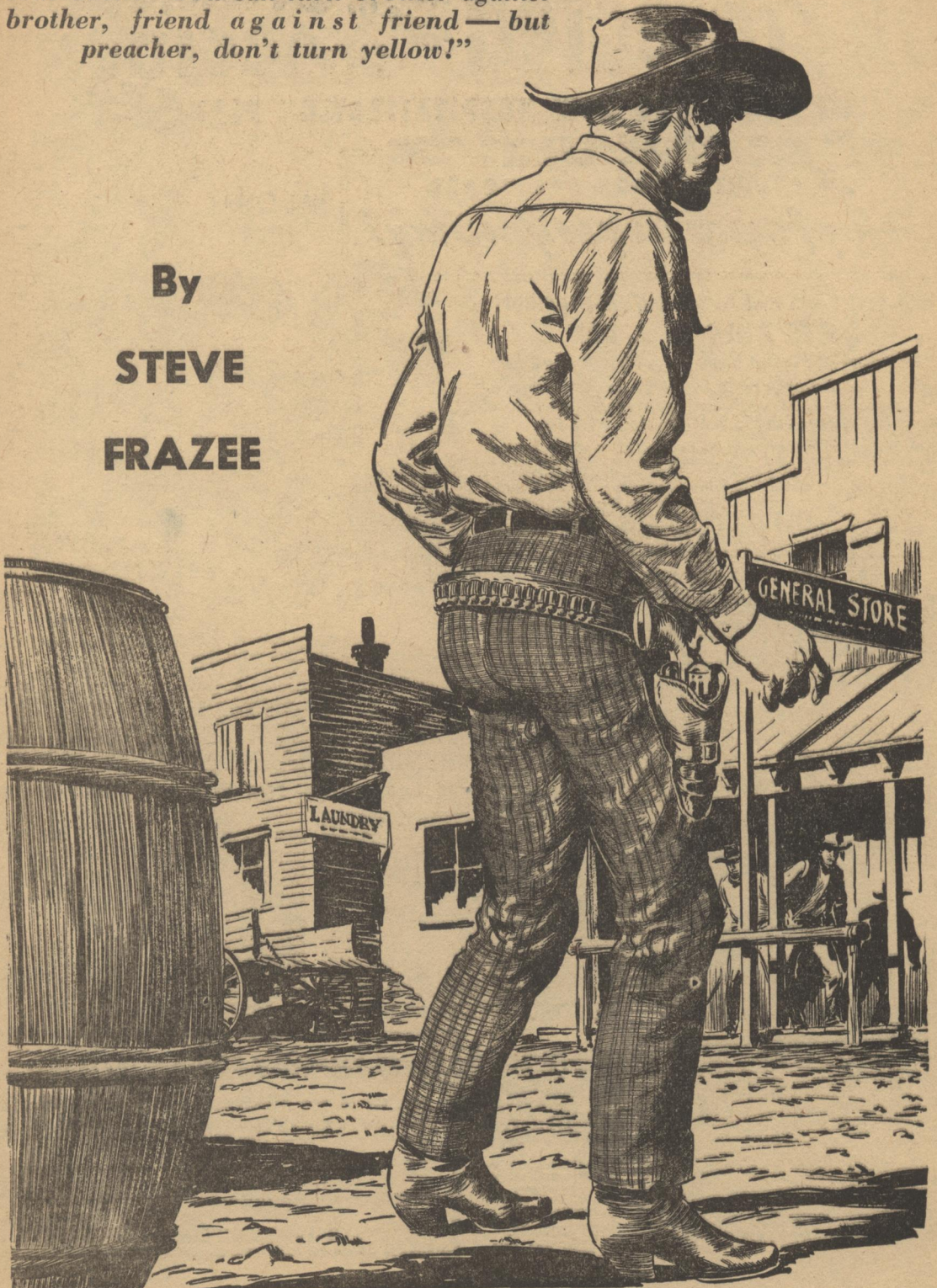
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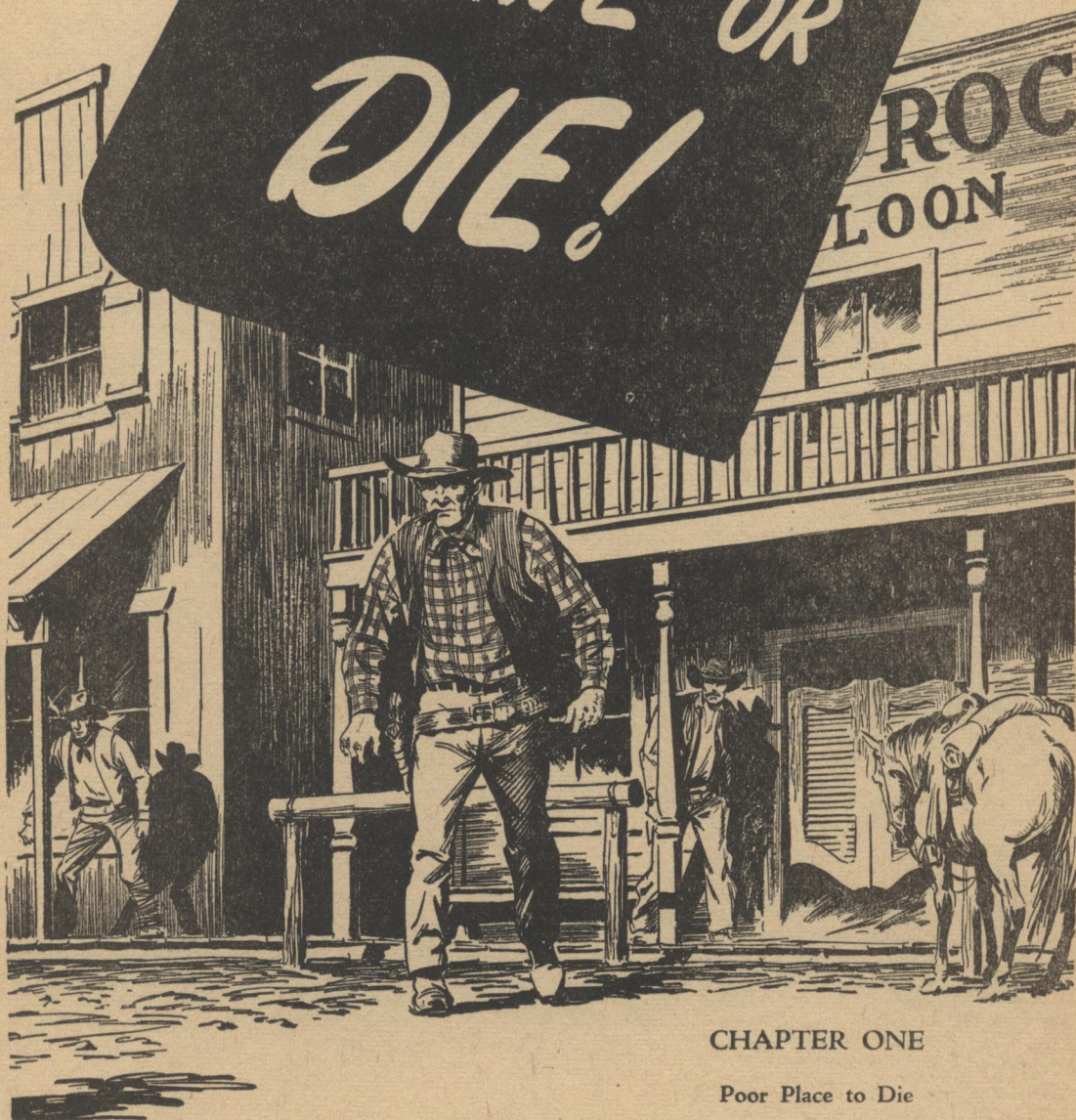
(Paste on penny postcard or mail in envelope)

Death rode with him again on his last bullet mission—with the man-killing sky pilot whose forgotten sixes whispered their comeback: "You can turn brother against brother, friend against friend—but preacher, don't turn yellow!"

By
**STEVE
FRAZEE**



SHOOT,
CRAWL-OR
DIE!



CHAPTER ONE

Poor Place to Die

Before he took three steps towards Chelf, the old dead-ness was in Andreas' nerves.

IN THE dead-still forest below Volcano Pass, ghost-barked Alpine firs shattered the sky, letting in only small streaks of sunshine. It was a poor place

to die, Vince Andreas thought sourly.

He took a short-handled shovel from the rifle boot, and untied a miner's pick from the cante strings of the patched saddle on Lucifer, the mule.

They too must have thought it a poor place to die.

Andreas looked for several moments at the tools. The pick was blunt, its splintery handle broken and bound with wire. The shovel was worn thin, almost square where the point once had been. Those tools were Sudden Valley's answer to his plea for help in doing a decent act. Both sides had warned him to keep out of this affair.

The thump of hooves sounded on the damp trail behind him. He listened, a stocky, sandy-complexioned man whose face was hewn in rough planes of composure. His jaw was square and solid. There was no fear or worry in his brown eyes.

Unarmed, he stood by the mule and waited for the rider to come up the trail.

It was Billy Chelf, the saloonman from Galatia City.

A mocking sort of devilry lay on Chelf's dark face. He tried to look up at the sky.

"They pull the shades early in this place, don't they?" He pitched a pick and shovel to the ground, and Andreas observed that they were sharp and sound.

"Now there's two damned fools," Chelf said.

He took his two hundred pounds out of the saddle with simple grace, and stood there with a tiny shaft of sunshine glinting on the buckle of his gunbelt.

"Why did you come?" Andreas asked.

"Now and then I need a little fresh air."

Chelf's eyes were small and black. They showed no expression at the sight of three dead men wedged in sitting position among the limbs of a fallen fir. Someone had made quite sure by shooting each one in the face.

"Do you know any of them?" Andreas asked.

Chelf shook his head. "How could you tell now?" He picked up his pick and shovel.

Working side by side, saloonman and minister buried three nameless men, the latest to die in the Sudden Valley trouble. Chelf lowered his eyes and stared thoughtfully each time Andreas said the prayer.

"Have you always been a preacher?"

"Not always. Have you always run a saloon?"

"For a long time."

They carried rocks to cover the mounds.

IT HAD started in earnest with the murder of Arthur Sudden, the brother of old Colonel Charley Sudden, first settler in the valley. The Suddens and their friends had been Union men. The Gibson brothers, Joe and Pen, had led Southerners into the valley and filed on water that the Suddens assumed was theirs by natural right.

No one could wait for the hands of distant Federal law to complete the endless shuffling and stacking of legal papers.

Joe Gibson started to swim his horse across the flooding Sawatch River one evening. When his brother and his friends took his body from a sandbar in the willows five days later, fifteen miles downstream, they said it was murder. They said Art Sudden was the killer, because someone had seen him riding north along the Sawatch the day Joe Gibson disappeared.

Sheriff Hawley was an honest man, quick of temper. He said there was no evidence of murder, not after the rocks of the fast Sawatch had finished with Joe Gibson. But it was murder one night when someone set fire to a shed on Art Sudden's ranch, and killed Sudden with a rifle bullet from the woodpile.

The sheriff rode down to Pen Gibson's ranch to ask questions. Tempers slashed across the yard. The sheriff died before he dumped head first from the saddle. Some said Pen did it; others said it was his foreman, Sandy Isebear. Prudent people did not guess at all. They buried Sheriff Hawley. His deputy resigned, and the lid was off in Sudden Valley. The fire ran up the slopes even to the mining camps, and no man was allowed to be a neutral.

Vince Andreas' church paid him twenty-five dollars a year to carry the word to ten thousand square miles of rugged territory. He was making the rounds of the Asper River camps when Art Sudden was killed against the light of his burning shed. He was riding Lucifer down the Roaring Fork of the Sawatch when a freighter told him of the three murdered men.

The three had been marked all the way across Great Park, close-mouthed men, ob-

viously hardcases hired by one side or the other. Here in the gloom under Volcano Pass someone had killed them from ambush.

Chelf used his boot to stamp earth around the last of three slab-rock headstones. "You've earned a bullet for this afternoon, Andreas. Neither side admits they hired these men. Both the Suddens and the Gibsons warned everyone to let them rot."

"I'm a minister, Chelf."

"I favor what you did. Not for the likes of these three, because hired gun hands deserve no better, but because you had the guts to tackle the job alone." Chelf looked off into the trees, his face suddenly bitter. He jabbed the earth with his heel in a final, vicious stamp. "You've horned into a high-rolling game, preacher."

"How about you?"

"I wear a gun."

Andreas nodded soberly. "These three wore guns too."

The thought bounced off Chelf's self-assurance as lightly as a falling pine cone skids across a rock. "You know what I would do if I were you, Andreas? I'd get on that mule and ride back somewhere into farming country, where they have respect for law, for your work—"

"It suits me here, Chelf."

"Yeah," the saloonman said heavily, and let any meaning come from it that a man cared to take.

They started toward the valley.

"We have law here," Andreas said. "In time, those who are scared now will support it. Chelf, why don't you take on the sheriff's job?"

Chelf laughed briefly. "That would wreck my business—if I have any left after this little sashay."

They skirted a bog where grass hummocks trembled. Shorthorns with the Double S brand of Charley Sudden peered at them from the edge of the aspens, then broke crashing into the timber.

"Sudden cattle on Gibson range," Chelf said absently. "More trouble." He brushed a deer fly from his neck. "Bob Silengo would make a good sheriff."

"He's district judge."

"Who will he try—if there's no sheriff to bring him customers?"

They were crossing Porcupine Flats when Andreas asked, "What makes you think Si-

lengo would be able to handle the job?"

"He's tough inside. That soft talk of his doesn't take me in one bit. Bob Silengo has all the marks of a smoky trail behind him."

"I'd never noticed that," Andreas murmured.

"You should have. You're tough enough yourself, for all your preaching, Andreas. Fact is, you might be even better than Silengo as sheriff." Chelf laughed. "Shall we arrange it? The job is sort of begging at the moment."

"I'm a minister."

"Yeah."

Ben Sloper, the liveryman, met them a mile from town, coming at them on a broad-rumped bay, his elbows bouncing, his fat face flushed with the joy of being the first to bring bad news.

"They wrecked the Placer Palace, Chelf! They plumb busted things up something awful! Sandy Isebear was a-leading them. Pen Gibson wasn't along this time, but—"

"That's mighty interesting, Ben. Thanks." Chelf moved his horse on at a walk. He glanced sidewise at Andreas and shrugged.

The sly viciousness of deflated importance came to Sloper's face. "Maybe it's more interesting, Chelf, to tell you that Isebear and his boys are still in town."

"You didn't expect them to run away, did you?" Andreas asked. "Any more than Chelf expected he could go out and do something he had been warned not to do—and not find trouble because of it." He gave Sloper a cold look. "We missed you up there on the pass today, Ben. Busy?"

"Smart," Sloper said. He put his horse into a trot and bounced ahead toward Galatia City.

The town choked narrow space between the Sawatch and a high gravel bank, stringing itself along the river for almost a quarter of a mile. On one side the ends of buildings burrowed into the bank, and on the other side of the street the ends of longer structures extended above the river.

Now the narrow street was half blocked with eight Bell-branded horses in front of Markley's Store. There was too much quiet, the thick, pulsing hush that always came to any part of Sudden Valley when trouble was at hand.

Ben Sloper's brockled bay was still unsaddled in the livery yard, and Sloper was peering between the logs of the corral, his

mouth half open, his fat face agleam with anticipation.

Sandy Isebear, foreman of the Bell, came out on the store porch. Seven men crowded behind him, then slid away along the walls when he made a slight gesture with his head. Isebear was a stringy man with black curling sideburns, Indian-swarthy from the hairline of a bulging forehead to the cords of a long neck. Smoky blue eyes rested steadily on the two riders.

Chelf started to ride by without a glance. "Chelf!"

The saloonman stopped and looked at Isebear casually.

"You know why we wrecked your dump."

"Uh-huh. I do, Isebear. I'm going up to look—and then I want to talk to you."

Galatia City was very quiet, except for the fretting of the Sawatch. Ben Sloper climbed two poles high on his corral to have a better look.

"I'll be here, Chelf," Isebear said.

Chelf started his horse on up the street at a walk.

Going by the silent Bell men, Andreas counted aloud. ". . . six, seven, eight."

Isebear said quietly, "Better head that mule right on up the river, Andreas. You won't preach in these parts no more."

"Is that a fact?" Andreas smiled thinly, and a reddish light showed in his eyes as he met Isebear's look. But a moment later as he followed Chelf toward the Placer Palace, Andreas' head was bowed and his lips were moving softly.

THE SALOON was a wreck. Glass freighted from St. Louis was thicker on the floor than sawdust. The bar was on its side. Some of the lamps were still dripping oil. The Bell had used the back-bar for target practice, and there was not a whole bottle left.

Two bartenders and a swamper trying to sort a few sticks of sound furniture from wreckage leaped in alarm when Chelf and Andreas walked in through a doorway that no longer had a door. One bartender grabbed a sawed-off shotgun.

"You're faster than you must have been a while ago," Chelf said.

The bartender let out a long breath. "They came in peaceable-like, until they had us boxed in. Boss, we tried—"

"I know, I know, Sam." Chelf rum-

maged into the overturned bar and found a cigar. He lit it and stood there in the shattered glass, apparently not seeing anything in the room. After a while he said, "Move anything that's useable over to the Hardrock." He grinned at Andreas. "Lucky thing I bought out all three saloons when I came here, wasn't it?"

Bob Silengo, the district judge, came lightly through the broken glass. He was a heavy-set man in his late twenties, black-browed. His brown cheeks came down flatly from wide facial bones. Today he was wearing a gun, tied down in a shallow holster.

Andreas and Chelf looked at the gun, and at Silengo's face, and then they glanced at each other.

"Don't go down there, Chelf," Silengo said. "Swear out a warrant. I'll see that it's served."

"Yourself, eh?"

Silengo nodded. "Maybe a little irregular, but I'll get the job done, and we'll have a proper trial afterward."

Chelf looked a long time at Silengo, and then turned to Andreas. "I said he was tough, didn't I?"

Andreas' face was bleak. "I'll go out to the Bell and talk to Pen Gibson. It may be that he doesn't know what his men have done here, and perhaps—"

"You're both forgetting one thing," Chelf said. "I told Sandy Isebear I'd be back to talk to him, and that's the way it has to be."

"The law—" Silengo said.

"The law has never bothered anyone about an honest fight, Silengo. Not out here." Chelf looked at the tied-down holster. He smiled. "I think you know what I mean, Bob."

Silengo looked at Andreas, who nodded.

"All right," Silengo said. "We'll keep it more or less fair, at least." He went out past the broken windows, and headed down the street.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Chelf murmured. He took his gun from its holster. "A trifle dusty in the bore. Find me a clean rag, Sam."

Nobody paid any attention when Andreas went out with the bartender's shotgun. Men were crowding in a little closer now, coming to the fronts of the buildings, peering out from narrow passages,

watching the Placer Palace, looking down the street to where Sandy Isebear leaned against the side of Markley's Store. Bob Silengo went straight down the middle of the street, walking lightly in the dust, the holster solid and unswaying on his thigh.

He stopped before Isebear and said something. The Bell foreman threw his cigarette away. He shook his head and made a small gesture with his hand.

Andreas had time for no more. He was running behind the buildings, kicking through tin cans and trash, dodging broken barrels. He surprised a brindle dog feeding on garbage and leaped over it. The dog's instinctive snarl turned to a yelp as it ran under a building.

There was a miner half crouched in the tight space between two buildings just above the store. He grunted when Andreas came up behind him.

"Lie down."

The miner looked at Andreas and the shotgun. "Good Lord!" he breathed, and lay down.

Andreas stepped over him and stood there with his shoulders touching boards on both

sides. Chelf was coming down the street slowly. Isebear left the store front and walked out, waiting. On the downstreet side of the store, Silengo was watching four Bell riders. There were three more just a few feet away from Andreas.

Chelf came pacing slowly. He had taken off his coat, and now the light gray of his broadcloth shirt made him seem larger than he was. The cigar was still in his mouth.

He had unholy confidence, Andreas thought. Just one drifting bit of that cigar smoke across his eyes at the wrong moment . . . Andreas inched forward to get a better look at the three Bell men on his right. All the little signs and marks were there: they had orders to go into it all the way.

That puzzled him. It scared him too, and for the first time since leaving the back door of the saloon, he wished that he had left the shells in the shotgun.

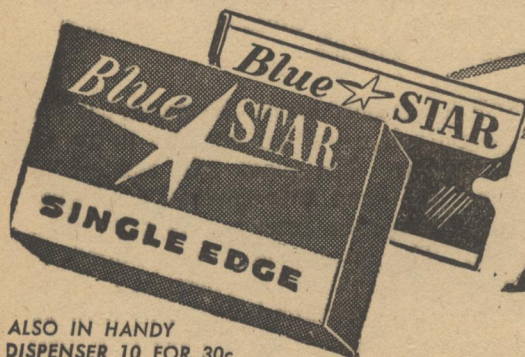
He judged the distance according to what he knew of Sandy Isebear. Chelf, he was sure now, would walk on and on until the other man broke and started to draw.

Andreas stepped out when he thought the

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distance close enough between the two men. He caught the three Bell riders from the flank. Just movement and the sight of a man so close was enough to start one toward his draw.

"Easy," Andreas said.

The man's hand fell away from his pistol.

Across the street two men lying under a porch stared wide-eyed at Preacher Andreas and his shotgun.

Silengo's voice was not loud, but loud enough. "Just the two," he said. "Just Chelf and Isebear are in this."

Chelf came on, with cigar smoke drifting back of him. He came ten paces away from Isebear, not slowing, not hurrying.

ISEBEAR went to pieces then. It started in his eyes and ran across his swarthy features like an ugly stain. He tried to swallow. The movement put deeper sags between the cords of his neck, made knots of his jaw muscles.

He pushed his hands out wide and shook his head. "No, Billy, no. I'll talk to Pen about what we done. He didn't know—I—"

Chelf stopped. "That's a lie. Pen Gibson sent you." Chelf's deadly calm changed to frustration. Andreas understood. No man could step from the razor edge of violence without a strong reaction.

The saloonman wanted to carry it through. He cursed Isebear softly with words calculated to make him fight, and so complete was the Bell foreman's terror that he almost went wild and started his draw when it was too late.

"That's all," Andreas said. "That's enough, Chelf."

The words broke the last of it. Isebear went stiff-legged toward his horse. Bell rode away, leaving slowly to preserve any dignity left to them.

Chelf's cigar turned toward Andreas. "What call did you have to side up in this thing, preacher?"

"You went up the pass today."

Chelf's face was stony. He stared a long time. "Yeah, I did that." He went up the street, walking as slowly as he had come.

Silengo's brown face was cold and scared and angry. "You did yourself proud, Andreas—you and your empty shotgun."

"How do you know it's empty?"

"I know. Let's see."

Composure sagged away from Andreas and left his face bone-bleak. "No need, Bob. It's unloaded."

Galatia City came back to life. Men appeared quickly and their loud talk rose above the river. They began to move up the street after Chelf, some pausing to cast inquiring glances at Andreas and Silengo.

"You can't mix in this," Silengo said. "It's going to be worse from now on."

"Much worse." Andreas passed the shotgun to Silengo. "Give it back to Chelf's bartender, please. And remember, you're the district judge, not the sheriff."

All Andreas' tension turned to tiredness as he went up the street. No one paid him any attention. They were all too busy helping Chelf transfer his business to the Hard-rock. Andreas found Lucifer finishing a pan of oats behind Lin See's laundry. For the one week of each month that Andreas spent in Galatia, Lin See fed the mule, shaking his head at any mention of payment, pretending to understand even less English than he did.

Andreas waited until Lucifer had curled his lips around the last kernel. Lin See came out and stood on the back step with his arms folded. He was a large, heavy-boned man with a long yellow face. He wore his spiky black hair in the Western manner.

The one Sunday a month that Andreas held services in the Shorthorn, Lin See was always there on the last bench, looking solemn, understanding little or nothing of what went on. But perhaps, Andreas thought, Lin See sensed more than many understood.

The Chinese stood on his step and shook his head. He made the pistol sign with his fingers and shook his head again, and Andreas thought of the times when he had said less in long sermons.

IT WAS gloomy inside the converted bar that Chelf permitted Andreas to use as a church. The place still smelled of whiskey and dead tobacco smoke in spite of all the spruce branches Andreas had burned. The church he had planned to build some day would have been at the lower end of town, a white building on a slope, exposed to all the seasons, placed so that people coming in could take a long look at the beauty of Sudden Valley, and see it once again when the service was over.

He stood a long time at the section of bar that served as pulpit, and when his head came up again to look beyond the silent benches, sunlight on a dusty pane of imperfect glass had given the window a wine color, like the rich blue of stained glass in a cathedral.

Andreas thought no more of the black gunbelt and pistol stored in a whiskey case in his quarters at the rear of the saloon.

He moved with his mind on other matters while he cooked and ate a meal of bacon and fried potatoes, and then he saddled Lucifer again and rode down the street.

It was just before the rush hour in the Buena Vista Cafe. Little Sim Randolph, who had almost starved to death on a placer claim before he went to work for Mary Sanders, was staring blankly at sunlight on the river. His face brightened when he saw Andreas.

"Hello, Mr. Andreas. I hear that shotgun was unloaded."

Andreas nodded. "It was just as ugly wasn't it?"

"Whew!" Sim began to polish the counter briskly as Andreas went on toward the kitchen.

Mary Sanders was a vigorous little woman who had never been beautiful or never would be. Her face was too square. Her eyes looked out with too much understanding, so that a man fell busily to justifying his shortcomings, and wondering if she knew about them.

She was slicing roast beef. "Sit down, Vince. Help yourself to the coffee."

"I don't want any coffee."

"You do too."

He had wanted it badly, and that was why he had denied the fact, so now he poured a cup and sat down at a work table. Presently she finished her work and sat down across from him.

"I knew you wouldn't stay out of it."

"So did I." He grinned.

"You risk your neck all winter snowshoeing to camps where the Lord Himself would have trouble being heard. You don't eat right. Day or night you head that mule toward anyone that's in trouble. And now this."

"Uh-huh."

"It looked odd—you standing hard and fast with Billy Chelf today."

"Chelf gave me a place to hold meetings.

He's offered money to help build a church. Today he helped bury men that everyone else was afraid to go near."

"I know. The whole valley knows it now." She leaned across the table toward him, with all a woman's fears, and all her strength, showing on her face. "Vince—" She settled back and said, "Where are you going now?"

"To talk to Pen Gibson, and then to Charley Sudden."

"Yes, I thought so." She rose suddenly and turned away, looking out the back door. And then she began to assemble an enormous sandwich. "You won't be invited to eat at either place, not any more."

Sudden Valley was all men could ask for. A dozen small feeder valleys came to it from both sides of the mountains that contained the Sawatch. There was grass and range for everyone, and the winters lacked the bitterness of plains country.

Andreas had filed on land near the head of one small valley, between holdings of the Gibson faction, but he had not filed on water as they had because he had believed the streams would be there forever, for everyone to use.

It was not entirely a water fight between the Suddens and the Gibsons, for the Gibsons never would be able to shut off the streams that came long miles from their ranches to the Sawatch, through Sudden land, even if they had been inclined to do so.

The old Union-Confederate issue was a powerful factor, but still it did not seem enough to Andreas, for he had been a Rebel soldier himself, and now he had pushed that all into the past, along with other things.

There was something uglier and more cold-blooded than the normal hatreds of range warfare. He could not forget the faces of the three men sitting among the branches of the fallen tree on Volcano Pass.

AT DUSK he came to Bell, Pen Gibson's ranch. All the buildings were run together, like a three-sided box, with the open end facing down-valley and the closed end resting solidly into a hill.

Andreas stayed on the hill and waited for some word from the man he had glimpsed a long time before. At last he spoke casually to the timber on his right.

"Do you mind if I go on in now?"

There was a long silence, and then a man's voice growled, "You're a smart preacher, ain't you? Go on in."

Bell was at supper. Men started to rush from the mess hall wing when Andreas rode into the yard. Pen Gibson came out and sent them back to eating. Isebear was the last to go.

"Make it pretty short, Andreas," Gibson said. A saber slash at Seven Pines had raked down his cheek and cut into his shoulder, so that now he favored his right arm and seldom let it hang at his side. He was a hawk-featured, slender man, with his temper always in ready reach.

"Gibson, I want you to help stop this fight before it goes completely beyond control."

"That's pretty short, all right."

"Nobody can win."

"Tell the Suddens that."

Andreas wanted to get down. He could talk better with his feet on the ground, standing close to Gibson; but Gibson was not going to invite him to swing off.

"Isebear said you didn't send him in to wreck Chelf's place."

"Did he?"

"You didn't send him, Gibson. I don't think you play that way—or Charley Sudden either. That's why I'm asking—"

"The Suddens sent for gun hands, Andreas. Somebody killed them. I said to let them lie where they were. You and Billy Chelf mixed in. A fine thing—a gambler and a preacher working together. So if I didn't send Bell to bust up Chelf's place, it's still all right with me—but it doesn't set well that you sided against my men with a shotgun. You'd better ride, preacher."

"The Suddens say those gun hands were yours, Gibson."

"They say lots of things." Pen Gibson had been impatient when it started, and now he was angry.

"Bell didn't bushwhack Art Sudden," Andreas said.

Gibson had started to turn away, but now his head jerked around so quickly that his long black hair bounced.

"I know that," he said.

"And the Suddens didn't kill your brother."

Gibson's tenseness, the set of his long face in the gloom told how much the quiet statement had shocked him. And then his

own thinking began to seep through him and take control.

"The hell they didn't!" he said.

There it was—men, not issues with Andreas in the middle. *Blessed are the peacemakers . . .* if they lived long enough.

"I'm going down to see Charley Sudden now," Andreas said. "I'll tell him just what I've told you."

Gibson's voice was slow. "I'll hand it to you for guts, preacher, but not good sense. The Suddens will never let you ride away—not after what you did today on Volcano."

"You're letting me go."

"The Suddens won't."

"They'd say the same thing about the Gibsons. Think it over, Pen. Decide for yourself whether the Suddens or the Gibsons are the bigger fools."

There was one fact more that Andreas wanted badly, and that was the details of Sheriff Hawley's death, but he thought he had pushed his way far enough for one visit, and so he rode away.

MOONLIGHT was running silvery fingers along the aspen rails of the Double S corrals. Charley Sudden's greyhounds loped out to meet Andreas, and held him a hundred yards away from the building.

Old Sudden's deep voice came from a corner of the dark ranchhouse.

"Who is it?"

Sitting there in the moonlight with the snarling circle of hounds around him, Andreas thought sadly that this strife was making men suspicious in their own homes. He thought almost too long. The block of a rifle slashed its steel against the night. There would not be a second challenge.

He gave his name.

"What do you want?"

"I want to know whether you're a bigger fool than Pen Gibson."

Sudden laughed harshly. "That's easy." There were other men moving in the shadows of the buildings, and Sudden sent one of them to call off the greyhounds. "Come on in, Andreas!"

Again, Andreas was at a disadvantage, sitting there on Lucifer, unable to move about or help make his points with movements of his body and hands. The hostility of men still in the shadows was almost tangible.

Old Sudden stood in the yard with the moonlight bright on his coarse shock of gray hair. His nose was the largest item of his features, wide and flattish, strongly rooted to the facial bones. It had been smashed a half dozen times by men who had tried Charley Sudden with their fists, but it was said that no one had ever knocked him off his feet. His jaw was like a block of gray granite.

Andreas kept remembering that Sudden had been the first man to welcome him to the valley, and the first to mention the building of a church.

"I've just come from Pen Gibson's place."

"The hounds smelled it, Andreas. If I'd known I wouldn't have called 'em off."

"Billy Chelf and I buried those three on Volcano Pass today."

"I heard."

"They weren't your men, Charley."

"I know that."

"They weren't Gibson men either."

Sudden's face was a big gray blot. "Who says so?"

"I do. You wouldn't work from ambush. You should have seen the men, Charley—shot in the face after they were already dead."

"I heard."

Andreas hooked one leg around the horn. It was a rough, warped saddle, and had tired him. A second time this night he would not be invited to dismount.

"Somebody is trying to make fools of you and Pen Gibson. Whoever sent for those men, then killed them, knew that one side or the other had to take the blame."

"Sure—the Gibsons."

"They say the Suddens."

"They say the Suddens killed Joe Gibson too."

"We didn't, even if they did kill my brother."

There it was again, and Andreas did not know how to get around it. But if he did not, it would go on and on until there was no stopping.

"You and Pen Gibson keep at it, Charley, and you both stand to lose everything. Then somebody moves in and takes over this valley."

"I don't figure on losing." Sudden had not moved his arms, his feet or any major part of him in all the time he had stood there.

Andreas shifted in the saddle again and eased his other leg. "Charley, you played right into somebody's hands when you gave the word that no one should go near those three dead men."

"Wrong again, Andreas. If the Double S had gone up there to bury them, or even said it was all right, then Pen Gibson would have come back and said we were doing it to cover up the fact we had killed them ourselves."

That worked two ways, Andreas thought, and both sides were too blind to see it. This affair might have been planned by the devil himself.

"Mind if I get down?" he asked, shifting again.

"Stay up. When you mixed in this thing today you sided with the Gibsons."

"Today in Galatia I helped keep the Gibsons from bunching up on Billy Chelf. They say I'm with the Suddens."

A long silence indicated that Sudden had not known about the affair in Galatia. And then he said, "A preacher and a saloonman. That beats me. When you first came here, Andreas, I thought you were all right, a man besides a preacher. But now I think you're a damned busybody. Get off my place. Don't sleep anywhere on Double S land tonight—and don't come back here no more."

Charley Sudden walked back to the house. There was a small rustle of movement from the darkness near the bunk shack. Mall Rising, the Double S foreman and a cousin of old Charley's, cleared his throat and said, "You heard him, preacher. Get out, or I'll have the dogs rip the belly out of that mule."

CHAPTER TWO

Sudden Death Valley

ANDREAS spent the night on a sandbar beside the growling Sawatch. He ate half the sandwich Mary Sanders had given him, made a hollow where the sand was dry, and lay down with the saddle blanket across his chest. It was impossible to measure the success of what he had tried to do. He had tried to plant an idea, betting on the basic honesty of the Gibsons and Suddens.

But an idea was a slow-growing weapon,

and would die quickly if further trouble developed. Another question he should have asked Pen Gibson—why he was so sure his brother had not died accidentally the evening he started to swim his horse across the Sawatch.

The river growled and slashed at its rocks and held its secret.

Andreas dug out of the sand at daylight. Lucifer was browsing on the high bank above him. After breakfast Andreas started across toward the quartz hills where a trail would lead him to the ridge route, the short way back to Galatia City.

The current of the snow-fed river was powerful. It swept the rump of the mule downstream, and Andreas, holding to a stirrup and swimming on the upper side, had to kick with his feet high and use his free hand powerfully to keep from being swept against Lucifer. It was an old story. They had done it together many times before, and there was nothing to fear, even when the choppy flow of mid-stream began to slap them with vicious hands.

The chugging *splutt!* near Andreas' shoulder was louder than the sound of water. He heard the rifle, and saw the smoke from the quartz rocks on the hill. That was all he heard and saw before his head exploded.

He was against Lucifer, pinned hard by the water's force, and then he was slipping under the mule. A threshing hoof struck his side and pushed him clear.

He was not unconscious, but he was helpless, turning over and over in the water. Rocks that ripped the surface touched him greasily. One held him for an instant and he lacked strength to grasp at it. He had just energy enough to take a deep breath before he slipped away and went plunging down again.

Sometimes he saw the sky, brightening with sunrise. Then it was black rocks and the booming of the water and his head was filled with grainy roaring sounds. It lasted for an eternity. He gulped air when he had the chance. He held his breath when the water churned him under, and gradually he gained enough strength to swim a little with the current.

The water took him around a bend and threw him into backwash behind a huge black rock. He let his feet down. There was no bottom. His head went under and he was a long time coming to the surface. He

swam then with all the power he had, toward the shore. When his feet went down again they touched slippery rocks.

He staggered two steps and fell. He crawled. When he could no longer exert the smallest effort and his arms buckled under him, he was thinking of Mary Sanders.

He lay a long time before he realized that he was against a sloping bank, and that his head was out of water.

Several times he tried to make the little climb to dry ground, but he was too tired. The numbing backwash of the river tugged at his legs, and tried to turn him sidewise and roll his head under water again.

Lin See was making the sign of the pistol. Mary Sanders was slicing roast beef. Gibson and Sudden shook their heads at him. There was something he had to tell Pen Gibson.

The river pulled him sidewise. His head went under once more. He clawed against the rocks and climbed.

It was the longest journey of his life . . . over rocks that bruised his ribs, over rocks that slid away from him and tore his hands. He crawled forever. But when he came to with his head hammering agonizingly, only his upper body was out of water. It was a long time before he finally felt the hot sun on his legs, and knew that he had beaten the river at last.

Some time later he sat up. His neck was drawn with cords of fire. He became conscious of ripped clothing and bruised flesh wherever skin showed.

The bullet gash on his head was not two inches long. He kept feeling it gently, sure now of how Joe Gibson had died. When he finally gained his feet, the world tried to throw him from its surface, but after a while he walked away.

A long-faced giant on a brockled bay came at him in the dusk when he was stumbling through long grass, trying hard to remember which way would bring him to Bell.

Lin See leaped down. He wore range clothes, but there was a scent of starch and soap and cleanliness about him as he examined Andreas' head. Lin See lifted him and set him in the saddle.

"Bell," Andreas muttered. "Take me to see Pen Gibson."

The interval of dozing did not seem long to him. He rode slumped, with his right

palm on the horn and his left hand clasped around the other wrist. It was like his Texas days of riding night guard on a quiet herd, except that he could not snap himself into complete awareness when little sounds came through.

SOMETIME during the night Lin See lifted him down. He said Gibson's name and tried to tell him something, but the dark closed in again.

Andreas woke up on the bunk in the tiny cabin he had built the year before on his own filed land on Marvene Creek, eight miles from where he had been shot. Lin See was gone. There was a large rock on the stove, a warning not to build a fire.

The cabin rocked for several moments. There was still a dull ache in his head and he was so stiff he moved like an old man.

There were no horse tracks outside. After a while he saw that they had been brushed out with a spruce bough. The sun got into his head, and the ache began to increase. He closed the door and felt along the wall until he found the bunk again.

Lying in half stupor all day, he kept thinking that he should be on his way to Bell to talk again to Pen Gibson. But Gibson was already sure of how his brother had died while swimming the Sawatch, and would not listen when Andreas told him that there were only two men in the valley good enough with a rifle to send a range shot as the man had done yesterday, and then follow it with a crease shot that would be a very small mark after the Sawatch had pounded a body for a mile or two.

Bob Silengo could handle a long gun like that. The second man . . . well, it would not do any good to tell Gibson. With him it had to be a Sudden.

There was nothing to eat in the cabin.

Andreas waited that day, that night, and until the next night, trusting the judgment of Lin See. Once in Montana, Andreas had worked with two Chinese riders, big North China men like Lin See, demons in the saddle. Lin See must have been a rider once, before he found out the hard way that all a Chinese was expected to do was run a restaurant or laundry, or work over the waste piles of white placer mines.

Mary Sanders came in the middle of the night, riding the same bay Lin See had rented from Sloper's livery.

Andreas met her outside. She could not keep the quick catch from her voice when she asked, "Vince! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You're hungry." He helped her down and she began to untie a sack from the saddle.

"A preacher is always hungry." There was a touch of bitterness in his voice, and it kept her silent until they were inside.

"When Lucifer came in with a damp saddle, there were three men with enough courage to go look for you, Lin See, Sim Randolph and Bob Silengo. I wouldn't let Sim go because he's too trusting to be able to take care of himself. We were sure you were dead, Vince, so Silengo decided he could do more good by working on Sloper."

"Where was Billy Chelf?"

"Light the lamp. I'll make a fire. We won't be here much longer, so it shouldn't make any difference."

The lamp drove darkness into the corners of the room.

"Chelf wasn't in town," Mary said.

"Where was he?"

They looked at each other quietly. "He'd gone to Georgia Bar to buy some mining claims," Mary said.

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Yesterday I talked to two miners who were with him most of the day you were shot."

"Uh-huh. Whose idea was it to bring me here?"

"Lin See's. He came back and pointed at the river and shook his head. Lin See recognizes you for what you are, Vince. He's probably the greatest friend you'll ever have. He wants you out of the fight. He knows—"

She turned away and took the rock from the stove and lifted a lid with a rusty piece of iron. Then she replaced the lid carefully and went slowly toward Andreas.

He sensed what was coming, and watched her with a bleak, hopeless expression.

"Like me, Lin See knows that it wouldn't be cowardice if you left the country tonight, Vince. It would only be saving everything you've done for yourself. There's one way to stop this fight, and that way will wreck your life again."

Again. The past went through him in a cold roll. His eyes were looking inside him. He leaned against the bunk with the old

sickness and fear clutching him like the icy power of the Sawatch. His voice was harsh.

"What do you know about me, Mary?"

"So much it breaks my heart to see this sort of thing coming at you again. You'd be better off if the river had taken you than to go back . . ." She turned abruptly and began to build the fire. "We'll talk about it, if you want to, after you eat."

She stood in the shadows near the stove while he took his meal in silence. He ate automatically, and his thoughts would not stay in the present.

HE WAS twenty, riding with his father down the San Saba to preach his first sermon. Minister Josh Andreas was the happiest man in Texas that day, and his face showed it.

But the little town was in an uproar. The war had come at last, and no one was in a mood to listen to preaching. It was thirteen years before Vince Andreas preached that sermon, four years as a Confederate artilleryman, that twisted his mind away from the sacred importance of Sunday.

He came back to reconstruction that was rightly destruction. Old Josh Andreas had been killed just outside his church for preaching that God's justice was above Yankee justice. Andreas' younger brothers died fighting for land that carpetbaggers regarded as rightful spoil.

Andreas put on a gun and for five years led a group that carried on a new war. He discovered a blankness in himself that let him draw a gun with incredible speed and kill without conscious effort. But each aftermath grew worse.

He killed his enemies quickly. They were killing him with slow torture.

There were two of his family left when he made the break. He took them with him to Kansas, where one of them was killed a week after arriving by a stray bullet during a fight in which the marshal of the town also died.

In a savage reaction against lawless men, mostly against himself, he took the marshal's job. It was said that he kept better order than men who killed for lust or glory. But there came a day when he knew that killing, as a lawman or as an outlaw, was just the same.

Andreas resigned and rode away. They

said his nerve had broken. He was known. Everywhere he went, men who believed his courage was gone, and men who had to prove something else, found a way to challenge him. He swore he would stand and let himself be killed when the next test came, but each time the blankness also came, and then there was another dead face mocking the youth who had ridden with a proud father toward a church on a spring day that would never be again.

At last, with only his first name changed he found the peace he wanted in Sudder Valley. No one knew that the first sermon he preached, at Charley Sudden's ranch on a winter day, was the same one he had carried in his mind for thirteen years.

HE DID not realize that he had stopped eating, that he was kneeling at the bunk, until Mary Sanders put her hand on his shoulder.

"Let's go away together . . . San Saba Andreas."

It was the name his father had given him, and not a nickname. He rose quickly. "How did you know?"

"From a hundred little things all put together, and later from Lin See. He was a boy in the trail town where you were marshal." There were tears in her eyes. "What you owe this valley is not as great as what you owe yourself. You can't stand to be torn apart again."

"Ah, Mary—" He started to take her in his arms, but she stiffened against him, and her eyes were tortured.

She drew a long breath. "Bob Silengo went out yesterday and brought Sandy Isebear in alone. Tomorrow at ten o'clock in the morning Silengo is going to try him for the murder of Joe Gibson."

Andreas' hands fell at his sides. His face went white. "Is there any evidence?"

She spoke carefully, with all the life gone from her. "Ben Sloper was looking for a strayed horse the day Joe Gibson was shot and left to drown. Sloper saw it all. Sheriff Hawley knew where he had been that day, and questioned him. He got something out of Sloper, but not enough. He didn't get very much from Sloper until after Art Sudden was killed. The day the sheriff went to Bell he went there to arrest Isebear for the murder of Joe Gibson, but Isebear never let him say that much. The Gibsons had

to stand behind their own man, of course.

"Silengo knew what the sheriff knew, and finally—night before last—he got the truth out of Ben Sloper. He put Ben in jail as a witness, and yesterday he caught Isebear alone on Bell range and brought him in." There was a defeated look on her face. "Everyone says the trial will never be held."

"I've got to go back, Mary."

"Silengo is your nephew, isn't he?"

He nodded stonily.

They rode double. Until the lights of Galatia were in sight, they did not speak.

"Why did you hold this to the last?" Andreas asked.

"To know that you would have gone away with me is something I will always have."

By nine o'clock, Galatia citizens were under cover, or close enough to leap to it readily. Bell came in first. Pen Gibson's long black hair straggled from under his hat as he led his men up the silent street. Isebear was his cousin. The Suddens, not Isebear, had killed Joe Gibson, and this was all a Sudden trick, like importing gun fighters. Even if Isebear had killed Joe Gib-

son, the matter was something for Bell to handle, not for a Sudden-controlled district judge.

Pen Gibson's manner said all that. All the Gibson clan were with him. Orderly, deadly, they followed him up the street, saddles creaking against the quiet. They dismounted on the north side of the log courthouse. Gibson looked contemptuously at the small rock addition that was the jail. He could take Isebear out of that any time he wanted to, but he would wait and see what the Suddens cared to make of this farce.

Old Charley Sudden brought the Double S and all his kinsmen and friends in at a trot. The dismounted on the south side of the courthouse. Sudden laughed loudly at something his foreman said, then swaggered across the street to the Hardrock for a drink.

Watching from the side door of the Short-horn, Andreas could feel what the Suddens were thinking. The issue was not the trial. It was the Gibsons against the Suddens, and this was as good a place as any for the showdown. Blood would curl in the dusty street.



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"



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IT'S EASIER than you think! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic checks Dry Scalp . . . makes a world of difference in the good looks of your hair. It's ideal with massage before shampooing, too. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. It's double care . . . for both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical.

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Silengo was standing guard over Isebear and Sloper. Andreas had begged him to explain in advance the evidence to Pen Gibson. "It would be asking his permission to hold the trial," Silengo said.

"You're going beyond your authority."

"I know that."

There would be no jury. One drifting cowboy had said he would like to serve on the jury, but he had sobered up and ridden away from Galatia City.

Only a few knew why Ben Sloper was being held in jail. The fat-faced liveryman was eager now to give his testimony. The glory of attention outweighed the fact that the Gibsons would try to kill him. Sloper thought that the Suddens would handle the Gibsons, and he would then emerge as the hero of the whole affair.

Andreas knew the trial would never be, unless—

He watched Pen Gibson cant his hat toward his saber-scarred cheek and saunter toward the Hardrock. Gibson would let everyone see that he, to, could idle at a bar. He and Sudden would ignore each other while they planned to kill each other.

A half hour passed. Sudden came out. Pen Gibson came out a little later. They strolled across the street. Young riders on each side took the horses against the gravel hill and stayed there with them. Sudden sent five men across the street, where they could have full view of the Gibsons. Five Bell riders crossed and took positions near the hitch rack in front of the Valley House.

Another group of Sudden men went to the back corner of the courthouse on their side. They peered around at Gibson men at the opposite corner, and then both groups stepped back and waited.

Bob Silengo was inside, between the two lead jaws. He was pacing back and forth, his brows coal black against the paleness of his forehead. After a while he would try to start the trial.

Twenty minutes. There was no use in talking again to Bob Silengo. There was no use to try to talk to Sudden and Gibson. Andreas ran his hand along his hip. It was an old gesture, and he did it without realizing that he had not yet put on the piece of leather and steel that was gunbelt and holster in one piece.

Lin See came out in front of his laundry, and stood there impassively with his hands

folded inside the wide sleeves of a white gown. *White for death.*

Andreas walked down to him. Men watched the move with slow, fierce interest. Andreas patted the sleeves of the gown, and tapped his fingers against other looseness that could cover a pistol. There was none.

Lin See took big hands from the sleeves. He spread them. He made the pistol sign and shook his head, smiling slightly.

"Good, Lin See. Good. Don't get into it."

"Good." Lin See smiled again, and put his hands away.

Down the street, Mary Sanders and little Randolph were standing in front of the cafe. They were the only other residents of Galatia in full view. Andreas started to raise his hand toward them, then let it drop.

He walked across the street to the Hardrock.

Billy Chelf and his bartenders were looking out, standing well back from the window. Chelf shifted his hard gaze to Andreas. The bartenders merely glanced at him and then nervously watched the men across the street.

"You want to help stop it, Chelf?" Andreas asked.

"I can't say that I do."

"That's what I thought. Step out with me."

"Why? A man could get shot out there in a few minutes more."

"You will, Chelf."

The black stones of the saloonman's eyes held Andreas in a narrow grip. Skin tightened around them as he smiled.

"It's too late, Andreas."

"You mentioned a 'high-rolling' game that day on the pass, Chelf. Other men called it a dirty game or a filthy game. I know now why you called it 'high-rolling'."

"Do you now?" Chelf took a cigar from his pocket and lit it with slow movements "Who are you, Andreas?"

"Come out in the street, if you're not afraid, and I'll tell you."

"That was a little childish, Andreas, coming from you. You know I'm not afraid." Chelf let a thin smile break over the poised tension outside. "I see your point, but they won't believe it, so why not have that breath of fresh air?"

They walked out in the street, and the pinpoints of suspended violence centered on them.

Andreas let his first words carry only to Chelf. "My first name is San Saba, Chelf."

Chelf's face brightened with surprise. He snapped his finger. "Sure! Why didn't I guess that?" And then his face changed to the same old calculating expression that always came to gun fighters when they first saw San Saba Andreas and thought their chances better than his.

"Well!" Chelf smiled. "That will make it all the more interesting. You didn't expect me to scare out, did you?"

"Men like you never do. I just wanted you to know, so you'd be at your best when I put on my gun and come across the street after you in a few minutes."

"Half way across will be enough."

After Andreas' first few words, both their voices had carried to the tense audience.

"You wanted this whole valley, Chelf, and you almost got it. You pulled Sandy Isebear into your plan and got him to kill his own cousin to start it. Then he killed Art Sudden. Hawley was getting close. Isebear killed him, and the Gibsons had to back the play.

"But things didn't move fast enough to suit you. You sent for those three toughs to make it look like the Gibsons or the Suddens were importing gun hands. You and Isebear killed those men, and it made both sides uneasy and afraid. By then you didn't need Isebear any longer. You went with me to bury the men, and it was rigged with Isebear to have him take in Bell riders to wreck your saloon.

"That was to be your excuse to kill Isebear openly. He finally realized the truth, and he was going to kill you that day down the street. The Bell men who would have helped him didn't even know they were being used. Isebear lost his sand when Silengo and I made him stand alone, but he would have tried to get you the easy way later on. I was out to make peace between fools. Maybe that was why Isebear tried to kill me the same way he killed Joe Gibson, and because I had helped make him look sick here on the street.

"It was all yours, Chelf. The two factions would have shot each other down until you could have stepped in like a sneaking carpet-bagger and taken over everything." Andreas swung his hand behind him. "Look at the fools, Chelf. You've been **laughing at them all this time.**"

"That's a lot of wild guessing, preacher." Chelf said that for the Gibsons and the Suddens. For Andreas, he said, "I thought you were getting close the day you saved Sandy Isebear. Don't hang it all on Sandy. I killed Art Sudden myself. Another thing, Andreas—I didn't send for those three men. They were old—ah—friends who thought I owed them something for a little deal some-time ago. Since they were coming, and I had to deal with them eventually . . . It worked out very well, didn't it?"

With men straining their ears only a few feet away, Chelf said that softly, smiling. He blew cigar smoke toward the silent men across the street. He laughed, and then he let his voice run normally.

"Put on that gun, preacher, that famous gun of yours."

He went back inside the Hardrock.

Andreas waited. Pen Gibson and Charley Sudden had their chance then. They could walk over and ask their questions, and force themselves to reason.

So Andreas waited, hoping; but as a gun fighter, he knew the truth: the clans had strung themselves too far down the trail of violence to be moved by words. They might be wondering, and some of them would be sliding their minds from side to side, hoping, rather than believing, there was a way out.

No one moved. Charley Sudden stood with his feet spread, staring past his broken nose. His mouth was only a line on his face. Pen Gibson began to roll a cigarette with his left hand.

The sickness was in him as he went to get his pistol. If it were not for Bob Silengo, trying to do what Andreas had said a lawman must do . . . No, Bob was only the immediate reason that had brought Andreas back. This had to be for the whole valley, for men everywhere whose minds were blind with hate, even if it blotted out forever that youth on the San Saba.

Andreas had at last reached the point where he could go out and let himself be shot down, but now the lives of too many others depended on him.

He crossed the street, not looking to where he knew Mary Sanders still waited with her hands hidden in her apron.

The built-up, curving back of the holster went snugly against his thigh, held there by the tension of curved spring steel which

ran upward into a reinforced section of the belt. The holster rode high, and men had made terrible errors because of that fact.

Andreas knew Chelf was unafraid, cold of nerve. But how fast or accurate he was did not matter, because San Saba Andreas could kill Billy Chelf as easily as any of the others, who also had been cold-blooded men, skilled and without fear.

The thirteen years would be started all over. He removed the gunbelt and knelt by the whiskey case which held things from the past. He prayed for saloonman Billy Chelf.

When he rose and put the heavy leather around him again, the heavy quiet of the town came to him.

It was five minutes of ten.

Before he took three steps toward Chelf waiting on the walk in front of the Hard-rock, the old deadness was in Andreas' nerves. Chelf knew he would not break, as Isebear had broken. Chelf would pretend that he was going to walk right through him, and would start his draw while still in motion.

He went toward the street. Chelf was off the walk and coming toward him.

It would start when his right foot was down. Just before that his stride with the left foot would be shortened. If Andreas cared to take the advantage, he had it in the time between that final step. He gauged the distance, and he knew just where Chelf's last step would take him.

Those watching would say that Andreas had let Chelf make the first move, never knowing how wrong they were. Billy Chelf had been a dead man since the day Andreas studied his movements against Isebear.

The slaps against the dust were from an outside world. White flashed between Andreas and his target. He saw a sinewy, yellowish hand pull a hatchet from the back of a white gown.

Instinct made Andreas leap aside. One bullet went through Lin See. Another made a sodden sound. Lin See was a powerful man, in motion, and his mind was set on one act. The hatchet, flashing like new gold, came around and struck.

Lin See lay at Chelf's feet. Chelf stood just an instant, with the hatchet buried to its head behind his ear, and then fell across Lin See.

They started from the courthouse slowly,

and then some of them began to run toward the three men in the street.

Pen Gibson prodded Chelf with his foot. "Dead," he said. "I guess he ought to be." He looked at Sudden without pleasure, and his mind was turning several facts. "Maybe, Sudden, we ought to listen to what Silengo has to say." The balance was still delicate. Sudden could have ruined it with a word.

"Well . . ." Sudden rubbed his heavy chin. He looked at Andreas. "What was it you and Chelf were whispering about here in the street?"

"He admitted the truth of what I said. He said he killed Art Sudden." Andreas began to unbuckle the gunbelt.

Sudden looked at Pen Gibson with strong dislike. "Well, if you say so, Gibson, maybe we ought to hear Silengo's evidence."

Bob Silengo pushed through the crowd. His face did not show that he had ever felt any doubt about the trial going on as scheduled. He looked from Gibson to Sudden, and asked quietly, "Can I have six men from each side for a jury?"

The two leaders nodded. Their mutual dislike was still there, but reason had at last been jarred to the surface.

The gunbelt struck the ground.

Pen Gibson shook his head. "That's a funny rig, preacher. I'll hand it to you for guts, but . . ." He looked at Lin See and Chelf, and shook his head again.

Mary Sanders pushed aside a curious cowboy who would have picked up the belt and pistol. She wrapped the belt ends around the holster, and then she wrapped the whole thing in her apron.

Charley Sudden's eyes were narrow as he watched the pistol disappear. He was an old-timer who had been in Kansas after the war, and now he knew that curious holster. His face swung toward Andreas.

"Good Lord! You're—" He closed his mouth, and that was as close as he would ever be to saying what he knew.

"—you're sure lucky," Sudden said, "that there was one white man in this whole country. Give me a hand with Lin See, boys. The trial can wait a few minutes."

Minister Vince Andreas and Mary Sanders went down the street together. They turned toward the river once, and when they resumed their way, her apron was flat again.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 43)

R EIN up a spell, pardner, and let's see how your range savvy is holding up these days. Below are listed 20 questions on cowpokes and Western subjects in general. If you can answer 18 or more of them correctly, you're top-hand material. Answer 16 or 17 and you're good. But call the turn on fewer than 15, and you're crowding into the tenderfoot class. Good luck!

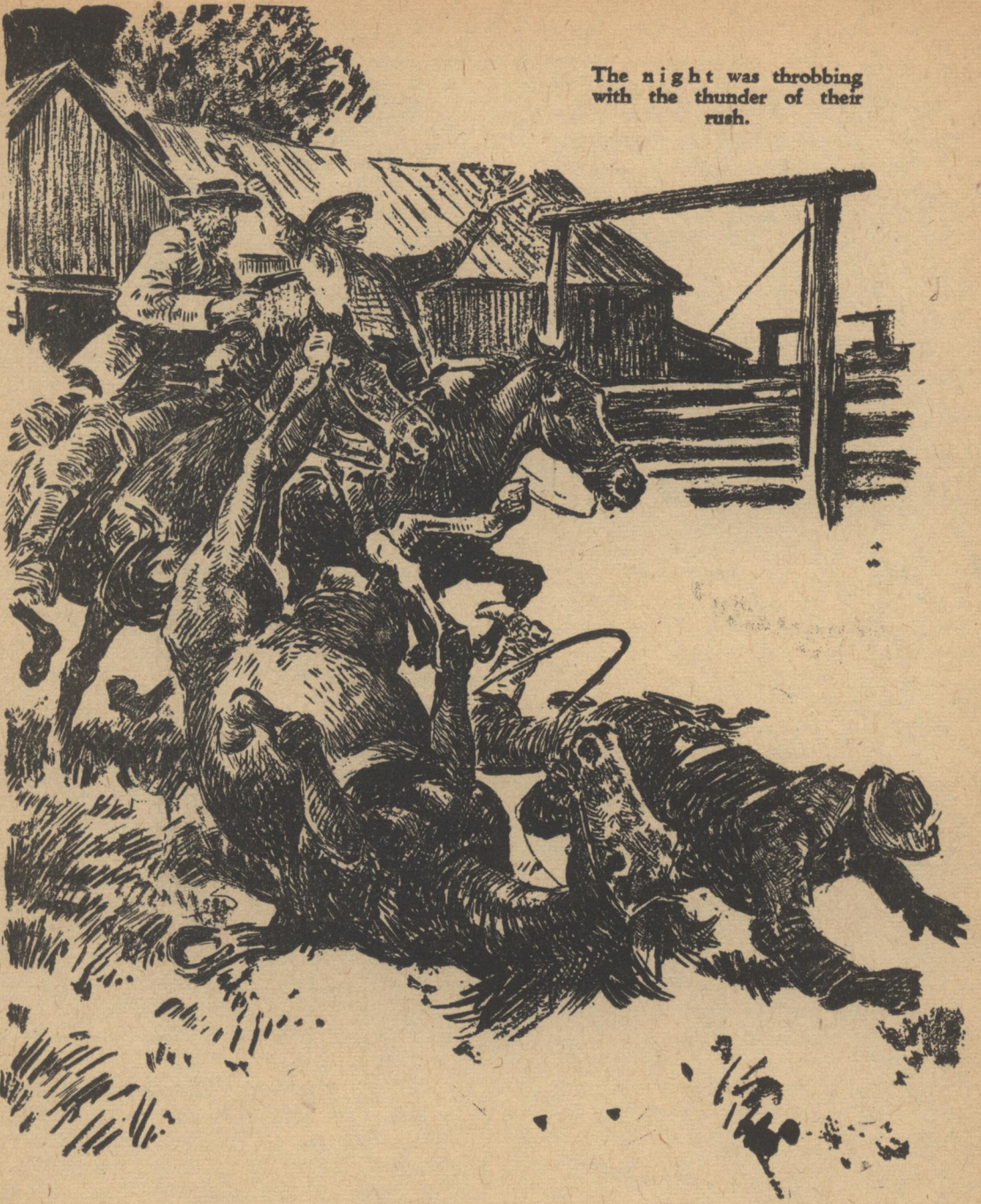
1. According to the westerner, what kind of an animal is known as a "beef"?
2. According to the reservation Indian's way of thinking, what was the meaning of the term, "beef issue"?
3. In the language of the cowpoke, what is the meaning of the term, "nickel-plated"?
4. If an old-time Westerner referred to the "big swimming," what would he be talking about?
5. What are two meanings of the cowpoke slang expression, "belly up"?
6. In the old west, would you have been most likely to find a "bed wagon" in a large or a small outfit?
7. True or false? Cowpokes would likely use the term, "bringing up the drags," in reference to a person noted for his slow movements.
8. True or false? A "broken bit" is a bit made in two pieces and joined by a swivel.
9. If the ranch boss said there was a "buscadero" on the layout, which of the following things would you think he was talking about? An officer of the law? An especially wild horse? A speckled cow?
10. True or false? "Butterfly" is a trick roping term.
11. Would you, as a top-notch ranch hand, like to work for a cap-and-ball layout?
12. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you to report to the "caporal," which of the following individuals would you seek out? The ranch cook? The boss? The daughter of the ranch owner?
13. What is the meaning of the Western slang expression "chew it finer"?
14. True or false? A "Cheyenne cut" is a type of wing chap which was developed in Wyoming.
15. As the cow puncher uses it, the term "compadre" means: Good friend? Bartender? Outlaw?
16. If the ranch boss sent you out to get the "converter," which of the following should you return with? A six-gun? A school teacher? A preacher?
17. What is the meaning of the cowpoke slang term, "crumb incubator"?
18. If a cowpoke referred to another person as "cultus," what would he mean?
19. What is the meaning of the cowpoke slang expression "to dab"?
20. True or false? In the language of the cowpuncher, the feet are sometimes referred to as "dashboards."



WRONG WAY GRAVE

His death was a legend where the gunfast rode—but the King had one last chore: to find the men whose ghostly guns were barring him—from his grave!

The night was throbbing
with the thunder of their
rush.



THE LINE STORM was rumbling itself out somewhere over the Rockies, leaving behind it the damp, green silences of the high places and the turned-over leaves of aspen and birch and alder. Dr. Kyle Mackenzie, staring through the wet windows of the two rooms comprising his home and office, was removing his rubber apron and trying to listen to the muttering skies—an odd habit which had settled into

By
**GEORGE C.
APPELL**

him recently and one which embarrassed him. Old Bennie Roy had told him that King Quantrill rode the thunderheads when the weather was up, though as everyone knew, Quantrill had been dead for three years. Until this morning.

He hung up the apron and started to roll down his sleeves. Without turning from the window he told Bennie Roy, "You can make it to home, now."

Bennie was big-headed almost to deformity, and the rough gray curls of his beard made his face seem bigger still. He swung his legs off the table, clutching the new bandage that bound his hip, and reached for his trousers.

"I don't want to go home, doc."

Mackenzie linked his cuffs, chiding himself for his childish imagination. But after what had happened this morning. . . .

"You'd better. You can't stay here."

Bennie tugged on his trousers and tucked them into his boots. He was crouching, favoring his torn hip.

"You can't either, doc."

Mackenzie put on his coat. He had a young face with old eyes, and when he moved, it was with the deliberate motions of a man who never knows what to expect.

"Go on back to Jessary's, Bennie, and I'll stay here."

Bennie reached for his hat and limped toward the door. "Ain't got a home no more, since they fixed Jessary." He put on his hat. "How much, doc?"

"Call it a dollar." That had become Mackenzie's usual fee since half the town of Ravenswood had turned against him. The rumors had caused that—rumors that he had saved King Quantrill's life during the War, when he could just as easily have let him die.

Bennie fumbled in his beltings. "Can I have the bullet?"

Mackenzie picked it up with his Blasius pincers. "It entered anteriorly—that's from the front—and comminuted—shattered—and lodged against your pelvis. That's your riding bone, so to speak." He exchanged the flattened bullet for the dollar. A man had to eat, after all. "You going to report this to the marshal, or do I?"

"Don't be a fool, doc! What good can a town marshal do against Quantrill—hey?" And Bennie thrust his tangled beard an inch from the doctor's shaven jaws. "My ridin'

bone, hey? Where'm I goin' to ride to? Back to Jessary's place where they're waitin' to tear me to pieces with scatter guns?"

Mackenzie stiffened. He hadn't seen King Quantrill in three years, not since that night in a barn near Taylorsville, down in Kentucky, when Blue and Gray horses were shaking the woods in search of each other and the guerrilla leader was lying in the straw moaning under Mackenzie's field surgery.

"An' doc, they'll get Frank Blaisdell, too. He owns most the land out here."

Philip Jessary had been Number One on Quantrill's list, and now he was dead, and Bennie, his handyman, had barely escaped with his life. And Dr. Mackenzie, it was spoken through the valleys, was Number Two. Frank Blaisdell was Number Three. Each of them, in his own way, had offended William Clarke Quantrill, whose headstone you can see today not fifty feet from the crumbling foundations of the old barn in Taylorsville: *Born Canal Dover, Ohio, 1837; Died On This Spot, May, 1865.*

And here it was September, 1868, and rumor had the man very much alive. The rumors had filtered west by stagecoach, by prospector, by 'steader. They mentioned names like Olney, like Stoughton. They had to do with Jessary, Mackenzie, Blaisdell.

For the second time that day, Mackenzie asked, "You saw him, Bennie? You're sure?" He had to know, he had to tell Blaisdell. Frank Blaisdell would throw a gun on him and order him out as he'd done before; and Evelyn would stand next to her father and never raise an eyelash. But Blaisdell had to be told.

Bennie Roy said, "Doc, it was him. An' no damned marshal—not like Nerens, at least—is goin' to get the squeal from me. Nerens is never in his office anyway." Bennie blew out his breath and tested his leg. "Jessary'd babble some, when he was in corn an' nervous, about how glad he was that Quantrill's dead, an' let him stay in hell. He'd tell me how he'd been farmin' in Kentuck' when Quantrill rud up an' wanted a hide-out, an' Jessary wouldn't give it, an' later told some Fed officers where he was holin' in a barn down the rud. That's why Phil Jessary was Number One out here—but he ain't nervous no longer, doc."

"Bennie, tell me again what this man looked like. I've got to be sure."

BENNIE ROY scratched the curls of his beard. "Big—sittin' big on a bay. Gray hat, black coat. Big blue eyes. Cold, when he looked at you. No beard, though. 'Bout your age. An' a scarred nose. I seen it when he put his face to me."

Bennie sucked in a sharp breath and grabbed his head in his hands. He was living the morning all over again; coming out of the crib with feed for the hogs, hearing the shot gun bark twice, seeing Jessary stumble backward, clawing at his holster. Seeing Jessary go down kicking, clawing more slowly. Seeing faint smoke sift through dripping trees. Hearing the big rider in front say, "Stand still, dad."

"How many were with him?" Mackenzie felt cold sick inside. It was King Quantrill, right enough.

"Mebbe half a troop. Two dozen. Hard to tell, through the rain. I didn't see many weapons, though." Bennie blew out his breath again. "I jus' stood there, not movin', an' the King says over his shoulder, 'Your shot, Mosser'. A man raised a rifle an' plugged it into me an' I jus' kept on spinnin' until I come against the house. I lay still 'til they was gone. I didn't dare open my eyes 'til their hooves was gone."

That's when Bennie had managed to mount a dray and ride down through the alder thickets to Mackenzie's place on the edge of Ravenswood. And that's when the doctor had made the old man comfortable, taken the farm dray and pounded up to Jessary's. Jessary hadn't felt anything, that much was certain. So Mackenzie had left Jessary under a blanket and returned to treat Bennie. And now Bennie was treated.

"What're you going to do?" asked Mackenzie.

"Stay out of sight. You tell the marshal, doc."

"All right. I'll tell the marshal, if he's in town."

Nerens had been making many night rides lately, claiming that night air was better for the animals. About every two weeks, he'd lead a pack mule out of Ravenswood to inspect his jurisdiction. Mackenzie clapped on his hat and followed Bennie from the office.

He trudged through the viscous mire with fingers shoved into weskit pockets, coattails swinging. He didn't look up when Bennie trotted heavily past, spattering him with mud. He was facing down, frowning, plagued



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with the possibilities of what might happen. Today, maybe. Or tonight—Quantrill had always preferred darkness—or tomorrow at the latest. Mackenzie reached the plank-walk and clumped along it to the marshal's office.

Gideon Nerens was a tall man, and painfully short of breath. It was necessary for him to gasp between words. The tiny blue spoons of his fingernails scrabbled up his lapels like little crabs as he faced Kyle Mackenzie.

"I'm in yo' debt, suh."

"Official visit." Mackenzie waited while the marshal unlocked the office—the wall safe inside was an arsenal of new weapons maintained in case of Indian trouble—and waited while Nerens sat down and wheezed into a neckerchief. The doctor refused a chair.

Nerens' uncertain eyes wavered as Mackenzie spoke. They slid from desk blotter to wall safe to hat peg to spittoon. And when the doctor had finished, the marshal made a sucking noise and spat onto the slanted rim of the spittoon with the sound of dropped playing cards.

"Seems odd, don't it, that the man who saved the King's life should be wantin' to ride him down?" Nerens' tone was pitched to a thin whine, as if he were prepared to abandon any statement immediately and make one diametrically opposite, in order to please.

Fury swirled crimson in Kyle Mackenzie's blood, and it needed all the discipline of his thirty-five years to hold it down. Gideon Nerens, sensing that, shrugged. "What I mean is, Quantrill's not goin' to harm this town, so why go on a goose chase fo' him? That's what I really meant, doc." His fingers, having scampered up his vest, came to rest on his black string tie, where they remained. "Ol' Phil Jessary, eh? Probably some bad debt come up from his past. Nevuh can tell 'bout such things."

"Mr. Nerens, I am trying to impress upon you the fact that Jessary was murdered this morning by a man answering Quantrill's description, and that Bennie Roy was wounded. I saw Jessary and declared him, and I treated Bennie. He's in the Silver Star now, repeating what I am telling you. Is that clear, Mr. Nerens?" The doctor was leaning across the desk, glaring down at the face under him. "And I don't care what you

say you meant, I resent the implication that I saved Quantrill's life. I did not. His own stamina did."

Gideon Nerens slid his fingers down to the desk top and splayed them out, like a man testing a keyboard.

"What d'you wish of me, suh? That I raise a posse an' chase a ghost all over Col-laraduh? Quantrill won't return to any place wher he can be recognized."

Mackenzie didn't know what to say. It had been like this since the rumors had started—there goes the man who pulled King Quantrill through.

And nothing Mackenzie could tell them would change their minds. He had treated Quantrill as he would have treated any human being, and it was a siege in surgery which he would never forget—flapping lamp shadows making the barn walls dance; the twisting torso on the straw, naked to its wounds. Distant sounds of pursuit—Blue horse chasing Gray horse through the Kentucky woods. The captain's husky voice, "It's Quantrill, doc. Let the swine die." None of them wanted him saved, after his raids on undefended towns, his treatment of women; his massacre of prisoners, even after he'd been mustered into the Confederate service. "An old party up the road named Jessary told us he was down this way, and I'll report that we wounded him in a barn and he refused to surrender. So"—and the captain had placed a forefinger to his temple and jerked his thumb.

Then there had come the rushing clatter of counter-attack and the thudding of Blue horse crying the alarm—the War didn't end in Kentucky until that summer—and the screech of Rebel yells in the dark woods.

"Come on, Mackenzie!" The captain's voice was blade-sharp. And Kyle—though with professional reluctance to leave a patient—had ridden for his life.

Afterward, long afterward, when the Gray bugles had sounded Recall for the last time and crumpled into eternal silence, Mackenzie heard that his patient had died and been buried near the barn. That had been his understanding and everyone else's—until the rumors filtered west.

Gideon Nerens sighed, shoved back his chair, and stood up.

"What'd Jessary get shot with, doc?" The sound of his cough was the sound of two shingles struck together.

Mackenzie said, "A twelve-gauge shotgun, at twenty feet. Bennie Roy was hit with a forty-four caliber. He had the sense to lie quiet—"

"Never mind Bennie's sense. Get on with the bullet." Nerens' eyes were half-closed.

"Forty-four. And because it lodged, instead of penetrating through, I'd swear forty-four, forty, two hundred in any court. That's a Henry rifle, which knocks a man down anywhere it hits him."

"Swear in cou't?" Nerens wheezed, choked, and coughed. "You know a lot, don't you, doc?" He whipped out a soiled kerchief and patted his mouth.

"I was a contract surgeon under Phil Sheridan—"

"War's ovuh, suh." The marshal removed his hat from the wall peg and put it on. "I s'pose I got to look at Jessary." He studied Mackenzie's flushed features. "Doc—you wouldn't be in possession of either a twelve-gauge or a Henry, would you? I mean—an' this is Jessary talkin', not me—Jessary always did say that you pulled the King out of it, right off his death bed." Gideon Nerens re-applied the kerchief to his mouth, facing away.

Anger crawled through Kyle Mackenzie like a live thing. When he spoke, it was through his side teeth.

"I don't recall him saying that, ever. What you mean this time is, I killed Jessary because he was ruining my practice? Is that what you mean? That I murdered the man who asked me to come out to Colorado and open a practice where he planned to live?"

Nerens turned slowly around, arms loose, eyes still half-closed.

"I nev' said a thing, doc. I only quoted po' Jessary, God rest his soul. You seem to fo'get, bein' a easterner, that the territory of Collaraduh's sentiments remain divided about the war, but not about the most unsavory charactuh who evuh—"

MACKENZIE'S fist arced swiftly from his side and smashed into that moist mouth and belted the head back and propelled Nerens gracefully backward against the wall. He hit it, bounced forward, and sat down all at once, knees high and hands on the floor. His hat was off, and a trickle of orange saliva was leaking from his lips.

Gideon Nerens pulled his long feet under

him, braced with his hands, and heaved himself up. He stooped, retrieved his hat, and straightened. He dabbed at his bleeding lips with the kerchief, gasped, and said, "That was a ver' foolish thing to do, doctuh." He pocketed the kerchief, put on his hat and marched out, keys dangling.

Mackenzie licked his knuckles and marched after the marshal, who locked up and then double-timed across the street. Two horses caked with the red mud of the roads were turning into the Silver Star, and Nerens approached one, gesticulating and talking. It was Frank Blaisdell, who was putting his left leg deep into his stirrup and lifting his right to dismount. The other rider was his daughter Evelyn—Evvie of the laughing blue eyes—Evvie at twenty-two, riding imperiously with head high and back straight, with a steel hand and a quick whip-lash for life.

She was wearing a half-length green riding cape with an Empress plume curling like a soft hand around her tucked-in, auburn hair. And she was prancing her roan, not listening to Nerens' rubbly voice.

Frank Blaisdell took his daughter's bits and drew the roan to the rail and tied it. Then he assisted her down, meanwhile following the direction of Nerens' arm, pointed across the street to Kyle Mackenzie.

Blaisdell shook out the folds of his coat and peeled off his gloves. The thin, amber twilight clarified more than obscured his square, heavy features. And his voice carried across the street like a rifled shell.

"Doctor, would you be kind enough to come over here a moment?"

Mackenzie presented himself, and risked a bow to Evvie. But even as he smiled into blue eyes flecked with softer blue lights, there came some faint warning from her. He faced around to Frank Blaisdell.

"You wish to speak with me?"

"Doctor, I have heard there's been a shooting at Phil Jessary's place. Mr. Nerens, here, tells me that you have declared Jessary dead."

Mackenzie drew in a deep, lung-cracking breath. "Is that why Mr. Nerens hastened from your place to town? Because he had heard, too, that there was a shooting?"

Evvie Blaisdell and her father swung surprised faces toward each other. She said, "Was he there? I was in the kitchen with Aunt Memmie, making fudge."

Blaisdell thrust his gloves into his boot topping. "No, he wasn't. Young Imbrie told me."

Gideon Nerens removed his hat and passed it through his palms with quick, tugging motions. "I heard . . . on the road . . ."

"Who killed Jessary?" Blaisdell stepped ahead of Nerens and put his back to him. His frown was thick and his eyes were cold, for he too had given credence to the rumors of Quantrill's coming.

Kyle Mackenzie tongue-swiped dry lips. "Bennie says it was—" Frank Blaisdell's harsh eyes were daring him to finish it—"King Quantrill."

Evvie stepped closer to her father and snaked an arm into his. The laughter was gone from her eyes and they were very large and very still.

Blaisdell cracked blunt fingers. "Nerens, take Bennie and half a dozen men from the Star—they're all from my place anyway—and go out and tote Jessary in, so we can give him a Christian burial. Evvie dear, I suggest you visit the yarn shop, as you had planned. And please get some ribbons or pretties for Aunt Memmie, her cooking is worsening." To Mackenzie, "Doctor, there's a back room in the Star which I consider to be neutral ground. Will you join me?"

Nerens was turning toward Blaisdell, furious at the order; but Blaisdell and Mackenzie merely walked away, leaving the remnants of the marshal's dignity behind them. They sat down and ordered sour mash and spring water, and Blaisdell drew a bent cheroot from his pocket and lit it. Mackenzie regarded with overt curiosity this short man whose honesty and simple dignity needed neither whiskey nor pomposity to make him seem tall.

Blaisdell said, "I deal off the top of the deck, doctor. If this is Quantrill, what do you know about it?"

"I repeat, I haven't seen or heard from him since May, 1865." Kyle drank, something he rarely did before full dark. "Why would I be Number Two, if I saved his life?"

"War makes strange bargains, that's why. You haven't got a practice worth a sheep's tick, and maybe you'd like some land to scratch around on. Quantrill was only avenging, east of here, but he'll come here both to avenge and to get land—lots of land."

"Do you call Jessary's corpse—land?"

"Jessary ran a good farm. He was killed because he'd informed on Quantrill back in Kentucky." Blaisdell quietly sipped his mash. "I imagine you could make yourself look pretty innocent if the King put a torch to your place and then you disappeared for awhile. But why should he kill you?"

"Mr. Blaisdell—" Mackenzie had to finish his drink in order to steady rage-stiffened hands—"I don't know the answer to that. I do know, however, that you come directly after me on this list. I suggest that you take steps to defend yourself and the members of your household." He cracked his glass down. "It's known that Quantrill favors darkness."

"Then you believe that it really is Quantrill who's here?" The challenge, the accusation, were gone from Blaisdell's voice now. He had become a man who wanted information, and whatever else he had sought had either satisfied him or been discarded from his mind.

The bartender stepped in, apologized, and placed a lamp on the table between them. When he was gone, Mackenzie nodded. He could project his vision far beyond the sallow yellow light and see into Kansas, into Missouri. All the way into Kentucky. He could see King Quantrill's be-smocked riders tapping a nester on the shoulder: *The King wants you back, we're headin' west*. He could see a masked rider calling across a fence to a dirt farmer: *the King wants you back, we're heading for Colorado*. Stealthy, all of it, because from '65 on, no man who had ridden with Quantrill dared to sit by an open window, or move beyond reach of his gun.

What Kyle Mackenzie's vision could not bring him was a picture of Quantrill's band securing weapons without rousing an alarm. That was the point he intended to make to Frank Blaisdell.

"Jessary was killed with a twelve-gauge. They tried to kill Bennie Roy with a Henry forty-four—I imagine to save shotgun shells, which are hard to come by. They didn't have a twelve-gauge on the twenty-second of last month when they burned out that 'steader on the Purgatoire. Name of Stoughton."

"Well?"

"You will observe, Mr. Blaisdell, that the weapons get newer and better as they pro-

gress west. And none were stolen from the victims because they might have been traced. And none of these weapons have been purchased from stores, because Quantrill, who plundered all of Kansas and half of Missouri before he took the Confederate oath, might be recognized—as might any of his men. Now is it stacking up?”

“Go on.”

Mackenzie lifted his palms. “Someone’s supplying Quantrill from a central point.”

“Who is this Stoughton? The name doesn’t register with me.” Blaisdell flicked ash, and let it spill to the floor. His eyes never left Mackenzie’s face.

“It does with me. Chan Stoughton was a captain in the cavalry command to which I was attached as surgeon. He was present at Quantrill’s—demise—and urged me to abandon treatment and let the swine die.”

Mackenzie sat back. “I don’t know how many more there were before him, but I do know how many more there are.”

Frank Blaisdell stamped out his cheroot and drained his glass. Abruptly he asked: “Did you abandon treatment, doctor?”

“Well, I” Mackenzie had to think

back. He had been twisting the forward thumbscrew of a Darmschere, sucking out the last bullet; and he’d been telling Stoughton to look into his bags and find some catgut and a needle.

“Let’s see, Quantrill was still conscious when the counter-attack came out of the woods. Chan gave the order to—” And with monstrous surprise it entered Kyle Mackenzie’s head why he had been honored with the Number Two position on Quantrill’s list: the man’s pain-shot consciousness had registered final impressions, not initial ones.

Mackenzie had not attempted to analyze it before, because it had not been important before. He stood up as Frank Blaisdell stood up. The man was striding to the door, opening it, side-stepping into it.

“I suspected as much, Mackenzie. Supplying guns to a bandit whose life you once saved is more than a territorial offense; it enters into the realm of Federal law. You’ll hang for this, just like your former patient Mr. Quantrill will hang.” Blaisdell, one boot on the door sill, snagged out a revolving pistol and held it on Mackenzie. “Barkeep! Has Mr. Nerens returned from Jessary’s

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yet?" To Mackenzie: "He's invited for supper tonight, and he might as well lock you up on the way." To the bartender: "I asked if Nerens—"

Suddenly Frank Blaisdell lunged from the back room and let the door clack shut.

Mackenzie heard boots running past the bar, heard the bartender call from the front, "Fire on the edge of town!" He heard yelling from somewhere, and the muted slap of a distant shot. Then Blaisdell was sprinting back toward the rear room.

"Mackenzie!"

Kyle swiveled around on his hips, took four long strides and forced the window up and was over the sill headfirst, clawing at the side moldings, writhing his body, kicking with his legs. He doubled from the waist and slid downward and reached for the wet dirt with eager fingers. A shot punched through the molding and splinters stung his neck. Another shot shattered a pane and glass sprinkled around his head. He was on the dirt, rolling across it; getting up and running around the Silver Star toward the tie-rail. Blaisdell's bellow was loud in his ears as he ran.

Everyone seemed to be racing toward the edge of town, where white and orange flames were lapping at purple skies and brightening the evening. Ragged yelling rose and fell, and a hoarse voice called for buckets. The drum-fire of galloping hooves was dull and insistent beyond the flames, circling out to westward. A couple of dozen horses, Mackenzie estimated.

"Are you going to stand there all night, or help them save your office?"

Mackenzie whirled fast about, collided with Evvie, and seized her elbows. She was soothing her nervous roan with one hand, and holding a package with the other. Her father's horse was beginning to hop and strut.

Kyle told her, "You'd better get home, hear?" He whispered, "Just in case, Evvie." And squeezed her shoulders up to his chest and kissed her—hard, hot, tight. Then he threw himself away with the taste of her mouth fresh on his, hurdled the rail and clapped a thigh over Blaisdell's hopping animal and cut it loose. Spurring around on the forehand in a shower of pebbles, he went to the gallop and flew past Wandt's Stables and charged recklessly past the jogging crowd and raked rowels to leave his

burning office far to his right. Then he was clear of town and swinging west with a savage determination to circle Ravenswood, and reach Blaisdell's place before the raiders.

Quantrill, logically, would strike now at Number Three, having just destroyed Two's place, and so wind up his affairs in this area. Mackenzie talked up Blaisdell's horse, holding the reins short and high, fanning rowels only on smooth ground. He completed his swing and cut back onto the road and galloped down it. Presently there were two riders ahead of him in the moonless night, and he pulled down in order to pace them. They swept through Blaisdell's gate and left it open in their haste, and Kyle Mackenzie followed them in. He had no gun, he didn't know what he would do if Frank Blaisdell whirled and fired at him. Mackenzie caught up and held out bare palms to the muzzle of Blaisdell's revolving pistol.

"For Heaven's sake, Frank, let me help!"

The dull drumming of hooves was circling down on them from the northwest, from beyond the box corrals.

Evvie pushed her father's gun aside hooked a hand into Kyle's elbow and dragged him through the door.

"Aunt Memmie, here's some tattin' for you. Lock up and come to the second floor, and bring the decanter from the dining room with you."

They knelt behind opened dormer windows and watched the rising moon turn the corrals to ghost-silver. Kyle had taken a Hawken gun from Blaisdell's rack, a heavy buffalo rifle hurling a charge that could blow a man off his horse. Blaisdell was depending upon his pistol. Evvie held the decanter of brandy, and Aunt Memmie had her Bible.

Frank Blaisdell was saying, "That hack I took from Fred Wandt surely displaced my bones—" when there was a stab of flame from the corrals and the *crang* of a shot. The bullet thudded into woodwork below them.

"Hold fire," Mackenzie murmured. "Don't shoot at muzzle flames and don't shoot at shadows."

Blaisdell spat through the window. "Where's Nerens? Why isn't he here?"

Dark shapes darted from the corrals toward the back of the house, and Mackenzie gripped Evvie's arm.

"You and Aunt Memmie fill some buckets. They'll try a torch. Frank, I'm going to the rear windows, you stay here."

More shapes moved on foot across the moon shadows and Blaisdell fired into them with surgical precision—fired so fast that his gun was empty in six quick flashes. He reloaded, listening to the howls.

Kyle Mackenzie knelt behind a rear window, resting the Hawken on the ledge. He aimed at a sudden sputter of sparks down there and his shot whipped two men off their feet and sent the torch spinning into the damp grass. A third man sprang to pick it up and Kyle's next bullet took him cleanly through the back. The man thrashed up and down in the moonlight, bucking from side to side to relieve the icy shackles of a snapped spine.

Mackenzie displaced himself to another window ledge. A hissing brilliance whitened the night from the front of the house—a torch sailing up from the corrals.

It bumped onto the roof and scraped into the drains and sputtered angrily. Evvie called to Aunt Memmie, and there was the tinkle of handles striking pails.

King Quantrill mounted his raid and threw it in a circle around the house. The air ripped alive with the old yell and the night was throbbing with the thunder of their rush. It was so close that Kyle could see belt buckles under wind-blown smocks. So close that he could see a broken nose in a beardless face under a gray hat. A big man riding a bay, riding high in his stirrups. Kyle's front sight blade led the bay by one horse-length and the Hawken exploded and the bay plunged free, saddle empty.

Across the corridor, Frank Blaisdell was squeezing them off evenly, picking his targets with care through the front dormer.

Round again they circled, closer now and frantically firing at the upper windows. And again they broke and scattered wide, this time raggedly bunched, with free horses racing away, scythed down to half their effective number, battered and hacked.

A thin voice whined, "Mosser! Where's the King?"

But there was no answer from the man Mosser. Blaisdell's gun slatted twice and the whine was choked off. Other voices rose

(Continued on page 44)

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 33)

1. A cow or steer over the age of four years is known as a "beef."

2. The term "beef issue" was used in reference to the issue of beef to reservation indians.

3. The slang expression "nickel-plated" means very good, best, etc.

4. An old time westerner would use the expression "big swimming" in reference to a high river.

5. The term, "belly up," means either to stand up to a bar . . . or to be dead.

6. You would be most likely to find the "bed wagon" in a large outfit. The smaller ones generally didn't have them.

7. True. Cowpokes would likely use the term, "bringing up the drags," in reference to a slow-moving person.

8. True. A "broken bit" is a bit made in two pieces and joined by a swivel.

9. If the ranch boss said there was a "buscadero" on the layout, he would mean there was a lawman present. The term is also sometimes used in connection with outlaws.

10. True. "Butterfly" is a trick roping term.

11. Chances are you, as a top-notch ranch

hand, would not like to work for a cap-and-ball outfit. A cap-and-ball outfit is one that is slipshod, unprogressive, etc.

12. If your friend told you to report to the "caporal," you should report to the boss. The term is also used in reference to the boss' assistant.

13. The Western slang expression, "chew it finer," means "explain it more clearly."

14. True. A "Cheyenne cut" is a type of wing chap which was developed in Wyoming.

15. As the cowpoke uses it, the term, "compadre," means "good friend."

16. If the ranch boss sent you out to get the "converter," you should return with the preacher.

17. The cow puncher slang term, "crumb incubator," means "bed."

18. If a cowpoke referred to another as "cultus" he would mean that person was worthless.

19. The term "to dab" is an expression used in roping and is used as ". . . to dab his loop on."

20. True. In the language of the cowpoke, the feet are sometimes referred to as "dashboards."

(Continued from page 43)

in a gabble of fright and the raid melted into the moon wash and fell apart. A moment of silence. Then new hooves were thrumming down from the north, pounding through the gates, plunging at the corrals, at the barns.

Bennie Roy's high cackle was a gleesome thing, "Over there—two of 'em! Down yonner—one gettin' away!"

There was a long and livid moment of horse to horse and man to man. Of steel and flesh and black madness and the red lash-cracks of hatred to whip it to frenzied crescendo.

And it ended, and Kyle Mackenzie was jog-trotting across the trampled gress, hands burning from the back-blasts of the Hawken.

Gideon Nerens was lying blue-faced and quiet, quite finished with affairs of office and forever unable to voice venom about other men's affairs. And King Quantrill was over there where the Hawken had blown him, the twisted bloat of his shocked face turned to the moon, chest rising and falling with the last of his breathing. Kyle got down to his knees and motioned for Blaisdell to hold the lamp lower.

Quantrill flicked bloodshot eyes upward. "Well, doc. . . . thought we finished you. . . . earlier." His voice was metallic and weak, as if he were speaking into the bell of a trumpet.

"I happened to be out." Mackenzie's fingers were seeking a diagnosis under Quantrill's shredded coat.

"Am I goin' to die. . . . this time?"

"Yes, you are." Mackenzie was translating his examination into a diagnosis: multiple perforations of the ilium; penetration of the inferior angle of the left scapula, and through the thoracic cavity. You die horribly, that way. The Hawken was designed to kill buffalo, not men.

Mackenzie whispered, "It was Nerens, wasn't it, who was delivering weapons to you?"

Quantrill's paling cheek lines deepened as he tried to smile. "You figger. . . that out, doc. It's took me 'most three years to. . . find you." His next four words were foul and his head came off the grass and a great and silent scream tore through him and struck his throat and died behind his clenched teeth. His heart fluttered to a stop, and Kyle lowered the head to the grass.

He stood up and brushed his hands on his coat. "Well, Frank?"

"All right, Kyle."

Bennie Roy was in the dining room pouring brandy and Aunt Memmie was preparing rabbit stew and Evvie Blaisdell was lighting tapers, her face radiant.

Frank Blaisdell said, "Bennie tells me that Nerens ordered them to tote Jessary back to town and wait there for him, that he'd join them later."

Kyle was staring over the rim of his glass at Evvie—at the easy grace of her movements, at the born assurance in the carriage of her auburn head. Then he faced sharp about to Blaisdell.

"If you'll check the number of weapons on hand in the marshal's safe against the number listed in his books, I believe you'll find a wide discrepancy. His pack trips coincided too neatly with the dates of Quantrill's raids." Kyle tasted his brandy. "It's odd, isn't it, what a man will do for the promise of some land?"

"You mean, Nerens was to get a big piece of my land after I'd been buried on it?" Frank Blaisdell examined the rough seams of his hands. "That's a hell of a way to get anything, Kyle. There are cleaner methods."

Kyle Mackenzie and Frank Blaisdell looked each other over carefully. Kyle said "Such as going right up and asking her?"

And Blaisdell sniffed and turned toward the kitchen. "We need a doctor in the family. Perhaps one who could prescribe for rabbit stew."

It is spoken through the valleys of southern Colorado that sometimes, when the heat-packed horizons burst into noise and thunderheads crowd each other across the skies, you can hear the drumming of hooves in the high distances. And it is related by ranchers still living that the chipped headstone outside of Ravenswood—WILLIAM CLARKE QUANTRILL, BORN CANAL DOVER, OHIO, 1837; DIED OF THIS SPOT, SEPTEMBER 1868—is a mis-marker and that there is nothing under it but solid earth.

Kyle and Evelyn Mackenzie could have told you differently, though, and would have remarked that both legends are empty. Empty as the head of a man who would listen to a storm for fear of hearing hoof beats in its thunder. For Evvie, even into her great age, was never able to break Kyle of the habit.

That first smashing blow
sent Vance staggering back-
ward on his high heels.



ENOUGH ROPE

*There's two ends to a gun and two
ends to a rope—and Judge Bell
had the wrong end of both!*

By BOB OBETS

JUDGE JEFFERSON BELL sat alone in his office, while on the street below him the shadows ran long, and under the big mesquite beside the walk his daughter, Suellen, talked with young Dan McBride. He could hear the murmur of their voices, Dan's occasional laughter. They

were to be married soon, and already Judge Jeff felt lost and lonesome.

Young Dan was making a good enough deputy, was almost sure to be sheriff when old Dan stepped down. But the son simply wasn't the man the father was.

Right now Judge Jefferson Bell was the loneliest man in the world. A spare man with silver gathering in his hair, his face kindly and wise, he sat staring across the roll top of his desk as if the garish reproduction of Custer's Last Stand, on the wall calendar, held a peculiar fascination for him. But he wasn't seeing the calendar. He was seeing himself, the man he had become, the man Rolly Himber had made of him.

He heard Suellen's quick, light step in the hallway. The folks were giving a party for him tonight to celebrate his fiftieth birthday. Folks who called him "Judge Jeff," who

respected him. He had read the marriage words for half the couples—some of them not so young, now—between the Nueces and the Rio Grande, and there were enough young Jeffs and Jeff Bells in the county to start an army. Old Dan McBride was getting plumb jealous! Bad enough to live a lie, but to live it in front of Dan McBride.

As he waited for Suellen's hand to turn the knob, scenes from an earlier and happier day crowded into his mind.

Dan McBride and Jeff Bell. The grass was free, the brush swarming with cattle. No fences, no range hogs, the few women brown-skinned and white men hard to find. Mexico still claimed this part of Texas, below the Nueces, until Zack Taylor with help from a few Texans showed her different. And that brief set-to was something for two lonely young men to talk about. They both had taken part in the fracas. So young Dan, after a few visits back and forth, brought his bedroll and skillet and coffee-pot across the creek, and then the nights never seemed so lonesome. When other settlers ventured in, with them a saucy-eyed girl with a pinch of devil in her, named Lissa Lou Allee....

"Dad? Are you in there in the dark?"

The door squeaked a little. Pain as sharp as the bite of the Mexican bayonet at Perote lanced through Judge Jeff.

Suellen was Lissa Lou made over. The same small, proud head. The same teasing, tender smile. No wonder Dan McBride had gone a little *loco*, tried to burn out his hurt with all the *tequila* in Oye Ortiz's bar. Wound up in a gunfight, so they had a funeral and the wedding the same afternoon. But you could always depend on Dan McBride. He came to the wedding with his left arm in a bandanna sling, even kissed Lissa Lou....

"Dad! It's time to get ready. I've got your Sunday suit laid out. I want people to be proud of their judge tonight."

Young Dan walked with them as far as the Peso Grande—almost strutting, Judge Jeff thought, beside Suellen. At the restaurant door, he squeezed her arm and grinned.

"Not that I mistrust you womenfolk's cooking. But I'm a creature of habit. Eat my supper prompt at six, and always a two-inch-thick T-bone with black coffee and French fries. Make trouble, woman, when I don't get it just so."

"Yes, sir; I'll try to member, sir," she said with a curtsy—and they both laughed.

Judge Jeff said, "Well, come on, come on you were in such a hurry, Suell'."

And suddenly young Dan's lean, browner face was sober. "One thing, Judge. Dad said he might have to miss out on the fun tonight. Pete Vance and the rest of Himber's outfit are in town, and if those *rancheros* from Turkey Creek—but we're not really expecting trouble. That hinges on how the trial comes out. Himber feels pretty strong about this. When you turn 'Nando Flores loose—if he's not found guilty, I mean—"

Suellen put her hand on Dan's arm.

It was a small thing. But somehow, to Judge Jeff, it seemed to put her against him. He wondered if old Dan and the whole town wasn't turning against him. The doubt in his mind put an edge to his voice.

"You 'tend to your job, Dan. I'll use my own judgment instructing the jury. If 'Nando Flores is guilty—"

"Dad," Suellen said, "come along."

They walked on home in silence and were turning through the gate of the white picket fence when Suellen said softly, "Shame on you. Dan didn't mean anything. Now you get dressed."

THE FOLKS were proud of him, not mistaking that. The church ladies had got up the party, which was an open-handed affair under the brush arbor that had served for a meeting place before the church was built. All his friends were there, townsfolk and ranch families, Mexicans from the little *ranchos* along Turkey Creek. Old Casoose Flores even came in from the creek bringing his buxom wife and his second son Lario. Fernando, his oldest son, was locked in the county jail, charged with stealing and butchering a High H yearling belonging to Rolly Himber.

'Nando's trial was tomorrow, and just thinking about it spoiled the night for Judge Jeff. After the cake had been cut, he made his thanks for the party and for the handsome silver watch the folks had given him. "In appreciation for faithful and unselfish service to the people of Nueces Bend County." He felt lower than the coyotes he could hear yonder yipparooing at the town dogs wanted to get away somewhere, by himself.

He was looking around for Suellen when old Casoose Flores came over to him.

"Judge Jeff—this old Mexican was you friend before Fernando was born. Casoose it not worry, Judge Jeff. Fernando never essteal, so you let him go. *Mañana*—tomorrow you let him go. This I know."

"Casoose, the jury must—"

"Sí, the jury. You tell the jury. They listen. *Hasta mañana*, Judge Jeff—I go home for now. I smile because you have the happy birthday."

Judge Jeff kept wondering about Dan McBride. There'd be no trouble tonight; none after the trial. Rolly Himber would submit evidence enough to send 'Nando Flores to Huntsville for—too many years. So maybe old Dan suspected something. He'd had to make arrests and serve court papers on plenty of honest men, all for the benefit of Rolly Himber. But he had hated those chores, and he was no man's fool. Once a man as blunt-spoken and honest as Dan McBride got to thinking, the whole sorry business would come out. Sometimes it made you wonder why Himber favored him for sheriff....

Judge Jeff was sick inside. He walked away from the yellow glow of the lanterns. Suddenly the night seemed cold and utterly lonely. He realized that he hadn't actually wanted to be alone; he never wanted to be alone. He wanted to be with Lissa Lou.

His need of her had brought him to the only place where he could feel close to her. The years had smoothed the mound, early bluebonnets grew around it; he stood humbly in evanescent moonlight and talked with Lissa Lou.

He told her about the watch and about old Casoose Flores, who could smile because Judge Jeff had "the happy birthday", about his son, 'Nando, who did not "essteal"—

"Ah, Liss', Liss', what has happened to

me? I'm as big a crook as Rolly Himber. I've even used Dan McBride, had him serve injunctions and arrest warrants for Himber's benefit. But I can't tell Dan—no telling what he would do. Liss', I'm the lonestomest man in the world!"

They had made him judge, and Liss' was sick, and there wasn't any money. Rolly Himber had come around with a pocket full of it. A loan, he said. A man had to stand by his friends. "But I would have robbed a bank, Liss'. I jumped at the offer, hired the best doctors in San Antonio. They saved the girl...but you, Liss'—they called it blood poison. I wish you could see her, now. And young Dan. Maybe I misjudge the boy. They're fixing to get married. Suellen thinks I'm fine and honest. Liss', you can see I can't tell her. It would ruin everything for her. Liss', Liss', what am I going to do?"

He stood there in the quiet of this place, and finally, slowly, he raised his head. Those coyotes were really tuning up now, and the night breeze from across the mesquite brought the smell of rain. This was his land and he loved it. Once its bigness had been a part of him. He had stood as firm-rooted as those mesquites yonder, loyal to his oath of office, to his people, to himself. His friends, Suellen, old Dan—it would hurt them, shock them. But tomorrow he could be a man again. Liss' would understand. Liss' would want it that way....

He went across the dusty road. From the direction of the jail came a shout. He heard hoarse, excited voices that meant trouble, and began to run. After a block he was panting. The jail's two cells were part of the courthouse, and in the street between the courthouse and the Longhorn Saloon a crowd had gathered. Two men were rolling in the white caliche dust. As Judge Jeff pulled up

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he caught a glimpse of the bloody, desperate brown face of the smaller man—young Lario Flores.

He shoved through the circle of booted men—High H riders, most of them—was looking around for sight of Dan McBride's big shoulders and stubborn-jawed face, when a hand clamped his arm. A soft and sardonic voice spoke in his ear.

"Let Pete have his fun, Judge. The damn' pepper-belly! It will save trouble later on. Lario was snooping around the jail—him and his friends most likely figuring to bust 'Nando out of it."

Judge Jeff turned and looked at Rolly Himber. He saw Rolly Himber for what he was: a ruthless and greedy freebooter, a sallow and black-eyed man without a god, without a conscience, who wanted power and property. Old Casoose's family and a dozen more ran their goats and cattle along the creek, raised some chickens, a little feed and vegetables. They were good, independent, honest citizens, who harmed no one. But now Rolly Himber wanted their land. He intended to drive them from their homes—and to have Judge Jeff's help in doing the driving.

Where was Dan McBride? Young Lario's nose was broken, and when he tried to roll away from Pete Vance, a High H man kicked him in the ribs. The High H foreman was a stocky and round-built man, almost twice as heavy as young Lario, and from the look on his beefy face he was enjoying himself immensely. He saw his chance, jumped at the lad with his knees bent, intending to cave in some ribs. Lario managed to roll from under, and then Pete Vance was astraddle of him, slugging him viciously in the face.

"Stop it, Rolly!" Judge Jeff said.

Where was Sheriff Dan?

"These Floreses are the ringleaders of those *rancheros*," Himber said. "Let Pete enjoy himself. He'll put the fear of God into that Lario, and tomorrow—Judge, I want 'Nando to get all that's coming to him. Anyway ten years. You understand me, Judge?"

That sickness was back inside Judge Jeff. He looked at Rolly Himber, and he could hear the dull, ugly sound Pete Vance's fists were making. For the first time in years he wanted to hit a man, use his own fists. He wanted to feel flesh smash until Himber

couldn't smile any more—that sardonic mocking smile that said, "Jump, damn you. I'm your lord and master."

Where was Dan McBride?

HE COULDN'T see Dan, but he heard a deep voice above the smaller voices say with unmistakable authority, "Make way, here!" Then he saw a tall, big-shouldered shape shoving through the crowd. His relief was enormous.

"You understand me, Himber. Whether 'Nando is found guilty or goes free is up to the jury. But your man Vance, half killing young Lario—I expect you'll be short a foreman for a few days. Dan McBride will put him in jail."

Rolly Himber almost grinned. "Which Dan are you talking about, Judge? The only one I see is young Dan."

Judge Jeff took a second look, and suddenly all the confidence ran out of him. The shoulders were broad enough; the man stepping toward Pete Vance moved with confidence—but he wasn't sheriff Dan. He was young Dan, and Judge Jeff didn't need Himber's chuckle to tell him that young Dan McBride couldn't handle this situation. Then Himber's chuckle changed to something like a snarl.

Young Dan, without a word, had reached down, got a hold on the collar of Vance's brush jacket and hauled the big man to his feet. While Vance stared at him in wonderment, young Dan slugged him. Sheriff Dan, himself, had never hit a man harder. And when the man was Rolly Himber's foreman, with Himber and most of his High H riders looking on, ready to back Vance—it was incredible, something that wasn't done in Nueces town.

But young Dan was doing a fair job of the impossible. That first smashing blow had sent Vance staggering backward on his high heels. Two of his friends caught him, with angry shoves gave him impetus in the other direction—back toward deputy Dan McBride. The honor of High H was at stake, and there was muttering and profanity and advice for Vance to "Kill the smart-aleck son!" Dan grinned, and hit Vance in the belly. When the big foreman tried to regain his dignity, and straightened himself he found his right arm twisted up between his shoulder blades. He tried to jerk away then let out a bellow of pain.

"Come on, Pete," young Dan said. Two or three High H men shoved forward, and Dan put a little more pressure on the foreman's arm. "You boys back off, or he'll have a broke arm. Pete started this."

"Like hell!" the nearest High H man contradicted him. "That chili-eater was fixing to bust his brother out of jail. That's where Pete caught the sneakin'—"

"Not Lario," young Dan said mildly. "Lario wasn't up to a thing, except to take 'Nando a piece of Judge Jeff's birthday cake. Come along, Lario—see if we can find it while Pete's cooling off. Move, Pete."

Foolhardiness? Or just plain courage? Judge Jeff found himself almost admiring young Dan. No man around here could give Himber such a public slap in the face, without getting hurt. But Dan had Vance stepping along, and didn't seem a bit worried. Not even when Rolly Himber edged over to block his way, saying, "Hold on, you!"

"Tell him, Pete," young Dan said, and the upward pressure of his hand against Vance's arm brought a hoarse bellow. He kept the big fellow moving toward the jail, with Lario trailing him.

One of the cowboys watching all this put his feelings into words, "Foreman of High H, huh? Sounded exactly like one them honkin' geeses, down Brownsville way. Only Pete was pitifuler!"

Somebody said, "Here's the sheriff." And Judge Jeff turned and saw his old friend, looking somewhat sheepish, squaring up before Rolly Himber. Himber's sharp face, in the moonlight, was a dirty gray. He pulled his cold segar from between his teeth with a hand that shook a little; but he spoke softly.

"That son, that deputy of yours, Dan, is getting too big for his britches. What kind of sheriff's office are you running, looking out so careful for a no-good Mexican! Where have you been, anyway?"

Old Dan murmured something about another little fracas—down at Oye Ortiz's, in Mexican Town, he said, and added hastily, "Keep your shirt on, Rolly, I'll handle everything."

He went past Himber, never so much as glanced at Judge Jeff, and headed for the jail. After a moment Judge Jeff followed him.

He stepped inside the sheriff's office in time to hear young Dan say, "Maybe I

didn't hear you right, dad. Pete picked that fight, and just because he's Himber's foreman—"

"You heard me," old Dan said wearily. "Let Vance out of here. I'm still the sheriff, and I'm telling you, Danny."

Neither of them looked at Judge Jeff. Young Dan's jaw was set stubbornly. "Let Himber's man go, and tell everybody Rolly Himber's running the sheriff's office! If you want my badge—"

"No, Danny," and old Dan shook his head. "I don't want your badge. Some day pretty soon...but right now I'm still sheriff. I'll handle this. Go on with you, boy. Go on...."

Young Dan flung an appealing glance at Judge Jeff. "You tell him. It's time somebody did. We let Himber's man go, and—" He went past Judge Jeff and on out the door, his boot heels hitting the pine boards hard.

The two old friends who had shared rough times and good times, who could remember the storming of Perote Castle, the dugout they had lived in when they came to this country, who recalled the day Dan had kissed Lissa Lou beneath her bridal veil, the day the gods had taken her away from young Jeff Bell, gunsmoke and laughter, before either of them had ever heard of Rolly Himber...stared at each other across trouble.

"WELL, Dan?"

"What else can I do, Jeff?"

And he went over and took the cell keys off the nail.

"You savvy this, Jeff. We'd have a regular war on our hands, all over a two-bit fist fight. Tomorrow, when you turn 'Nando loose, I'll back you till hell freezes stiff. Rolly Himber just thinks he runs—but I better go let his dog loose. Don't want any more trouble tonight."

He hurried toward the cell block; the voice of Rolly Himber, gently chiding, faintly amused, pulled Judge Jeff around.

"So I just think I run things around here...Judge, I thought we understood each other. I still think we do. Why, you wouldn't consider letting that sorry Mexican cow thief go free—would you, Judge?"

Judge Jeff hadn't heard the man come in. He was leaning against the door jamb, smiling a little, no sign of anger about him

now except the unnatural shine in his black eyes. Those eyes watched Judge Jeff, not winking.

"What happens to 'Nando," Judge Jeff said stiffly, "is for the jury to decide. My personal beliefs have nothing to do with the matter."

Old Dan would be coming back any moment; Judge Jeff was beginning to sweat, he wanted out of here. But Rolly Himber was in the doorway, reaching inside his coat for one of those long, black segars. His chuckle was a masterpiece of indulgence.

"Now, Judge, don't give me that old stuff. People look up to you. You're some sort of god. We ought to save the county money, do away with juries. You're a valuable man to me, Judge. Judge, you wouldn't want Suellen to know what good friends we are. It might ruin her wedding."

"Rolly, you wouldn't!" He could hear boots slogging toward him from the cell block, hear Pete Vance's rumbling voice. He was sweating in earnest now, Himber still smiling.

"Rolly," and he was almost begging the man, "step over to my office. We'll talk this out."

Himber rolled the segar across his mouth, spoke around it. "I've made my talk, Judge. All you've got to do is get it clear in your mind what you're going to tell the jury. That sorry greaser gets at least ten years. Remember that, and—everything will be fine."

He stepped away from the door with a meager nod that said, "You can go now." His voice, as Judge Jeff went past him, struck softly at old Dan McBride, "I'll have no charges put against my foreman, Dan. It wouldn't look good...."

Judge Jeff reached his gate with his heart pounding, slugging his ribs as if he had been running a foot race. Suellen and young Dan were sitting on the front steps, and as he went through the gate he heard her scolding Dan just to show him who was boss.

"Danny McBride, you haven't heard a word I've said. I asked you if you thought that flowered curtain material at the Mercantile, for our bedroom—or maybe the rose chintz—" She saw Judge Jeff then, and immediately was concerned.

"Dad, you look—is something wrong?"

"Sick," Judge Jeff muttered, and went past them, up the steps. "Going to bed."

THIS morning was hot and sultry, in sufferably long. Judge Jeff tried to keep his mind on the testimony, while one after the other the witnesses took the stand and folks jammed on the backless benches used sombreros and starched bonnets as fans against the stifling air. Folks Judge Jeff kept thinking, who were his friends, who looked to him for justice, held confidence in him—the judge who could not be bribed or intimidated or in any way corrupted....

High H took up all the front bench, and every time Judge Jeff looked down he could see Rolly Himber and Pete Vance, who sat beside him. Vance kept watching young Dan, on the side bench with old Dan and 'Nando Flores. The sardonic eyes of Rolly Himber watched Judge Jeff.

This whole trial was a put-up job, and Judge Jeff knew it; he couldn't meet Suellen's eyes. She was sitting behind Himber that mock-serious look on her face telling Judge Jeff that she knew he would do the right thing, let 'Nando go free. The Flores family shared the bench with Suellen—Casoose solemn-faced but unworried, his wife with her youngest in her arms, and battered Lario with their dinner basket beside him covered with a white cloth. When the court recessed at noon, they would have a regular picnic in the wagon yard beside the Mercantile. In good time, their friend, the judge would see through all these foolish, lying words and let 'Nando go home with them. If that *hombre malo*, Pete Vance, started more trouble, why here was Sheriff Dar with the big six-shooter....

The sickness inside Judge Jeff made him shaky, made his head throb. *I thought I could stand up to him, Liss'. Be my own man again. But there's Suellen, her happiness, her pride. There's old Dan, and—maybe 'Nando did steal the yearling. Maybe that's not so important. Rolly Himber always gets what he wants, anyhow....* Himber was on the stand now, gesturing with his segar, entirely confident.

"So I leave it to you men of the jury—you're cow men. You've heard Butch Rankin, here, testify that 'Nando delivered the yearling to the back of the butcher shop, all skinned out and quartered, after dark. When Butch asked if the buyer wasn't entitled to the hide, 'Nando joked about it. Said if Butch wanted to look he might find

the hide buried in the Flores's horse trap. But that, gentlemen, was no joke. That's where sheriff Dan found the hide, as you heard him testify. It's in the corner, there, with my High H brand—"

"Is a lie!" And 'Nando was on his feet, his dark eyes blazing. "Si, I sell the steer yearlin', but I take Butch Rankin the hide an' all. Was my steer, my brand. When sheriff Dan ride out and say, 'Look, 'Nando, this hide of the High H was in your horse trap,' I don' know about this. Judge Jeff, listen! Somebody bury him there. You know I never essteal. So now you tell these men, so I go home an'—"

"Sit down, 'Nando," sheriff Dan McBride said.

But 'Nando was beginning to doubt, and he wanted justice. He jerked free from the sheriff's grasp, cried, "Judge Jeff, tell these men!"

Old Casoose and his wife now were watching Judge Jeff with a faint puzzlement on their brown faces; the pockmarked face of Butch Rankin wore a grin. Pete Vance muttered something and started to his feet, but Himber caught his arm. Himber was enjoying this.

He rolled his segar mockingly across his lips, caught Judge Jeff's eye and deliberately winked.

Judge Jeff rapped the desk with his gavel. "Sheriff, take the prisoner across to the café for dinner. Court is recessed until one o'clock, when I will have a few words for the jury."

The crowd began to shuffle out of the courtroom, some looking back curiously at Judge Jeff.

What words? What would he say? That hide could easily have been planted for the

sheriff to find. . . . But who was to say Butch was lying? Who here had courage enough to buck Rolly Himber?

He thought of Dan McBride, remembered how sick and old he had looked swinging onto 'Nando's arm. He shook his head. He had no real proof that 'Nando was being railroaded, so there wasn't any use to get old Dan mixed up in this. But 'Nando was innocent. He felt it in his bones. He could remember 'Nando as a boy, riding as fine and free as any Comanche, hunting wild cattle, hunting deer, always friendly and smiling, harming no one. But now, because he was the leader of the *rancheros*, because Rolly Himber was ruthless and greedy for land—

"No!" Judge Jeff said aloud. "He couldn't live caged up. It would be better to put a bullet in him."

"In who, Judge? In Rolly Himber?"

The courtroom behind young Dan was empty. He stood watching Judge Jeff, something in his steady eyes probing, insistent. It was almost as if he were the judge, weighing Judge Jeff before passing final sentence.

Judge Jeff almost snarled at him. "Go away. I'm—I've got to think."

"You've had twenty years for that—you and dad, both. Thinking won't do the job, Judge."

"What do you mean?" Judge Jeff started. "Twenty—"

Pain showed on young Dan's smooth face, but he said steadily, "Twenty years since your wife died—since Rolly Himber got you and dad under his thumb. You've been taking his orders a long time. I wonder if you've forgotten, you and dad, how to stand up and—"

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"Not Dan," Judge Jeff said with anguish. "Me... I was the one."

Judge Jeff stared through young Dan, not seeing him, while crazy thoughts whirled through his brain. Dan McBride—honest, big-hearted Dan, all these years taking orders from Rolly Himber. It was incredible, unbelievable. But for a friend—for Lissa Lou—it was exactly what Dan would do...

"Each of you," young Dan was saying, "trying to keep his secret from the other. I've suspected for quite a while. Last night, you like a sick ghost, and dad—that trumped up story of why he missed the fight—well, I pinned him down. But that's not important now. Judge, Butch Rankin lied like a dog. This whole thing was staged by Rolly Himber. Have you and dad forgotten," he finished softly, "how to deal with a greedy hog, like Himber?"

"I don't know," Judge Jeff admitted miserably, the shame inside him a bitter and hurting thing. "There's Suellen—and no real proof. If Dan and I had put our heads together, years ago—but I guess it's too late I guess—"

DOWN on the street the voice of Dan McBride shouted, "'Nando, you crazy loon!" A shot sounded like an echo to the shout.

"Now they'll kill him, Judge. He lost faith in you and dad, made a break for it... Once you two stood up pretty much like men."

And young Dan headed toward the hall stairs, going fast.

A minute later, when Judge Jeff reached the street, strapped beneath his coat was an old six-shooter that he hadn't worn for nearly twenty years. Wearing it now was only a gesture; but those words of young Dan's had hurt.

He pulled up beneath the big mesquite, which was older than the courthouse. From some remote corner of his mind came the memory of the last day he had held court under this tree. He had sentenced Joel Hyde to twenty years, he remembered, and Joel's friends had decided the old mesquite might make a good hang tree... Dan McBride, those days, had stood mighty tall...

Old Dan, he saw, was standing tall now, shoulder to shoulder with young Dan, in the middle of the street. They were facing the High H men, who had come running

from the saloon; and when Judge Jeff pushed between them, first young Dan, then old Dan looked at him. No words were spoken—but suddenly a warm, good feeling lay over the three of them. Judge Jeff no longer felt worn-out and old.

What had happened was plain enough. 'Nando had lost faith in Judge Jeff, in Dan McBride and in the justice of this land. He had tried to reach one of the horses in front of the Longhorn. Butch Rankin, there, still had a gun in his hand. He held it angled down at 'Nando, who was on all fours, like some crippled animal. His left leg was bleeding. His eyes made Judge Jeff feel worse than a murderer.

He was reaching for 'Nando's shoulders when the voice of Rolly Himber said, "Let the damned thief stay there!"

Pete Vance, as Judge Jeff straightened started his left hand across for his gun. Rolly Himber smiled around his segar. He was still smiling when Judge Jeff, in a clear voice, spoke his little piece.

"You're the thief, Himber, not 'Nando. And you're all through giving orders around here."

Himber reached under his coat, and then guns began their flat slamming. Judge Jeff in this thunderous moment, found himself remembering the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland. For Himber's smile vanished and Himber and his segar along with it. The furor quickly subsided, but it took Judge Jeff a little while to realize that Himber and Vance were down.

Then old Dan, taking his look at Himber drawled, "That fixes a few things, Jeff. I always did despise that black segar."

Young Dan had Butch Rankin caught by the seat and collar. "What about him, Judge Jeff? I bet he'll talk some, now."

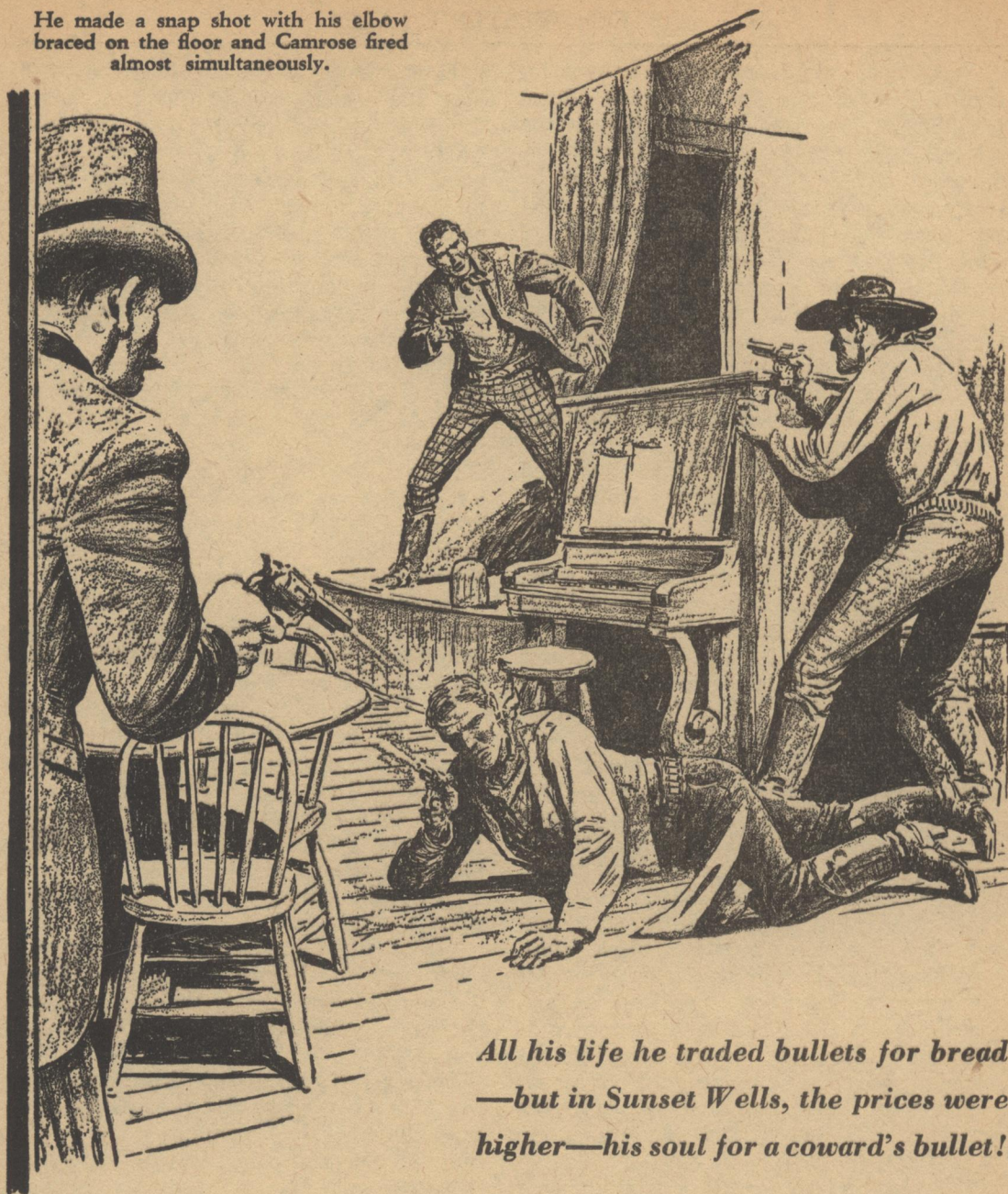
'Nando, Judge Jeff saw, was sitting with his pants leg rolled up, while his brother Lario, tied a bandanna around his leg for a bandage. Old Casoose was squatted across from Lario, gnawing on a chicken bone. He looked up at Judge Jeff and grinned.

"Haul your prisoner over under that old mesquite, Dan," Judge Jeff said. "This trial is going to take a new course, with a quick ending."

Somebody brought a barrel out for a desk, then Judge Jeff banged on the barrel with the butt of his gun.

"Folks, this court is now back in session."

He made a snap shot with his elbow
braced on the floor and Camrose fired
almost simultaneously.



*All his life he traded bullets for bread
—but in Sunset Wells, the prices were
higher—his soul for a coward's bullet!*

CROSS- RIPPED!

By
KENNETH FOWLER

THE sign above the doorway read DIAMOND HITCH SALOON & DANCE HALL, and from a certain quality of gaudy flamboyance in its architecture you knew at a glance the kind of place it was. You knew that behind this flashy facade there would be more cheap and tawdry glitter. But you were past caring about that any more. At forty-eight, you were too old to change a way of life that had become a rigid pattern, inflexible and unalterable.

Matt Bodin's sun-scoured blue eyes remained fixed on the sign as he swung down from his lathered steeldust and tied at the saloon's crowded hitchrack. A memory of wasted years flooded back on him as he stared at the name underneath the sign: JACK CAMROSE, PROP. He'd heard along the way that Camrose had set up here in Sunset Wells, but he'd never expected to see a layout like this. This was a far cry from the old days when he and Jack had dealt to the suckers in Ace Burnshaw's Log Cabin Cafe, in Abilene City. Jack must have done all right for himself since their trails had split, a good many years ago.

Funny, the way old trails bent and twisted back. He'd come here to have a look at the kid, and then be on his way again. And here, in this same town, was Jack Camrose.

Standing at the edge of the board walk, Bodin's fingers fumbled over the makings for a cigarette. He realized now the folly of the impulse that had drawn him back here to see the kid, and maybe look in on Kate and Boyd. No final contentment or peace would come from his succumbing to this urge, rooted though it was in a blood bond nothing ever could sever. The name up there on that sign was like an accusing finger pointed down at him. It was a bitter reminder that however far a man might travel, he could never outride his past.

He finished making the cigarette and scratched a match across his black whipcord breeches. As he did, the bat-wings of the dance hall flapped open and a thin, slightly stoop-shouldered man stepped outside and glanced idly up and down the deserted street, chewing on an unlighted cigar.

Abruptly, Matt Bodin flung away the match he had just lighted and walked up to the man.

"You look prosperous, Jack. Maybe you'd remember a pardner from the old days."

"By God, Matt Bodin!" The chewed cigar dropped from the man's mouth. "This is one for the book." Cordially, he wrung Bodin's hand, then, pushing with his free hand against the bat-wings, he tugged urgently on his arm, leading him into the saloon. "Come in, Matt, come in! Here, this way. Drinks are on the house until further notice."

"Just one will do for me, Jack."

"Same old Matt! I wish you'd teach me that trick. It's one I never learned."

Five minutes later, Bodin followed his host to a door marked, *J. Camrose, Private*. Camrose pushed open the door and Bodin went in after him. A young, dark-haired man, with a deputy marshal's star pinned to his gray flannel shirt front, was seated behind a flat-topped desk in a corner of the room. He rose unhurriedly as Camrose entered, sponging out a half-smoked cigarette on a silver ash tray as his glance went to the saloon owner.

"Jack, I thought I'd talk to you about that—" He stopped suddenly as he saw Bodin. "I'll see you later," he finished shortly.

"Okay, Tom," Camrose said. "But wait a second. I want you to meet an old pardner of mine. Matt," he said, swinging his glance back to Bodin, "meet the next marshal of Sunset Wells—Tom Owens."

Bodin's eyes went blank with shock. This was the kid. This was his son. And he hadn't even known him, hadn't recognized his own flesh and blood!

He turned to conceal his emotions and planted his hat on the hook of a wall hanger. Then he faced around, his eyes inscrutable.

"Howdy," he said, "Marshal."

The kid's nod was perfunctory. "Howdy." He passed Bodin going to the door, looked back at Camrose.

"I'll wait outside, Jack. Let me know when you're free."

"Do that," Camrose said. "And have Al Cluff come in. I want him to meet Matt."

Camrose went over to the desk and took the chair behind it, motioning Bodin to a seat.

He reached into a desk drawer and took out a box of cigars. He passed the cigars to Bodin, then took one out of the box for himself, smoothing it between his fingers.

"Well, what do you think of him?" he asked, biting off the tip of his cigar.

"He's traveling in fast company, Jack, for a youngster."

Camrose laughed. "I grab 'em young, Matt. They stay better trained that way." He touched a match to the tip of the cigar, puffing. "Also, I want to be sure of my marshal, even after I'm mayor. Boyd Owens, the kid's old man, is ramrodding the law here right now. But he won't be—not after I'm elected boss of the town."

Bodin stiffened. "What's the set-up Jack?"

"The set-up is, I'm running for mayor against Boyd Owens. You know me—I'd have preferred to play my politics from the side lines. But Owens forced my hand. I've got a gold mine here, Matt. Wine, women and wheels—the old formula." Camrose gestured with the cigar. "Trouble is, Owens is out to clean up the town. In the process, he figures to sweep me right out of the picture."

"And with his boy on your side of the fence," murmured Bodin, "you figure he'll need a pretty wide broom."

Camrose's thin-lipped mouth broke in a grin. "Exactly. I've got Tom right in my pocket—he's sweet on one of my girls, Lura Bright. Crazy for her." Camrose tilted back his head, blew a smoke ring. "I'll have no more marshal trouble, day after election."

"Unless Boyd beats you."

"I have ways to see that he won't, Matt."

Bodin stared at him, taking a deep pull on his cigar. The smoke suddenly tasted bitter to his tongue. *I sure picked a time*, he thought, and now his mind picked at the tempting out. *Ride out of here*, he thought. *This started a long time ago. You started it. And now it's too damned late to stop it.*

BODIN stood, dropping his cigar into a cuspidor. He spoke the usual mechanical words. "Well, reckon I'll be moseyin', Jack. Good to see you again."

Camrose said, "I could use a floor manager here, Matt. Two hundred a month; to start. You'd be back on your feet in a year's time."

Bodin flushed under the implication. "No deal, Jack. I'm an old dog who can't change his tricks. Anyway—"

The door to the office swung open, and Bodin turned. A small wiry man stood in the aperture, a flat-topped black Stetson tilted low over immobile gunflint-gray eyes.

"Tom said you wanted to see me, Jack."

Camrose said, "Come in, Al. Meet an old pardner of mine, Matt Bodin. Matt, this is my trouble-shooter, Al Cluff. Another old dog who can't learn new tricks."

Al Cluff made a meager acknowledgment of the introduction, as did Bodin, and after a few perfunctory words with Camrose, Cluff left. Bodin moved to the door, Camrose's arm around his shoulder.

"You think it over about that job, Matt. It's better than hiring out your guns from

one outfit to another, and never cooling a saddle long enough to call any place home."

"A saddle is my home, Jack. Take care of yourself, now."

"I'm going to take care of you too, Matt. I need you here. You're coming back, Matt. You know my hunches."

Coming back. . . . Outside, Bodin stood for a long moment on the board walk, abstractedly building a cigarette. Didn't Camrose know a man never came back, to anything or anybody, once he'd gotten off on the wrong foot as a kid, and started fiddle-footing to hell? Bodin's glance drew a slow line up the street. Sunset Wells didn't seem to have changed much, in the twelve years since he had last seen it. A few new buildings, besides Camrose's, fewer vacant lots.

Towns don't change very fast, Bodin thought, watching a gust of November wind scoop up a whirligig of dust and send it sleeting against the window of Fry's Mercantile, across the street. It took towns a long time to age and season. But not boys. Kids grew like weeds. And expose them to the wrong soil, and they grew crooked as hell.

Lura Bright. . . . Change that name to Bonny Dixon. Change Tom Owens' name to Matt Bodin. And there you had the pattern. The pattern, now about to be repeated.

Bodin's thoughts back-tracked as he stared up the wind-swept street. After just a year, Bonny had run off with a whiskey drummer, and he'd had no choice but to leave their baby with his sister, Kate. And Kate and Boyd Owens, his brother-in-law, had raised Tom as their own. As Tom Owens. Not as Tom Bodin. And so, he'd drifted. For a time, in Abilene, he'd been a professional gambler. Then wanderlust had become a fiercer urge in him, his need for excitement an overwhelming lure. He had fought with the McSween faction in the Lincoln County war, had built a rep for himself as a fast man with a gun. After that he had gone professional. His gun was for hire, he was a mercenary fighting for whichever tough cattle outfit would pay him the highest wages.

And now he remembered. The last time he'd seen Tom, the boy was twelve years old. But he'd kept promising himself that some day he'd come back. *Manana*. Never. He had no rights there now. All he had right at this moment was a swelling lump

in his throat, and a swelling fear in his chest. Twelve years. And now Tom was a man. A man with Matt Bodin's rotten blood in him. And nothing under God's green footstool could ever fix that.

Bodin lighted his cigarette, his pale eyes bleak above the match flame cupped in his hands. The kid wasn't all, now. Camrose had seemed pretty certain that Boyd Owens wouldn't beat him in the election. *I have ways to see that he won't, Matt.* Bodin thought of Al Cluff. A cold-eyed killer, if he'd ever seen one. Unselfishly, Boyd and Kate had assumed the responsibility that rightly had been his. He couldn't let Boyd get hurt, now. The least he could do would be to warn him. Then he'd get on his horse and ride the hell out of here. If Boyd and Kate hadn't been able to check-rein the kid, was it his fault?

Instant with the thought, an ugly feeling of shame cut through him. Abruptly, he flung down the cigarette and lunged into a long-gaited stride, heading upstreet.

MATT BODIN was sorry he had come here to this house, but it was too late to retreat, now. Kate, his sister, grown more buxom with the years, and with her dark brown hair tinged now streaks of gray, had shown a shocked surprise at seeing him, and for a brief moment he had imagined a kindling of warmth in her clear hazel eyes. Then, swiftly, her expression had altered, the eyes had become chilled, remote.

"So, the bad penny has turned up again," she had said coldly.

"I just wanted a look at the boy, Kate. It's been a long time, you know."

"Twelve years. You must have been dying to see him, Matt."

The sarcasm in her voice bit into him like acid. "Let's not rehash it, Kate. What's done is done. None of us can go back."

"You can do no good here, Matt." A sudden look of fear sprang to her eyes. "You're not going to tell him—you didn't come here to—"

"No. You'll never need to worry about that. But tell me, Kate—what is he like? Is he—"

Abruptly, Kate Owens shot it back at him like an accusation, "He's like you!" and then, biting her lip, she had swung abruptly back to her kitchen table, where she had

been kneading a batch of dough for raised biscuits.

Watching her, remembrance of Jack Camrose's words back-lashed across his thoughts. *Tom, right in my pocket. . . . Lura Bright No more marshal trouble, day after election.*

Kate Owens had her dough patted into biscuits now. She placed them in a tin, and bending, pushed them into the oven of her big wood stove. Then she turned to face him again.

"Yes, he's just like you are, Matt." He was startled by the sudden passion in her voice. "The only difference is, you've already gone to the devil and he's just on his way! Boyd and I have done everything under the sun—talked and argued and pleaded—but we could have saved our breath for all the good it's done! He just won't listen to us. It's hopeless! And now—"

Her voice caught. She swung around to the stove. "I'll make some coffee," she finished dully.

Over the coffee, she told him of the struggle she and Boyd had made—how they had sought to curb a natural strain of wildness in Tom Owens, and bend this force towards decency and respectability. And until just recently, they had thought they were succeeding. Boyd had made Tom a deputy marshal, hoping the job would steady him down and give him a feeling of civic responsibility. Instead, it had led him into an affair with a cheap little dance hall doxy named Lura Bright. An entertainer in a saloon run by Jack Camrose.

Camrose had turned up in Sunset Wells two years ago and had built a place called the Diamond Hitch. Lura Bright was one of the girls he had brought in for his show. Boyd had wanted to close up the place, but old Henry Waggener, the mayor, had let things slide.

Then Henry Waggener had died suddenly, of a heart attack, and now Boyd and Jack Camrose were pitted against each other as rival mayoralty candidates. Boyd was rallying the decent elements in town and it looked as if the election might be close. And now Camrose was worried. But not as worried as she was, about Boyd. Boyd had good people behind him, but they were mostly storekeepers, not professional politicians or men who could be quick with a gun, if the need should arise. Not like the men Jack

Camrose had sitting in his corner. . . .

Frowning, Matt Bodin took a last swallow of coffee and stood, as Kate Owens finished her story. "I'd like to talk to Boyd," he said softly. "Maybe you'd know where I might run into him, Kate."

"Dunford's Bridge," Kate Owens said, with a sudden catch in her voice. "Somebody sent him an anonymous note. The note said if he'd scout around the old lumber camp up there, he'd find out something that would help him dump Jack Camrose's apocryphal once and for all."

Bodin suppressed an impulse towards anger, seeing the taut lines of worry on his sister's face. Boyd was a born reformer, and sometimes reformers forgot where their heads screwed on.

"Well, I don't guess it's anything for you to get worried about," he lied heavily. "Likely the note was written by some hombre with a grudge against Camrose. Common enough thing, in a political ruckus."

"I—I hope you're right, Matt. But—"

Matt Bodin started to put out his hand, almost brought it up in a comforting gesture to Kate Owens' shoulder. Then he let it drop. "You just don't worry," he said, and swinging around abruptly, he went out the door.

MATT BODIN remembered Dunford's Bridge. By an old abandoned wood road, it led circuitously upward toward Shack Mountain, where it dead-ended in the slash of the deserted lumber camp. His steeldust was tired and he let it make its own gait over the hummocky up-trail, despite the concern that had been slowly building in him ever since Kate had mentioned the anonymous note. There was, of course, a slim chance that honest good intention had inspired the note. On the other hand, it might be bait. Bait too irresistible for Boyd Owens to ignore.

Bodin's eyes held a fixed stare as he rode on through the tangled overgrowth of the wood road. Ahead, now, he could hear the distant roar of a falls. He was getting close to the bridge, and breathing a little easier now. Boyd might have been here and gone already. Kate hadn't mentioned what time he had left the Wells. Maybe—

Bodin's head jerked as the sound of a shot smashed startlingly across the stillness. He felt his heart start to pound. Ahead of

him, the trail divided, one branch swinging to the left, towards a flats spiked with brush and rotted stumps, the other to the right, in the direction of a wooded ridge which roughly paralleled the stump area.

For a confused moment Bodin hesitated, unable to remember which fork led to the falls. Then, on a blind impulse, he reined right, towards the ridge. Within a few short seconds he realized that his memory had tricked him. Off to his left, brush crashed suddenly and twisting around in the saddle he had a moment's shocked awareness of a rider pounding towards him out of the brush area, his right arm stiffly outthrust, gun-weighted.

He had never had it like this before—the sinking knowledge that even as his own hand dipped down, he was a Johnny-Come-Lately and was going to get it. The shot cracked and he felt a blow against his left shoulder blade. Spooked, his steeldust started to buck and he swung it with a savage rein jerk.

Matt Bodin hesitated as he saw the dry-gulcher gallop on until he was hidden in the dense overgrowth in the slash. Go after the man? There would be little chance of his catching up to him, now. Anyway, he had to find Boyd Owens first.

Gingerly, he felt along the shallow ridge where the bullet had scored his flesh, barely scraping the collar bone. Lucky. He'd been lucky as hell. Now, distance-muffled, he could hear dying-away hoofbeats. He had had no very clear look at the man, and, by the same token, he was confident the killer had not recognized him. Plainly, that shot had been a maneuver to buy time, to insure a clean get-away.

Bodin angled his horse down from the ridge road and on over to the other fork. He had ridden only a short distance when he saw it—a hat, hooked over a stalk of bramble. A moment later, bending from the saddle, he scooped it up and stared down at it as he rode along. A flat-crowned black Stetson, no initials in the band. But it was a small size, possibly a six and a half. A man with a small head. Abruptly, Bodin tensed. Al Cluff, he remembered now, was a runty little hombre. And Cluff had worn a black Stetson! Bodin's mouth drew into a stiff line. A coincidence? Or had he, by fool's luck, plowed up a clue?

Abstractedly, he rolled up the hat and stuffed it into the side pocket of his jeans.

Then, his eyes pressed forward bleakly, he rode on to the bridge. . . .

Without surprise, prepared now for grim discovery, Bodin presently spotted the big Appaloosa, idly cropping at a patch of bunch grass near the approach to the old plank span across the creek. A half dozen feet from it, in a sandy gully beside the trail, lay the sprawled figure of a man.

IN his room at the Pioneer House, Matt Bodin had a wash-up, scrubbed his face with the coarse hotel towel till it tingled, then went across to the bed and buckled on his gun belt. Preoccupiedly, his fingers ran down the smooth walnut butt of the Texas Walker chocked in the belt's holster.

With this gun he had worked, and fought, for whichever outfit had wanted him badly enough to pay his price. Fighting had been a business with him, and nothing personal had ever been involved.

But this was going to be different. This was personal. His sister, Boyd, Tom. . . . all of them were mixed up in this business. And Jack Camrose. He rather hoped Jack would stay out of this. How many years was it now since they had been teamed up at Ace Burnshaw's sucker trap in Abilene? Twenty years? A man lost track, in the fog of years. Bodin stared fixedly at his face in the mirror above the wash stand. A face seamed and hewn into ineradicable lines by those years. A man couldn't bring them back, couldn't change them, or himself. But there still might be time to change the kid, to shock him into a realization of the fool's paradise he was living in.

Bodin walked to the window and stared down at the street, below. Lights were beginning to bloom, laying their butter-yellow streaks across the board walk. Somewhere a honkytonk piano was rattling tinnily. And upstreet, in the little gray house where Kate and Boyd Owens lived, Boyd lay in a coma. But Doc Forrester had said he would pull through.

Bodin wondered if the kid knew, yet. After bringing Boyd in, he had hunted for him. But Tom Owens hadn't been around. And now he had to find him. And despite his promise to Kate, tell him, stun him with the bitter truth. He must open the forbidden door. It was his last hope.

It was almost 7:30 when Bodin reached the Diamond Hitch and pushed through the

smooth gliding bat-wings. If the usual timetable was observed, it would be half an hour yet before Camrose's dancing girls would come mincing out on the low stage at the rear of the saloon. Bodin's bleakly searching eyes ran along the crowded bar, then swerved, cutting towards the gambling alcove, to the left. No sign of the kid. Maybe, by now, he'd heard about Boyd, and had gone back to the house.

A woman's shrill peal of laughter cut away the thought, and Bodin's glance swiveled abruptly to where the proscenium of a low stage aproned out from the deep far end of the room. Then he saw the girl. She was seated on top of an upright piano her long slim legs dangling provocatively her bare powdered arms folded negligently across the stays of her rounded bodice. She was smiling down archly at a man seated below her, on a piano stool. At Tom Owens gazing up at her with the sheep-dumb expression of a man lost in the clouds.

A dozen long-gaited strides took Bodin into the room. He came up behind Tom Owens and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I want a little parley with you, Owens." His glance cut upward, at the doll-like painted face of the girl. "Personal," he added, in a blunt voice.

Tom Owens jerked around. An angry flush stained up into his high cheekbones as he recognized the man to whom he had been casually introduced, a few hours earlier.

"I'm busy. Some other time," he told Bodin flatly.

Bodin said, "Now," and the color in Tom Owens' cheeks flooded to a deeper crimson. He swung around on the stool, stood.

"Look, mister, I told you some other time. Don't make me speak plainer. There's a lady here."

"Where?" Bodin said deliberately, and then as he saw the blow start he pulled back stepping away from it almost negligently. Tom Owens' fist whizzed past his ear. At the same instant his own right hand doubled and shot up, moving in a blurred arc. A crashing discord sounded as the kid rocked back under the slugging punch and fell heavily against the piano keyboard.

The girl screamed and leaped down to the floor. Tom Owens lunged up, his face contorted with fury, but his right hand was barely to the butt of his Colt before Bodin's

gun cleared leather and was down on him. "I told you, Tom," said Bodin in an even voice. "I want to talk to you."

Tom Owens brushed a hand across his bleeding mouth. "You—you go to hell!"

"I did, Tom—before you'd ever even heard of the place. But now you're on your way there, and I'm here to stop you—if I can."

Tom Owens glowered. "What's it to you what I do? You're feedin' way off your range, mister."

"Look at me, Tom. A saddle bum. And I started out just the way you're starting—full of spit and vinegar." Bodin's voice tightened. "Then I found me a woman like you've found. Name of Bonny Dixon. We got married. It lasted about a year." He paused, as a man pauses before an icy plunge, then abruptly took it. "Bonny Dixon was your mother, Tom, and this woman's the same kind Bonny was. Get on to yourself, boy—before it's too late."

He stood tracked, watching the shock spread in Tom Owens' eyes.

"You're a damned liar!"

"All right," said Bodin meagerly, "you want it between the eyes, that's where you'll get it. Not where Boyd just took it from your friend Camrose—from the back side."

Tom Owens paled. "Boyd—shot? You're loco! Jack wouldn't—"

"No," Bodin cut him off in a thin voice, "Jack wouldn't. Jack hires back-shooters

for his messy jobs. Hombres like Al Cluff."

He watched doubt, uncertainty, batter at the kid's eyes.

"This is a big stake game, Tom, and your friend Jack plays all the angles. Look," Bodin drew the crumpled Stetson out of his pocket and threw it down on the piano, "here's something I picked up at Dunford's Bridge, right after Cluff had tried to pick off Boyd up there." In a few terse words, he told Tom Owens about the anonymous note and his own encounter with Cluff. "By now," he concluded, "Cluff has probably—"

He broke off suddenly, aware that the girl had disappeared. *She's skipped. To warn Camrose.* The thought twanged in him like a plucked wire as he swung to look behind him. At the same instant, Tom Owens' hand came flatly against his chest and he felt himself heaved violently backward.

For a sinking moment, he had a sickening sense of betrayal; then the shot slammed, and he knew he was not betrayed, but vindicated. The bullet ripped up splinters from the floor a scant two feet from where he had stood but a moment before. Then he saw Al Cluff standing in the right-hand wing of the stage and threw himself flat to the floor as Cluff fired again.

His Texas Walker was tilting up at Cluff when he heard Tom Owens' warning shout: "In back of you—look out!" and he flopped over on his side as a shot hammered out

(Continued on page 60)

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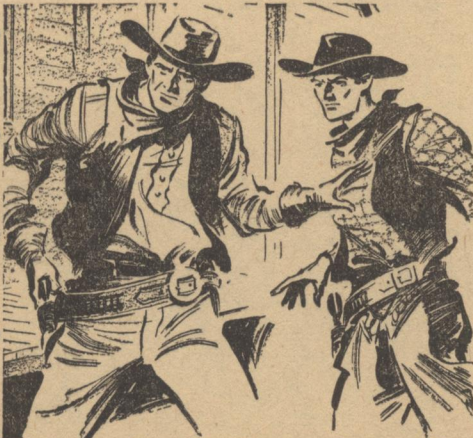
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(Continued from page 59)

from the doorway of the gambling alcove.

A word exploded in his brain: *Cross-ripped*, and as he lurched around and saw Jack Camrose behind him, conscious thought left him and he became a machine geared to the ticking of tiny automatic impulses. He made a snap shot with his elbow braced on the floor and Camrose fired almost simultaneously.

Forward, Bodin heard a soft thump, and as he rolled over once and lunged to his feet, he had an instant's glimpse of Al Cluff, leaping down from the stage. A third shot from Camrose caught him under the knee and he felt his left leg buckle, then stiffen momentarily. He judged his shot and fired at Camrose very deliberately. He knew the shot was good and spun around to see Cluff and Tom Owens blaze away at each other from opposite sides of the piano.

He had a sick telescoped feeling at the pit of his belly as Tom Owens rocked back, clutching his shoulder. At that moment, Cluff had his belated awareness of Bodin standing there and a look of premonitory shock stretched the little gunman's eyes. Bodin had the edge in readiness, and a sense of savage exultation pumped through him as he squeezed the trigger of the Walker.

Al Cluff had seen it coming, had known he wasn't going to be fast enough to meet it. He staggered back, then suddenly collapsed against the proscenium, like a spider disintegrated by the touch of a finger.

For a thin-spun instant, Bodin stared at the limp motionless body. He drew in a cramped breath. Then, with painful deliberateness, he sheathed the Walker and was like a man in a somnambulistic trance hobbling slowly towards the piano. . . .

MARCH slid into April, April into May, and it got to be with Matt Bodin as if he had never left Sunset Wells, as if this was the way it had always been, and always would be.

Bodin strolled along the board walk, conscious of a feeling of zest which surged through him like the very breath of this crisp spring day. He reached the corner of Main and First and his eyes sought the familiar sign above the bat-wings of the Diamond Hitch. Only now the sign bore the name of a new owner, James Targ, and Targ was running an honest saloon, thanks to the

clean-up regime launched by Mayor Boyd Owens.

A clean town.

A man sauntering by nodded to him, "Howdy, marshal," but Bodin was barely aware of him in his deep preoccupation. His glance idled to the opposite side of the street and he saw his sister Kate coming out of Fry's mercantile, market basket under her arm. Seeing him, she smiled and waved, and he waved back, feeling the warmth of her gesture deep inside him, like a glow.

It was Kate who had insisted that Tom change his name back to Bodin and the memory of that was another suffusing warmth in him, like a candle lighted in the depths of his being.

"I don't believe you realize how proud Tom is of you, Matt," Kate had told him, in her earnestly quiet way. "Now that he's come to his senses, I'm glad he knows." She'd paused then, her hazel eyes warm and soft suddenly, searching his. "Boyd and I are proud of you, too, Matt."

Bodin halted, reaching the corner, and pulled a silver stemwinder from the pocket of his leather vest. He glanced at it and saw it was almost noon. Almost time for the stage from Painted Wheel to be rolling up in front of the Pioneer House, with Tom Bodin at the ribbons. Tom had been working hard at his new job, and his prospects with Ed Woodring's outfit were good. So were his prospects with Ed's pretty little red-headed daughter, Sally.

Abruptly, Bodin swung around and started back upstreet. He could talk with Tom some other time, and Sally would be at the stage office now.

He had a startled awareness of smiling to himself as the voice hailed him from the doorway of the livery.

"Somebody tickled you in the ribs, marshal? You look like the cat who swallowed the canary."

Bodin halted, turning a blank stare on liveryman Will Halsey. Then he laughed.

"Spring fever, Will. Spring fools a man. Makes him think he's as young as he feels. How're things with you?"

"Fine, Matt, fine."

"Fine with me, too," said Bodin, and strolling on upstreet through the dancing spring sunlight, he knew it was so, knew that winter was past him now, and that summer lay ahead.

For Sale—One Bullet



The man appeared, a rifle held ready in his hands.

By WALLACE UMPHREY

The dream he'd buried years ago haunted Luke Apkey again — through the smoking sixes of his brother!

TOSSING its head, the horse nickered softly. Luke Apkey slid from the saddle, reaching for the Winchester in its boot even before he touched the ground. The report of the distant rifle sounded loud on the hot still air. The horse toppled and lay quiet.

Luke dropped, seeking protection beside the body of his dead animal. For a long

moment he lay there with his chin pressed against the rocky trail, aware of the swift beat of his pulse. The heat, combined with the suddenness of the attack, left him breathless, putting a trickle of sweat between his shoulder blades.

The sun was a brassy yellow in the inverted blue bowl of the sky. Luke cautiously lifted his head, scanning the tumbled rim-rock. Sunlight glinted on a rifle barrel, but the man behind it was hidden securely in the rocks.

This wasn't new to Luke Apkey. A part of his life had been lived like this in the shadow of death.

"If you can spit," he told himself, "you're okay."

He was a dark, stocky man with fine hands and a quick eye. Guns had always been like an extension of his own fingers. He was now thirty-five, and could feel the weight of the additional years. He'd been outlaw, sheriff, bounty hunter; in the dim past he'd sold his legendary guns to the highest bidder. But for a long time he'd been satisfied to live a quiet, normal and peaceful, if lonely existence on his small one-man ranch.

Now he thought about his younger brother. Emmett was the only person alive who could have given him reason enough to strap on his guns and enter once more the world of violence. It was a world he'd tried to put behind him.

The stranger had ridden up one evening at sundown, when the dying day was painting the distant peaks with crimson and gold. Luke welcomed him, glad of a break in the monotony.

"I'm riding away from Pleasant Valley," the stranger said, after sharing Luke's meal. "Too hot for me there. You ever heard of Colonel Barrett?"

"Old Injun fighter. Owns the Anchor brand."

"Barrett's taken a notion there's too many nesters. He was first in the valley and he figgers it belongs to him. He's hired himself some gunhands. The nesters are hanging tough under a steady man named Hank Morgan, but they ain't got a chance."

"I've heard the story before," Luke said.

"And you'll hear it again, mister. Barrett's worried the nesters may hire some guns of their own. He's got the whole valley locked up like a drum. Nobody gets in

or rides out without Barrett's say-so."

Luke nodded. "Times change. It's kind of hard for some men to keep pace."

The stranger said, "Barrett's bought himself a couple of old-time gunslicks. And he's picked up a kid some place who's out to make a name for himself. They call him Emmett Apkey."

NOW Luke was lying beside the dead horse, stopped before he'd even got into the valley. But the thought of his brother Emmett had served to quiet his nerves. And once more he was a cold, methodical machine, weighing the calculated risks, the laws of chance.

The attacker above hadn't fired again. Colonel Barrett, owner of Anchor, while never condoning murder, would hardly let murder stop him. Still, there was no reason for murder now. Likely the attacker hadn't meant to drop even the horse.

The dead horse lay in the shadow of a rocky overhang. Luke carefully removed his hat and propped it near the horse's head. Then he began inching backward on his belly, each separate movement cautious and slow. He made the overhang without drawing another shot. An upthrust of granite afforded him concealment.

He didn't have long to wait. A small cascade of pebbles hit the trail; Luke heard the sound of a man sliding down the steep wall of the canyon. The man himself appeared, a rifle held ready in his hands. Luke waited until the man's back was toward him.

"Drop the rifle," he said, stepping out to the trail. "Hands shoulder-high before you turn."

The rifle clattered. The man was tall and lanky, about Luke's own age, with hard eyes and a lantern jaw. The palms of his hands, held at shoulder level, were soft and smooth.

"Didn't aim to kill the horse," said the man. "Heat waves tricked me."

"Figured that."

"Didn't see you pull out, neither."

"A chance I had to take," Luke told him. "You started something. Seemed like you might have to finish it."

The man was frowning. "You fooled me with a real old dodge."

Luke nodded, keeping the man covered. He stepped forward and gently tugged the man's six-gun out of its holster. He tossed both weapons farther down the canyon.

"I'm Slick Sbarbo," the man said. Luke shook his head. "Never heard of you."

Anger touched Sbarbo's eyes. Smart and dangerous, Luke told himself. He didn't know why he'd lied; he was aware of Slick Sbarbo's reputation.

"I'm with Anchor," Sbarbo said. "What's your business?"

"I'll talk to Barrett."

"You're calling the turn right now." Sbarbo was still angry. "Arms are tired."

"You got a hoss?"

Sbarbo gestured toward the rimrock. Luke slanted a look upward. His eyes, dark and flat, never betrayed him.

"Set," he said. "Keep your hands in the open."

They squatted on their heels, facing each other. Luke laid his six-gun on the ground beside him. He rolled a cigarette, then passed the makin's across to Sbarbo.

"This valley ain't healthy," Sbarbo said, smoking in quick, nervous puffs. "There's a war here. Barrett's bought himself some guns. Me and Shadrack Kelly and a kid you never heard of."

"Which side's in the right?"

"Who cares? I draw Anchor pay."

The sound of a horse's feet came to them. Both stiffened, rising quickly. Luke gripped his six-gun now. Smoke from his cigarette stung his eyes, and he spat out the glowing butt. With Sbarbo in his sights, he retreated behind the upthrust of granite and waited.

A girl reined in a few feet from Sbarbo and swung lightly to the ground. There was no fear in her gray eyes. Brown hair, red lips, a lithe figure; she wore jeans and a man-style shirt open at the throat.

"Hello, Miss Sally," Sbarbo said.

Luke stepped out to the trail. The girl, still showing no fear, took in the situation quickly.

"You got yourself outsmarted," she said tauntingly to Sbarbo. "I'll enjoy telling it around."

Anger flared in Sbarbo's eyes. Pride, Luke thought. Sbarbo, pride-ridden, could be deadly.

Luke spoke to the girl. "It's dangerous to be out riding like this."

"Anchor won't shoot me." She was scornful now. "Even Anchor draws the line at shooting women and kids." She regarded

Luke with a level stare. Then she spoke.

"You know the setup here?"

"I've seen it before."

The girl was suddenly eager. "You got the drop on Sbarbo. That takes a good man. Dad could use somebody handy with a gun."

Luke shook his head. "My business is with Barrett."

Eagerness faded from her eyes. Her lips trembled; then they firmed again. The scornful look was back on her face.

"I might've known it," she said. "I'm Sally Morgan. Colonel Barrett's out to drive the small ranchers away. Land laws mean nothing to him. All he wants is power. Now he's surrounded himself with gunmen. My father's trying to keep the small ranchers together."

"Gunmen." Luke hesitated. "Like Emmett Apkey?"

The girl's response wasn't exactly what he expected. Again her lips trembled; the scornful look went away. Now she seemed only very young and very hurt.

"Before the trouble started," she whispered, "Emmett was a nice boy. He took



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me to dances and came calling at the house. Then Colonel Barrett laid down his untimatum, and Emmett changed overnight. He's as bad as Shadrack Kelly and Sbarbo here." Her small chin jerked suddenly. "You're Emmett's older brother!"

Luke heard Sbarbo suck in his breath. Sally Morgan stared a moment longer. Then, without another word, she mounted her horse and rode away.

"So you're Luke Apkey," Sbarbo said. "I've heard a lot about you. A lot I don't believe."

"Your hoss won't carry us both," Luke told him. "Somebody's got to walk. And I've got the gun."

A pallor touched Sbarbo's gaunt cheeks. "You can't do that to me."

Luke grinned evenly. "I'm doing it."

THE sun was furnace-hot. Luke rode slowly, Sbarbo stumbling along ahead. They went up a narrow draw and then the valley was suddenly spread out before them, carpeted with sun-cured grasses. A distant stream flowed full along its low banks. Ahead lay the Anchor ranch house and a big corral and half a dozen outbuildings. Good range. Good soil. Cattle dotted the slopes, and Luke could understand why Barrett was fighting for this land.

Sbarbo was sweat-caked and mean and very weary; six miles in this heat fried the marrow in a man's bones. He flicked deadly eyes at Luke, who urged him forward at gunpoint. They reached the ranch house and somebody let out a loud whoop. Half a dozen men clustered quickly; they saw the gun in Luke's hand and there was only silence.

A man with a lined face, a great hawk nose, and long white hair came out of the ranch house to stand on the shaded gallery. He stared down at Luke and Sbarbo, a vein throbbing in his temple. Luke dismounted, handing the reins to Sbarbo. Sbarbo led the horse away, the cluster of punchers splitting apart to let him through. At the corner of the ranch house Sbarbo turned to stare back, and Luke felt the impact of the glance. Luke holstered his six-gun, then mounted to the gallery.

"Luke Apkey!" Colonel Barrett suddenly grinned, extending a tough, wrinkled hand. "Heard you'd settled down, but reckon the rumor was exaggerated. Come in and sit."

They sat in the cool dimness of the big main room, renewing a friendship that went back along the years. Luke had once ridden for Barrett when he himself was about Emmett's age; he'd helped deliver a trail drive to railhead. But he hadn't stayed long with Anchor. He'd wanted excitement, the thrill of danger. And somehow he'd got himself trapped into looking for something he could never hope to find.

"Where's Emmett?" he asked suddenly.

"Out on patrol now." Barrett sat with his long legs stuck out in front of him. "A good boy, Luke. Takes after you."

"Tell me about him, Colonel."

"Been riding for Anchor for two years. A good, steady hand with cattle and horses. And with men. A year ago he kilt a crooked gambler in a fair fight; folks claimed it was about the fastest draw they'd ever seen. After the trouble started here, he asked if I'd pay him fighting wages. Sounded good to me."

Luke looked away. "How's Shadrack Kelly?"

"Sent for him and Sbarbo," Barrett said. "Knew 'em both in the old days. Always liked Shadrack Kelly; never trusted Sbarbo. It's hard to get men now who ain't afraid to shoot. Can't figger where all the gutless wonders come from."

"Times change," Luke murmured. "More people. More law. A man can't remain blameless now, hiring out as a professional killer."

Barrett said sourly, "The hills and the grassland and the water ain't changed none. I fought Injuns for this valley, and no homesteader can take it away from me." He slapped Luke's knee and asked, "Want to sign on with me?"

"Nope," Luke told him. "Came to get Emmett."

Barrett squinted one faded blue eye. "Just like that, eh?" He shook his mane of white hair. "You'll give him the word. He'll ride away with you. Just like that, Luke?"

Luke felt momentarily helpless. "Hadn't thought about it, Colonel."

"Which side you on, Luke?"

"Neither. It's not my fight. But I'll not work for the nesters, if that's what you mean." Luke stood up. "Tomorrow I'll be riding off. I'll accept your hospitality for the night."

By dinnertime Emmett still hadn't ridden in. Luke ate with the Anchor hands in the big cookhouse. Sbarbo kept staring down at his plate, a muscle quivering in his cheek. Shadrack Kelly, a small, quiet, thoughtful man, sat next to Luke at the long table. The rest of the Anchor hands, mostly youngsters, stared at Luke in awe. Afterwards Luke and Shadrack Kelly had a smoke together on the bunkhouse steps.

"Good to see you again, Luke." Shadrack Kelly was weaving an intricate horse-hair hackamore with slim, incredibly swift fingers. "Remember the time we rode together in the Hayes County War?"

"Same as this," Luke told him.

"Even then you worried about it," said Shadrack Kelly. "I'm not like Sbarbo; a man does what his heart tells him and that's good enough for me. Sbarbo says it's a sign of yellow. Watch out for him, Luke. He'll be looking for a showdown."

"Wanted?"

"No dodgers out on me now." Shadrack Kelly's fingers were suddenly still. "If you mean Sbarbo—well, he's wanted for murder three-four places. Reckon I don't like him much."

Shadrack Kelly smiled. "Can't help but compare you and him. You always gave a man a fair shake; maybe a better than even chance. Seen you let a man get his gun clear before you slapped leather. But Sbarbo never gave anybody a fair shake if he could help it. He's proud of being a vicious dog."

LUKE stared off into the gathering dusk. It was almost like sitting at home on his own small porch, watching the gold and crimson touch the distant peaks. But there was a difference; memories which he'd thought banished forever were crowding him now.

He thought about Sally Morgan. She represented all that had been denied him. The jaws of the trap had sprung, so long ago; and no more than any man could he shake loose.

"It can't happen to Emmett," Luke murmured.

Shadrack Kelly's face was hidden in shadows. "A boy like Emmett can't be told. Look at it this way, Luke. Suppose somebody had pulled you aside, when you were his age, and claimed you were making a

mistake. What would you have done?"

Luke watched a horse go past, the rider indistinct in the gloom. He shook his head. Words weren't going to be enough.

"That's Emmett now," Shadrack Kelly said.

"Thought so." Luke stood up. "Reckon I could use another cup of coffee."

A flunky was noisily banging pots and pans; otherwise, Luke and Emmett had the cookhouse to themselves. Emmett pushed away his empty plate and Luke silently passed over the makin's. Their greeting had been warm but with reserve; they hadn't seen each other for quite a while. Emmett had gone his own way when he was barely seventeen.

Words, Luke told himself again, were not enough. He had casually mentioned he'd like Emmett to ride back home with him; and Emmett had just as casually shaken his head.

Luke stared at his kid brother through the drifting smoke. It was like holding a mirror to the past. Emmett was twenty-one now, still full of the hopes and dreams and fires of youth; and Luke remembered when he himself had regarded life as a challenge. He'd had life in his grasp and he'd thrown it heedlessly away. Now his own shattered dreams could live only in Emmett.

"Kid," Luke said gently. "What do you want from life?"

Emmett shook his young head. "A year ago it was easy. All I wanted was a little place of my own; a wife and maybe a couple of shirt-tailed young 'uns. Now I don't know."

"That's when you shot a man."

"A fair fight."

"No fight's fair, kid. Both men lose something."

Emmett laughed deeply. "The man I shot got more than a fair shake. I've always been proud of your rep; nobody ever matched your speed. And you were always fair and square in a gunfight. The great Luke Apkey. That's what everybody tells me. Well, I'm tired of hanging on to your coattails. I aim to be just like you." Emmett leaned forward. "Luke, watch my dust!"

Luke felt his mind shaken by confusion. He'd always been proud of his reputation; but now it was defeating him.

"Your first shoot-out," Luke murmured, "and you got the world by the tail. I know

the story. But you've got something I never had. There's a girl who loves you."

Emmett said, scowling, "Not now."

Emmett kicked back his chair. "Let's mosey over to the bunkhouse."

Luke stood up quickly, anger touching him. He couldn't let Emmett throw his young life away. They stood face to face, tension mounting between them. Lines that didn't belong there touched the corners of Emmett's young mouth.

"What do you want, Luke?" he burst out sharply. "Are you worried about your own rep?"

Luke rocked back as if struck across the face. "Let's mosey, kid."

Lamps were turned up high, scaring away the shadows. The Anchor hands pretended no interest when Luke and Emmett shouldered inside. Shadrack Kelly was lying in a bunk, reading; a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles hooked over his ears made him look more like a schoolteacher than a hired killer. Three men were playing poker in the unshaded glare of a kerosene lamp; Sbarbo was one of them. He didn't glance up but his fingers shook a little.

Both Luke and Emmett had been silent during the short walk from the cookhouse. The feeling of warmth between them was gone now. Emmett slid into an empty chair across from Sbarbo, clinking coins on the rough table top.

Luke glanced around the bunkhouse. A young puncher was busily polishing a pair of boots; another, with needle and thread, was sewing a patch on an old pair of pants. Shadrack Kelly smiled, and Luke approached him.

Shadrack Kelly read Luke's face. "A long ride here, Luke. It'll be even longer back, knowing you've failed."

LUKE moved restlessly toward the poker table. It was easy to know the men here who lived by the gun. Sbarbo and Emmett and he himself still wore their gunbelts; Shadrack Kelly would have a gun under his pillow, one hand always close to it. A man who walked in the shadow of danger couldn't relax. It wasn't in him to hang his gunbelt on a peg and forget about it.

He stationed himself behind Sbarbo's chair. A slow flush began spreading along the back of Sbarbo's thin neck. It gave

Luke a feeling of satisfaction. Sbarbo put his cards face down on the table and nervously rolled a smoke. Making no sound, Luke kept on standing there.

Emmett was winning most of the pots. Luke's presence rubbed Sbarbo's nerves raw. Sbarbo suddenly leaned forward, staring across at Emmett, the edge of the table hard against his stomach.

"You're damned lucky, kid," he said.

"Just so you call it luck." Emmett matched his cold stare. "I'm not afraid of you. So don't call it anything else."

Luke could feel the chill in the air. He watched Sbarbo sit slowly back.

"Sbarbo," Luke said, "don't take it out on the kid."

Sbarbo leaped to his feet, sending his chair crashing to the floor. Men moved swiftly but carefully out of range. There was a sudden pool of silence that hurt the eardrums.

Then Sbarbo broke it. "No man makes a monkey out of me."

"Now's your chance," Luke said. "Ten paces. Want to count, Sbarbo?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll count. Three—then go for your gun."

He watched the flicker of something in Sbarbo's eyes; and he saw Sbarbo run a tongue over suddenly parched lips. Sbarbo was bent in a crouch, hands shaped like claws. Luke smiled to himself; Sbarbo wasn't sure about the legend.

Luke said, "One."

He saw Sbarbo's crouch and then he looked beyond and saw himself. He himself was dead already; he might as well have never lived. Maybe they'd tell about him in song and story, but the song would be a lie and the legend only a shadow on the screen of a romantic past.

"Two—"

But with Emmett it was different. Emmett still had a chance. Emmett would never die; he would live on through his children and their children after them.

"Three!"

Sbarbo's hand dipped; fingers touched the polished butt of his gun. And then he froze. Jaw muscles started to sag; the pattern in his eyes changed and shifted.

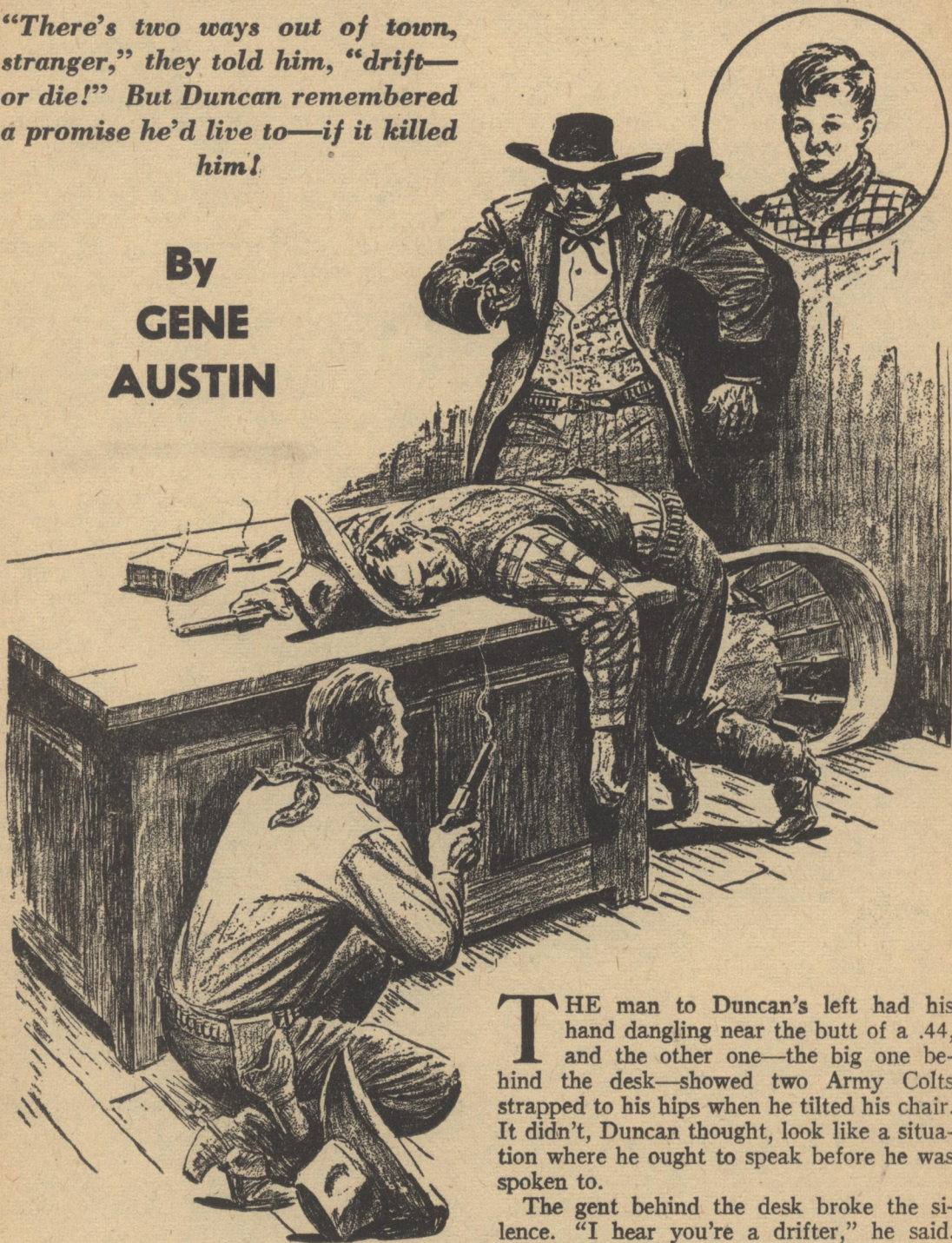
"I don't believe what they say about you!" Sbarbo shouted. "Draw!"

(Continued on page 113)

Drifter—Draw or Drag!

"There's two ways out of town, stranger," they told him, "drift—or die!" But Duncan remembered a promise he'd live to—if it killed him!

**By
GENE
AUSTIN**



Duncan remained crouched, figuring Jameson had backed against the wall.

THE man to Duncan's left had his hand dangling near the butt of a .44, and the other one—the big one behind the desk—showed two Army Colts strapped to his hips when he tilted his chair. It didn't, Duncan thought, look like a situation where he ought to speak before he was spoken to.

The gent behind the desk broke the silence. "I hear you're a drifter," he said. "And that kid with you ain't your'n."

"His daddy was a coyote and so was his mammy," Duncan said. "If it's any business of yours."

The big man scowled. "If it wasn't my business I wouldn't of had you brought here. Anyway, it don't make a difference. You're goin' to do me a favor, Duncan."

"Oh?" Duncan said.

The big man nodded. "You're goin' to get out of town—without the kid. Forget about him, get drunk, and leave. The sooner the better—for you." He stood up, towering over Duncan, glanced at the .44'd ape who'd brought Duncan in. "Take him out, Jake. I reckon he knows what's good for him."

Duncan went—there didn't seem to be much else to do. He went through a saloon that was rather plushy for a cowtown like Buffalo Chip—wood floor and all—and found himself again on the dusty boardwalk. Jake followed him out and stood halfway through the batwings, looking at Duncan.

"Cow Jameson means what he says, Duncan," Jake said. He spat a wad of disintegrated tobacco at Duncan's feet and then the batwings swung shut and Duncan was alone.

Duncan also spat—at the batwings. He realized it was a late and futile gesture. Then he went to the sawdust-floored saloon down the street, which served his type.

"A beer," he said, and received the instant service accorded the best customers—for he had achieved that distinction in the three days he'd been in Buffalo Chip.

He felt, he reckoned, as a steer feels when it's in the loading pens and realizes the grazing days are over and the slaughter near. He knew Cow Jameson's type. He knew that Cow Jameson, whatever his reason, meant what he said. But what the hell did he want with the kid?

Not that it made any difference, though. Duncan realized, with a hard thump of his heart, that it would end the same way if he left the kid here or if he tried to take him along.

He was on his third beer when the kid came in. He was about nine years old, grimy as a prospector's shirt, and as cute as a bear cub.

"What you doin'?" he asked, looking at Duncan's mug of beer.

"Drinkin' coffee," Duncan said, repeating his stock lie. He had often wondered if the kid believed it really was coffee. "Where you been, Tim?"

"Foolin' around," Tim said. "When you're done drinkin' coffee, Dunc, there's a party I want you to meet up with."

"Who?" Duncan asked suspiciously.

"A lady," Tim said. "I been squirin' her around yestiday and today, and I think she's fell for me. I reckon it'll plumb break her heart when me and you slope out of here."

Duncan said, "Well, I'll be done 'fore long and I'll see you." He gave Tim an Injun sign, which Tim returned and promptly disappeared.

DUNCAN returned to his beer. Damn that kid was sassy. And this lady he spoke of—some old maid, probably. Women all went crazy about Tim buying him candy and such, and men, too. In fact, about the only ones that didn't like the kid were the coyotes he'd spoken of to Cow Jameson—the kid's own kin.

He suddenly felt worse. A hundred miles to the south, in the short-grass country Tim's father was waiting for Duncan to bring him in. Tim didn't know that. He figured him and Duncan were pards and were going to run some stock down there.

Tim's father, Ward Hooper, was another Cow Jameson—or worse. He was a big shot in a little town, trying his damndest to be a bigger shot.

Duncan did not understand the psychology of such men, but he would have liked to be similar. He had long ago decided he was not. He admitted he was a bum and there was no force he could recognize in him that would ever raise him.

Duncan worked for Ward Hooper because he knew Hooper was the better man. And Hooper had lately tied in with a fabulously rich rancher and speculator in Texas. He'd almost blown the profitable tie when the rancher, a fanatical family man, had discovered Hooper had a son.

So Hooper gave Duncan five hundred dollars, the name of a town, and told him to come back with the kid. . . .

It had been easy. He found the mother working in a suspicious looking establishment, the boy neglected and in rags. He showed her the five hundred and she gave up Tim with an ease that made Duncan sick in the stomach.

He had taken his time on the way back stopping off at every saloon town to soak

a feeling of guilt. He knew Hooper loathed the kid. But he knew he was not the kind of man who could do anything about it. And he knew what Hooper would do if he messed this up. . . .

The barkeep asked, "More?"

Duncan shoved over his empty glass. When the beer was brought he leaned across the bar.

"What kind of trouble's Cow Jameson in?" he asked.

The barkeep grinned. "Woman trouble."

Duncan nodded. "How?"

"Well," the barkeep said, looking around carefully and apparently deciding it was safe to talk, "About two weeks ago he gunned an old fella named Ci Wills. Well, Ci has a daughter named Melissa, and Melissa got herself a rifle and she said the next time Cow Jameson showed hisself on the street she'd plug him. Now, Cow knows he can get away with plenty in this town, but he knows he can't get away with shootin' no woman just for threatenin' him. And he can't show or she'd bushwhack him sure as hell. So Cow ain't been out of his office for two weeks."

Duncan said, "Have a drink on me," tossed a dollar on the bar, and went outside. It had been interesting but it hadn't cleared anything up.

He squinted in the blistering alkali heat. Across the street he saw the gunman Jake watching him, and Jake's hand went down and tapped a hickory butt with a gesture Duncan understood. Duncan tipped his Stetson and said softly, "I do my ridin' in the mornin' and you can wait till then."

He started down the street, looking for Tim, and passing a lunch counter saw a lop-sided Stetson and a pair of calf-eyes peering at him from the window.

He turned in, grinning, and Tim came to the door to meet him.

"Slope over to that booth, Dunc," Tim said, pointing, "and I'll interduce you to the prettiest filly this side of St. Louis."

Duncan followed him to the booth, fearfully expecting some gimlet-eyed, hook-nosed representative of an anti-drunk society.

She was dressed in frilly blue that matched her eyes, she had blonde hair and was altogether lovely.

Duncan figured he must have gaped, because she laughed.

"How do you do—Dunc," she said.

Duncan swallowed and sat down, blood pounding in his face. And then he saw the glistening barrel of the Sharps rifle that was sharing the girl's seat.

Tim was saying, "Dunc, this is Melissa Wills."

Duncan understood it all then. Of course Tim had captivated Melissa Wills; Cow Jameson knew that. And with Duncan out of the way of course she would want to take care of him. And she'd put her rifle away because she'd love Tim and wouldn't leave him alone again—as he surely would be if she shot Cow Jameson. Apparently Jameson understood women as well as men. He had seen through Duncan's character and he saw through hers.

"Tim was telling me of some of your exploits, Mr. Duncan," Melissa said. "You sound like quite a hero. I especially liked the one where you saved the wagon train by sneaking into the Indian camp at night and sprinkling itching powder on the backs of their horses."

Duncan looked at Tim, and Tim looked up the ceiling. Now why in hell, Duncan wondered, had the kid told such a whopper?

Tim seemed anxious to change the subject. "Dunc drinks coffee all the time. Fifteen, sixteen cups a day. I reckon we'll order him some."

Duncan wanted to protest; his stomach was a bottomless pit of sickness already, but the kid hollered at the waiter and he got a huge cup of steaming black coffee.

He drank it while Melissa and the kid talked. He listened some and he thought disconnectedly. He would leave in the morning, early, when the kid was asleep.

The kid kept getting him coffee and they kept talking till the kerosene lights went on and Melissa's face reflected their soft glow. He was trapped and sick. When he got out of Buffalo Chip in the morning he'd get drunk and stay that way so he would not have to think about what it meant. And he'd wait for the end. . . .

BUT that night he thought about it more and he knew what it meant. He was in the cheap hotel room he'd taken and Tim was in the bunk beside him, breathing easily.

He stared at the dark ceiling and remem-

bering the whoppers the kid had told about him, how he'd painted a false and heroic picture to Melissa. It occurred to him that the kid wanted him to be like that and hell nor high water would make him believe any different.

The kid had acted like that before; today he'd been a little different, like he was straining. Like it was getting harder and harder to keep Duncan on that pedestal.

Then he heard the noises. Tim was getting out of bed, softly, scraping around the room and putting on his clothes. Duncan did not move. The kid started to mumble and he listened.

"I'll get him," the kid said. "I'll plug that there Cow Jameson. I reckon Dunc'll be right proud of me for doin' a lady a hand."

If the kid had stabbed him, it could not have hit Duncan harder. He sat up quickly, scratched a match and lit the lamp.

He glared at Tim. "What's this, pardner?"

The kid, half-dressed, looked guilty. "I thought you was asleep."

Duncan stared at him. The kid could tell yarns like a muleskinner, but this kind he could not tell. Duncan knew suddenly he'd not thought him asleep; that he'd wanted him awake, to see and hear.

Duncan looked at him and it was like a whisper in the back of his head: *He's giving you your chance, Duncan. He's tricked it. He knows, somehow. He's there waiting for you to show him you're what he's made of you.*

And as he looked he knew all about faith. Some men, like Hooper and Jameson, were born with it. Some, like him, had to acquire it. And the kid was showing him the way.

He got out of bed and began dressing, frowning at Tim. He strapped on his Smith & Wesson and picked the room-key off the washstand.

"If you leave this room while I'm gone," he said, "I'll wallop you."

The kid's eyes were round, but they were not afraid, and that was all Duncan needed. He went out and locked the door, whistling so Tim would know this was as routine as sneaking into the Injun camp with the itch-powder.

He was down the dark alley till he was back of Jameson's saloon, under the window of the back room where they had talked to him that morning. He lit a match, hand

trembling, to make sure, and in the soft dirt under the window he found the imprints of two small boots. Tim had heard it all.

He went around to the front. The place was still going at top speed and he walked unnoticed through the crowd, went to the back room and found the door unlocked.

He pushed it open, stepped in, and closed it in one motion, and stood six feet from the desk where Jameson and Jake were engrossed in a stud game.

"Come to say good-by?" Jameson asked.

Duncan felt smothered, out of breath. His heart was pounding wildly. "No, I reckon I'll stay, Jameson. I like it here."

Jameson shrugged. "Out of town; dead—what difference does it make?"

It must have been a signal. Jake went for his gun, Jameson started to rise. Duncan fell on one knee, clawing for the Smith & Wesson, ramming his shoulder against the desk to keep Jameson out of it momentarily.

Jake's bullet took the lobe off his ear—Tim would like that—his own entered Jake's chest and Jake helped by falling against the desk and making it a slightly larger barricade.

Duncan remained crouched, figuring Jameson had backed against the wall. He counted to three and stood up suddenly, screaming like a Sioux and fanning four bullets into Jameson before the big man could get a trigger back. Then there was nothing left but gunsmoke and he crawled out the back window. . . .

H E NOTICED Melissa was very attractive in an apron and that the kitchen stove made her cheeks glow red and her eyes bright.

"I'll be glad to keep Tim, till you get back," she said. "Longer, if you want."

He wanted that, but he'd attend to it later, after he made Ward Hooper understand how things stood. He set his stomach and finished his coffee, stood up.

"I guess I'll be going."

Melissa smiled and he looked hard so he could remember it on the long ride. And he shook hands with Tim and went outside.

Mounting his sorrel, he heard Tim's voice through the window, "I reckon Dunc's goin' to take care of Jesse James. Hope he don't shoot him up too bad."

Duncan grinned. Maybe, he figured, he'd do that on the way back.

By LANCE
KERMIT



The acrid odor of burning powder filled Jefferson's nostrils and for a while he forgot all else.

TRIGGER SIZE

The badman's gun and the marshal's heart had one thing in common—they took the same size bullet!

BORDERTOWN bustled with Saturday's activity. A summer thunder-shower had laid the dust of Main Avenue without forming mud puddles and the women and children from the ranches and farms paraded merrily from the Elite Emporium to the Golconda Hotel. The prosperity which the railroad had brought was apparent in the hearty accents of the populace and the bright colors of new costumes. Even the many Mexican citizens smiled with their white teeth, lazily sleek in the afternoon sun.

There were four trees along Main Ave-

nue, tall cottonwoods from the creek bottom, transplanted by the City Council to give shade and add tone to the town's appearance. In the tiny patch of grass and weeds called The Park the folks gathered to gossip, exchange opinions and to meet other folks. Marshal Jeff Jefferson made it his business to be at the park much of each Saturday, mending his political fences.

The marshal was a tall man with black mustaches and a certain elegance of dress, a lean man with the drawl of the South in his speech, and also much of the Old South in his attitude toward life. His father and

elder brothers had been killed in '62, fighting the damyankees. The family plantation, in the path of Sherman's Bummers, was burned and laid waste. Jeff Jefferson had brought his mother west with what was left of the money, buried her along the Rio Grande, and settled in Bordertown when the rails came. He was a man with no gift for trade nor farming, a fair hand with a deck of cards, swift and deadly with a Colt's. Therefore he became city marshal. Ahead of him was a chance to be elected sheriff, perhaps representative. Secretly, his eyes were fixed higher, upon the chair of the governor, but this would all come later, when true civilization had been established; meantime he was bent upon establishing his reputation as one of the line of great peace officers so respected in the Southwest.

In furthering this reputation, he had killed three men. One was a renegade Apache. The other was reputed to be a Mexican bandit named Cansina. The third was a gambler, Johnny Ransom, who had been a part of the boom days when railhead was being established.

He stood fondly surveying his future constituents and spoke to Dutch Herman. "Yes suh, I'm a man of peace. Even if I got to fight for it, suh."

"Yah," said Dutch Herman. He was one of the many German immigrants who had settled near Bordertown, a prosperous farmer. He was a dark-haired man with no back to his head, clean shaven in an era of beards. He said very little, but his dark gray eyes darted like a hummingbird in flight, never missing a feminine figure amidst the crowd. Herman was a bachelor and unhappy with his lot.

"You see Miss Molly today?"

A faint frown creased the classic brow of Jeff Jefferson. He said stiffly, "I believe she is engaged in her duties at the Elite Emporium, suh."

He could not afford to alienate the influential Dutch Herman, but he permitted himself to turn pointedly away. He motioned Juan Apache into the gutter to allow two drunken cattlemen to stagger freely upon the boardwalk which surrounded the park.

Juan Apache obeyed, his sloe eyes lowered. He was small and young and inconsequential, although he was useful to Jefferson, a willing errand boy and hostler. When the cattlemen had gone by, he took

off his hat and came close to Jefferson.

The marshal turned away from the crowd, appearing not to listen, but bending one ear as Juan spoke.

"Sergeant Blackie, *Señor*. He has return."

Jefferson straightened. He was looking down Main Avenue. He could see a dozen people he knew intimately, a hundred he could recognize. He was a lusty young man with a great future before him, a man destined, he told himself, for things of great import.

Yet he stood frozen, his eyes bleak and staring, for a full minute. The brown eyes of the Mexican lad gave off a quick glint, his mouth twitched, then became solemnly serene.

Jefferson said, "He is with Miss Farraday?"

"Si, *Senor*," said the soft, expressionless voice.

Jefferson said, "All right. Go on. Keep watch."

Juan whispered, "You will keel him, no, *Senor*? Thees time he will not *vamos*, no?"

Jefferson did not meet the gaze of the Mexican youth. "Get back to your duty. Report to me every hour."

Juan's smile was childlike. "I could have two pesos, *Senor*? It is to buy for my sweet-heart a gift."

Jefferson snarled, "You know I can't hand you money here."

"At the stable, then, *señor*?"

"In an hour," said Jefferson, "Now git!"

Juan vanished in broad daylight as effectively as a ghost on a moonless night.

Dutch Herman lurched against Jefferson, going toward the center of town. "I go by Emporium," muttered Dutch. "See you later, marshal."

Jeff Jefferson watched the German go down the street his waddling, farmer's stride, well-dressed in neat broadcloth, but still clumsy, earthy. Cowboys and gamblers smiled behind Dutch's back—but he could buy them all, lock, stock and barrel and they knew it even as they mocked him. Jefferson knew it best of all.

HIS MIND, which had been frozen momentarily by the news brought by Juan Apache, began to function again. Dutch Herman was going to the general store to seek out Molly Farraday,

determined to press his suit for the girl's hand. And Sergeant Blackie was hanging around Molly, Juan had said.

Jefferson moved slowly, on the opposite side of the street from the Elite Emporium. Men and women called to him and he answered their greetings meticulously if absently. His pace was leisurely, but his brain was revolving with great speed.

Sergeant Blackie, that enigma, that violent man with the soft voice, had returned to Bordertown. Sergeant Blackie, who was reputed to have fought in the War, yet seemed as young or younger than Jeff Jefferson, that handsome, curly-haired rascal, that highwayman and adventurer and desperado, was back from Mexico. And he had gone straight to Molly Farraday.

They all went to Molly, thought Jefferson bitterly. Her raven hair, her high color, her bright gray eyes which gleamed half-mockingly at them were irresistible to the leaders of men in this country. The lesser men never even tried; they knew they had no chance, but all the top hands at whatever pursuit set dead after Molly Farraday.

Yet who was she, Jefferson fiercely demanded of himself? A girl out of no place, a clerk in Cohen's Elite Emporium who took in sewing on the side to make an extra silver dollar. Why, back home in Georgia, he thought, who would look at Molly Farraday with marriage in his mind? No one even knew her father!

He brought himself up sharp, biting at his lip. He had not harbored such a thought in years. He stopped on the walk across from the general store. People eddied about him, all seemingly in a hurry. After a moment he realized that their faces had sobered, that no one was lingering, that everyone was hastening away from the vicinity of the Elite Emporium.

Max Maxon paused and said sharply, "You better get over there. Sergeant Blackie's on the prod." Then the Mayor went quickly into the Last Frontier Bar.

He saw that the Elite Emporium, which should have been doing a thriving business, was emptied of customers. He saw dimly, through the large window, the three figures.

Dutch Herman was standing, his shoulders stooped, at the low counter. His long, heavy arms were bowed away from his body—Jefferson had seen gun-fighters stand so, ready to draw.

But Dutch Herman did not wear a gun. He was facing Sergeant Blackie, head thrust forward, belligerent, without weapons.

Molly Farraday was behind the counter. Her hands were flat on its surface, she was leaning forward a little.

The looming, wide-shouldered figure of Sergeant Blackie was facing the door. Jefferson could not see his face but he could imagine the cold eyes, the slightly smiling mouth, the chiseled jawbone gaunt and thrusting. He had seen Sergeant Blackie in a fight, the night before Johnny Ransom had gone down under Jefferson's fire, the night Sergeant Blackie had left town after shooting Pecos Jake Windler in a card game.

And now he had to go in there. It was his duty. Jeff Jefferson had to go in and do his best to protect a citizen and a political ally, Dutch Herman. He had to somehow prevent Sergeant Blackie from killing the farmer who aspired to the hand of Molly Farraday.

The streets of Bordertown were deserted now. People fled when a man like Sergeant Blackie turned loose his wolf.

Because, Jefferson knew, Blackie was a real gun-slinger . . . his reputation did not stand upon the downing of an alleged Mex bandit, a tin-horn gambler and a renegade Apache. Blackie had won his spurs long since, in Hays City, in Dodge, in Abilene. He had matched guns with Earp and the Mastersons and Thompsons and Luke Short and John Wesley Hardin . . . and still lived to walk around and smile upon girls like Molly Farraday.

Jeff Jefferson knew fear. He stood there and the sweat was cold on his shaven upper lip. He touched the butt of his low-slung gun with one hand, pulled it away as though it were hot.

Yet he had to go forward. His future lay in the balance. From concealed vantages, the entire county was watching to see how he would conduct himself. He had to move.

He broke the trance by terrific effort. He moved knees which were rubbery. He crossed the street, started up the steps to the Elite Emporium. Behind him the buzz rose and lingered as people relayed the news from one to the other.

He paused. Then he wheeled and moved swiftly. He slipped into the alley alongside the store. His knees became firmer as he ran. He turned the corner of the build-

ing and leaped to a loading platform. Nobody could criticize him for going in this way, taking Sergeant Blackie in the rear. Indeed, he thought, going in the front would have placed Dutch Herman at a disadvantage, between two guns.

Two guns? Did he mean to draw on Blackie? He tried very hard to answer that question as he ran between stacked merchandise, past the little office where Cohen and his wife cowered, into the main body of the big store.

He heard Dutch Herman's thick voice, "I tell you, Blackie, you are not goodt for her. A man like you!"

Molly Farraday's voice was sharp. "Dutch, you've no right to talk like that! I've never given you any right . . ."

The drawl of Sergeant Blackie cut in, smooth and amused.

"Now, Molly. This here's a free country. Man's got a right to his opinions. Says so, right in the constitution. Let Dutch talk. When he gets through, I might orate myself a lil bit. But let him talk."

He'd orate, all right—with his guns, thought Jefferson. He moved past a pile of tin pails, concealed from Dutch and Molly, behind Sergeant Blackie. His hand was clammy on his gun butt. He drew the weapon, cocked it. The sound was loud in a heavy silence which had fallen over the trio.

Jefferson said, "Just don't move, any of you."

Sergeant Blackie drawled, "Well, what do you know? The rebel boy. The marshal!"

Molly said sharply, "Jeff! No!"

Dutch Herman was peering, trying to see between the stack of pails. "Dot's you, Jeff?"

"Don't make a try for it, Blackie," warned Jeff. "I've got you covered."

"A move for what?" asked Blackie patiently. "You reckon I want to start shootin' in here? In front of Molly?"

Jefferson licked his dry lips. Suddenly he realized that he was in a ridiculous position. There had been no reason for him to draw his gun. He had moved, through fear, before the situation was clear to him. He stood, transfixed, aware that this was almost as bad as if he had not entered the store.

Molly said, "Come out here, Jeff, and put that gun away . . ."

BEFORE she could finish, the gunfire sounded. It began like a thunderstorm, striking at the heart of town. It was a frightening sound in that place and time, a rattle of rifles punctuated by pistol fire. For a second it stunned them all into inaction.

Then they were running, falling over one another to get to the front door. Sergeant Blackie had two Colt's drawn, Dutch Herman, eyes wide, stared through the door unarmed. Blackie jerked him back, hurled him past Jeff, shouting, "Molly, give Herman a rifle from stock! Hurry!"

Jefferson had reached the window. A horseman rode up close and a blaze of fire sent him ducking. Lead shattered the glass of which Cohen was so proud. Splinters of it cascaded upon Jeff's hat and shoulders as he tried to return the fire.

Sergeant Blackie was kneeling, aiming his right hand gun, balancing the other. The rider dashed away unharmed, to join a band of swarthy men who drummed their shots up and down Main Avenue.

Jefferson stammered, "The bank . . . Saturday payrolls and deposits."

"Yeah," nodded Blackie. He was firing as best he could from behind a wheelbarrow on display just outside the door. Jeff crawled over to join him.

He could see them coming out of the bank now, bearing croker sacks which bulged with loot. He drew a bead on one of the robbers and fired simultaneously with Blackie. The man dropped and the sack lay for a moment in the street.

Then there was a wild yell and a ride broke from down the street. Bending low he swooped up the sack without losing a stirrup. He came up with his gun blazing raking the street. There were a dozen others pinning down the town, riding like madmen up and down. The leader shrilled another yell.

They let loose a last fanfare. Then they rode out of Bordertown—to the south.

Sergeant Blackie straightened up. With the smoking muzzle of one of his guns, he shoved the sombrero far back on his head "Yaas, indeed. Cansina and his gang."

"Nonsense! I killed Cansina myself," said Jeff.

"You kilt his lil brother," corrected Blackie gently. "The no-good, senorita chasin' brother. He's got four, five more

He meant to git you—that was him on the black hoss, come ridin' up here and broke Mr. Cohen's window."

Jefferson was already going down the steps. He paused and stared back up at the serene, smiling face of Sergeant Blackie. Dutch Herman, awkwardly holding a rifle, was saying, "Go and chase them yet! They got our money! You got to chase them yet!"

Blackie said, "They're over the Rio by now—or will be time you mount up."

"We'll be ruint! The town'll be ruint!" wailed Dutch Herman. "How can I married up get, if I am ruint?"

"That's a problem," said Blackie negligently. "Yore problem, Dutch. Howsomer, if the gal truly loves yuh—what's money? You oughta think of that, Dutch. Now me, if I aim to marry a gal, I want she should take me for my own sweet self."

Jefferson said hotly, "They can't get away with that. There must be something we-all can do!"

Someone shouted from across the street, "They got Max! The Mayor is dead!"

Sergeant Blackie said, "They'll be in Mexico in an hour."

Jefferson stood, staring, thinking. People were showing themselves, Maxon's wife was running awkwardly across to the saloon, weeping wildly. Jefferson said, "You know that country over the Rio. What about it, Blackie?"

The Sergeant cocked an eyebrow. He had a thick growth of brow, almost mephistophelian, and the corners of his mouth quirked up in small triangles, showing white, even teeth.

"Why, Marshal, that's agin international law. You kin git in a heap of trouble, goin' over the Border after someone, don't you know that?"

"The Rangers have done it. I've heard tell about them doin' it," said Jefferson. "There's no Rangers hereabouts now—if I knew the country. . . ."

"Can't take a posse," said Blackie solemnly. "It'd look like an armed invasion if a passel o' men rode armed over there."

Jefferson's voice was steady. "All right. You and me, then. You got a good horse?"

"I got Sandy," said Blackie. "You remember Sandy. Won a right heap of money with Sandy when I was here afore."

"I'll be with you in five seconds," snapped

Jefferson. He paused to look at Molly. She was staring at Sergeant Blackie, her face slightly pale, but with a pink spot on each cheek.

He was back in moments, astride Frontenac, a tall, blooded chestnut of which he was very proud. Frontenac was Kentucky stock, almost dainty in his lines, but sturdier than he looked. There was a rifle in the boot and *bandeleros* of ammunition in belts and boxes. There was a poncho on the saddle and a bedroll.

Blackie rode up on Sandy, the buckskin nag which had deceived so many bettors by appearing sleepy and worn before the gun to start a quarter race. Blackie rode slouched in the saddle, a wry grin on his wide face.

Jefferson said, "Sergeant Blackie will guide me and God willing we'll bring back the money. Trust in us." He said it quite loudly, so that many people heard him and murmured admiringly. He rose in the saddle and waved flamboyantly to where Molly stood shading her eyes on the verandah of the Elite Emporium. Then he bowed to Blackie, motioning for that gentlemen to lead the way.

Sandy had a niggling gait and Frontenac wanted to run, forcing Jefferson to hold him in. So they rode out, two men against a dozen bandits, going south into a country strange to Jeff but very familiar to the prey—and to the strange, smiling man on the lazy-seeming cayuse.

A WEEK later, holed up in an arroyo deep inside Mexico, Sergeant Blackie leaned on one elbow and surveyed his companion. "Town life softens a man. This is rough country," he said kindly.

Jefferson lay stretched on his bedroll. Remembering the gaudiness of his departure from town, he evaded the glance of his companion. He was sun-bitten, wind-swept and saddle sore. He was so weary that every bone seemed to ache separately.

He said thickly, "I cain't see how you do it. No man can ride night and day in this land and be fresh."

"Waal, y' see, I been ridin'," said Blackie, almost apologetically. "Always make it a habit to get outa town every so often. Keeps a man fit."

Jefferson twisted restlessly on his hard couch. "Cansina and his men must be some-

wheres spending all of the loot by now."

Blackie shook his head. "They would be, wasn't we after them. But the way we come, we cut them off from Joeslita, which is their headquarters and fav'rite drinkin' grounds."

"You mean they know we're on their trail?"

Blackie grinned. "Marshal, they know every move we made since crossin' the Rio."

"But—but how we goin' to catch up to them?"

"Don't aim to. Not actual," said Blackie softly.

Despite aches and pains, Jefferson sat upright. "You don't mean to catch 'em? What do you mean to do?"

"Well, Cansina's a nervous kinda feller. Sooner or later, to git us off their necks, they'll come in to wipe us out."

"They'll dry-gulch us!" said Jefferson.

"Cansina's a cavalryman," said Blackie patiently. "He'll ride in. That's his style." "But this arroyo. It's a trap!"

Blackie shrugged. "Yeah. Hate to ask yuh to move. But tonight will be about it, I reckon."

Jefferson staggered to his feet. "Tonight? Here?"

"Yuh see, I know the Cansinas," said Blackie apologetically. "Could have ridden with 'em, if I was so minded." He paused, and his face was expressionless as he stared at Jefferson. "That worry you some? Don't let it."

Jefferson stood a moment, staring into the fathomless eyes of the strange man with whom he had ridden for a week. His emotions were confused, but strangely there was no fear in him.

He said, "That's none of my business, Blackie. This is your play. I aim to go along, all the way."

Blackie said gently, "That's handsome of you. There's a lil ole hill up yonder. Reckon you can walk it?"

"Our horses?"

Regretfully, Blackie said, "You and me got one thing in common. Floss flesh. But we gotta take a chance. They gotta see the hosses." He picked up his blanket and began deftly making a long form to resemble a human body. Jefferson followed suit. Soon there were two bundles, resting on the saddles as pillows. Blackie looked to the guns and ammunition.

"How do you know it'll be tonight?" asked Jeff.

"Don't know it. We'll have to do this every night until—well until the end of it."

"The end of it," repeated Jeff. "Which-ever way."

"Whichever way," nodded Blackie. "It never figured to be a picnic, did it?"

For a space Jefferson stood, swaying a little in his weariness. He had wondered, secretly, about himself for some time now. He was almost too exhausted to think straight, but he recognized that this was an opportunity to learn something of himself. Blindly he had put himself into the hands of this other man, one who had shown him endurance, courage. For one moment a breath of suspicion was in the air—Blackie knew so much about the Cansinas, it seemed wrong. Then it was allayed, and he was following the strong man up the hillside.

There was a small cup of rock on the hill-top. It was uncomfortable for aching joints and Jefferson bit his lip to keep from crying out his complaint. Blackie merely chuckled "I knew this was here. Nothin' like knowin the country, huh, marshal?"

"Yeah," groaned Jeff. "I dunno how many nights I can . . ." He broke off, biting his lip. Blackie, relaxed, seemed already to be dozing. Jefferson twisted, his bones creaking.

He thought of his past life, the way he had drifted with the tide, acting always in the way which would bring him the most for himself. Never before had it occurred to him that there was a flaw in his procedure. Now he wondered, shifting among the stones, staring in the darkness at the still form of his companion. He nodded feeling the warmth of sleep upon him.

He was awakened by a nudge in the ribs—and a hand over his mouth which prevented speech. Blackie pointed down toward their camp. There were stars in the night sky and a moon threatened from behind a bank of low-hanging clouds.

At first he could see nothing. Then he heard Frontenac whinny and Sandy's response. The horses kicked their heels, pawing loose rocks.

As if that were the signal, the riders came in. They were shadows, bulking huge, driving straight for the dummies by the cold fire, shooting murderously as they came.

Blackie said, "It's them or us. Aim low

and drop them and hit them again." His voice was low and cool, urging Jefferson, as if he knew the reluctance of the marshal to shoot from ambush. "This here's the only way, marshal. Let 'em have it."

Jeff's cheek rested on the stock of the rifle. He picked men to the left and followed them in. The moon obliged by sending a silvery streak across the scene of action. Alongside him Blackie's weapon danced with the flame from its muzzle. The acrid odor of burning powder filled Jefferson's nostrils and for that while he forgot all else, slamming lead into the bandits who had looted Bordertown and killed its mayor.

It was over almost as soon as it began. Blackie was standing, rifle at trail, six-gun in hand.

"Better go down one at a time."

Jefferson said tightly, "Yes." Reaction had set in and he was shaking. "You want to go first?"

Blackie said without expression, "You ain't scared I'll grab the loot and vamose?"

Jefferson gulped. "How did you guess..."

"It coulda been a scheme of mine. Get you down here, let you help me clean 'em up, then kill you and go back with a sad tale. Who'd know? A man as smart as you would figure that out," said Blackie reasonably. "Go on, marshal. You go first and make sure."

"No," said Jefferson. "No. We'll go in together."

They spread apart, went cautiously in. Jeff kicked up the fire. A piece of brush shed light on the scene. Bodies lay all about the arroyo.

Jeff had never seen so much violent death in a small space. For a moment he feared he would be ill.

Blackie murmured, "Looks like the field at Shiloh. Only they wore gray. Well, it was butternut, for truth. Poor lads!"

"You—you were in the Union army?" said Jefferson, shocked.

"The United States Army, we called it," grinned Blackie. "Don't take it hard, Marshal. War's over—this here one, too." He stepped over the body of the tall Mexican with fierce mustachios who had ridden the black horse into Bordertown. "This here is Cansina, the big fella. Looks like the one you downed, at that, don't he?" Blackie stooped over a dead horse and lifted saddle bags from the carnage. "He was boss of

this gang." He opened the bags. "Didn't even split the loot. He was waitin' until he got us outa the way."

He extended the heavy, bloodstained bags to Jeff. Numbly the marshal took them. He held them, knowing what their recovery meant to the town—and to Marshal Jefferson. For that moment he was speechless.

Blackie said, "Better get ridin'. If a Mex troop of soldiers found us they'd give us what we give Cansina. We don't rightly belong here, remember?"

He whistled long and loud and Sandy came trotting in. Frontenac, nervous and skittish, followed. Jefferson rallied himself.

He had come through, he thought. He had satisfied the doubt in his mind, the doubt he had never admitted even to himself until this night.

BY THE time the two rode into Bordertown, Blackie was as saddle-beaten as Jefferson. People came running at sight of them. In the Square, before them all, Jefferson handed the saddlebags to the banker. A shout went up that shook every rafter in the town.

Molly Farraday stood where they had last seen her, before the Elite Emporium. Dutch Herman came waddling, beaming, to look upon the regained loot. Jeff almost fell from Frontenac, clinging to a stirrup to remain erect. The crowd closed in and Jeff found his tongue, telling the story in his smooth, colorful way, while Blackie smiled and smoked a cigarette.

Then Jeff had to pause. He was nearly at the end of his string. He made a gesture and left the crowd, for once, to another, as Blackie sat cross-legged on the durable Sandy. He staggered alongside Frontenac, going into the alley behind the nearby hotel. In the stable yard Juan Apache came, white-toothed, grinning, to take the horse. Jefferson leaned against the stable door. His belt was too heavy and he unbuckled it and hung it on a wooden peg. He wiped a hand across his face.

Juan Apache said in his soft, humble voice, "You keel Cansina, no?"

Jeff nodded, trying to pull himself together, thinking confusedly of Molly Farraday, but also thinking of the sleep he so badly needed.

Juan said, "Now you have keel two Cansinas, no?"

At the unnatural insistence of the Mexican's voice, Jefferson turned, frowning. Juan was facing him.

Juan was no longer smiling with head half-bowed. His white teeth were framed now in a grimace. Juan held one of the revolvers he had just lifted from Jefferson's cartridge belt.

"Put that gun down." Jeff tried to go forward. He felt the wings of death touch him, once more knew fear. Yet, even then he dove forward, into the embrace of death, unshirking.

There was a blast of sound. Something clubbed him, driving him to earth. He was face down on the floor of the barn, dust in his nostrils. He thought it was the end, the end of dreams, here on a stable floor, at the hands of a Mexican boy. And, curiously, he laughed, laughed at himself . . .

Then he was turning over, sitting up. He was not shot down, he realized; he was not bleeding. There before him lay Juan Apache, limp, unconscious. Jeff reached out and picked up the revolver, his revolver.

He looked up at Sergeant Blackie. That individual winked. "Figured it'd be like that. Followed you in."

"Juan was—one of the gang?"

Blackie blew through the barrel of his smoking gun. "Juan was mebbe the next smartest to the big one. Mebbe even smarter."

"Juan was a Cansina?"

Blackie nodded. "Like I say, I knew 'em. We won't go into that, huh, marshal?" He holstered his gun. "You're quite a guy, at that, Jeff. Tell yuh what. You allow to the town how you knew this alla time, see? You had it all figured out and took Juan just now to clean up the Cansinas."

"What?"

"It'll getcha elected sheriff. Some day it might make you gov'nor, a thing like that. It ketches people's imagination."

Jefferson pulled himself together. Dutch Herman was coming into the alley. Others were following, attracted by the sound of the shot. Jefferson frankly took Blackie's arm, leaning on it. He hobbled past Herman, through the crowd. He urged Blackie onto the porch of the hotel, and as always the crowd gathered to listen to him. Across the street Molly Farraday still waited, leaning against a post in front of the Elite.

Jeff's voice was very clear. "Friends, I

want all of you to listen close to what I have to say." Blackie tried to pull away, into the background, but Jeff held him close. "This man, this Sergeant Blackie—he got your money back for you. Just now he saved my life when Juan Cansina—known to you as Juan Apache—had me dead to rights."

A shout went up. Jeff held up his hand. "Friends—please!" He was all politician now, holding them under his spell. "There's an election coming up. I hope to get your votes for sheriff, as yawl know. I admit I'm electioneerin', right here and now." He paused and his smile was wide and appealing as it had never been before. "I'm electioneerin' for this man. I want him to be marshal of Bordertown in my place!"

He jerked the badge from his vest. Still clinging to Blackie, he pinned it firmly in place. He saw then that Blackie was sweating in embarrassment. He laughed, forcing Blackie to hold still as the crowd surged forward, yelling approval. He stuck by the dark man, finally extricated him without affronting the hero-worshippers, dragging him across the street.

Molly smiled at them. Jeff said, "Molly, he's the better man."

Blackie said, choking, "He's plumb loco, Molly—"

"Now maybe you'll stay home and be good," she said softly.

"I only went because—because you—"

She nodded. "I take the blame." She turned to Jeff. "My people, like yours, were southerners. When I found Michael was in the Union Army we quarreled and I left and came here—"

"Michael?" asked Jeff.

"Michael Corrigan. Sergeant Blackie. My fiancé."

She reached out and took Blackie's hand. "I won't lose him again."

Jeff was aware of Dutch Herman behind him, gaping. He gathered the remnants of his strength and turned, taking Dutch's thick elbow, piloting him away.

"All the time she is engaged to him?" Dutch said sorrowfully.

Jeff felt his weariness disapper. He did not even look back over his shoulder at the happy couple. With the help of Michael Corrigan he had done a very wonderful thing. He had almost grown up to his dreams. Happiness could come later. For now, this was enough.

MAN FOR HELL



"Welcome to Trail's end, mister—where a grave comes easy an' livin' comes hard—an' you pay for both with a bullet!"

HE PULLED the bandanna over his nostrils, for the hundredth time that long day. They were crowding close to the pens of the Kansas Pacific—he could see the long gray fences through the dust. He would hold the cattle here, ride into Abilene tonight and make arrangements with Kirk Goodman to have the stock turned over in the morning. Then a day—two full days with Vance.

After the dust and hell of this Texas trail

**By W. EDMUNDS
CLAUSSEN**

two days was hardly enough time to spend in a woman's arms.

He sat his horse on a little knoll, watching the chuck wagon pull up and the men break into a camp. The cattle drifted a little, then picked a dry slant for their bedground. No different from any other spot on this hard, sable prairie. A frail smile pulled John Giddings' mouth. They knew what they wanted, all right. Perhaps some cloying odor was different from a hundred yards yonder, perhaps the grass held a sweet shading of flavor.

He, too, knew what he wanted. He had not been able to get Vance out of his blood. He shaped a cigarette and tossed it away unsmoked. He was restless, irritable. A dance hall queen! What would old man Giddings have said?

Old Jeff Giddings was dead. This was the second herd over the trail for John. The last trip, last year, he had met Vance.

Jeff had been hard as a boil, but righteous living. He'd have bent a lass-rope over their rear ends if they hadn't gone to church of a Sunday. Susan, his sister, and he.

He hadn't built his Four-Aces spread to be inherited by any honkytonk breed. The thought pulled John's mouth tight. He'd gone over every angle of this for a year. Still he loved her with a longing that made itself felt all over.

He rode in on his riders and pulled rein, letting his eyes sort over the ones that could be depended on. He picked the man who'd been most faithful; the ones too old to give a hoot for town pleasures. He named them off slowly.

"Swenson—Buckley—Beahl—Carmody. You four ride herd. Be an extra ten in tomorrow's pay. Rest of you hit for town. Get goin' before you lose your sight staring at that helltown!"

They let out yells, fierce and unruly, and hit the trail to town. The men he had named fell into well-known, familiar tasks. Swenson and Buckley, with saddles on fresh horses, would night-ride the cattle. Carmody, the night hawk, would guard the horse string. Beahl pulled the last of the firewood from the sling fashioned between the wagon's wheels. Next came his dutch ovens.

His eyes drifted to John and then he spat juice. The dust in his windpipe made his voice crack.

"Gord's pulled in with his critters."

John nodded, rolled a fresh smoke. He lifted a glance wondering how much Beahl suspected of that Red River fight. He said edgily, "I don't count on more trouble from Gord."

"You don't? John, you near killed him at Red River."

"And so I should have. If there hadn't been an easy spot in me, Gord would be down the trail now—sleeping."

Beahl ejected another streamer. "Soft spot in every Giddings."

John turned that over and dismissed it. He lifted his hand, touching his roan with spurs.

"Don't let anything spook the beef."

"An' young fella, you keep outa the clip-joints!" Beahl yelled.

He rode on and the herd's dust thinned until the backs of Abilene's buildings took definition in the failing light. He was rubbing his right hand as he rode, a frown piling deep in his face. When he found himself nursing the hand he dropped it quickly to his saddle. The fight with Gord along the Red had shown him how close he stood to death. He could have shot Gord instead of pistol whipping him. He should have done it.

The shock of that jar on Gord's head had traveled along his whole arm, blinding him with pain. Not a man of his outfit knew that he suffered. Not a one but respected him as the quickest trigger man to come up the Texas trail. That had been true—last year!

Darkness was settling over the holding lots. To satisfy the nagging inside he let his hand slide to his holstered Colt. His fingers fitted around the handle in a talon grasp. And then he groaned. White light filtered in front of his eyes, and he pulled the gun by his sheer will power alone. He would have been killed in that draw before the muzzle started its outward course. The only reason he had beat Gord was because Gord had been drunk.

Good thing for him Vance was the only one in Abilene who knew his fist had been smashed last year. Vance and the Doc.

Somehow his thoughts spun to his sister Susan. She had kissed him when she saw him ready to leave. Twice she had warned him. Not to get into a fight. And second not to forget their good name.

THE threat of ambush rode with him as his roan stepped into the dust-cushioned street. Gord still thought he was the fastest gunman on the trail. He'd shoot from the dark if he meant to carry it on. The law of the trailboss had given John the right to kill Gord along the Red. But he had preferred to spare a Texas rancher's life. They had cut their herds after that fight and Gord had ridden north. They had driven him out of camp and given him eight hours start.

He was in Abilene now. Something about the brooding night warned him Gord's mind was festering and sore.

South of the tracks, Abilene's Texas town held a vile stench of whiskey halls. Even this early men staggered from the saloons and held tight to the curb railings. A hell of a place, he thought, for Vance to live and breathe and have her roots.

He had beaten the life out of one hardcase last year over her. That was how he had broken his hand. She had asked him to take her out of this and he should have done it then.

Kerosene lamps picked out a sign and he turned in toward the curb. The board held a sketch of a woman in dancing costume and underneath were the words THE GAY LADY.

He went inside and the riotous sounds closed around him. A woman got to him before his eyes grew accustomed to the blaze.

"You want a dance, mister?"

He shook his head. When she spun away he grabbed her arm and slipped a silver coin inside her fingers.

"I'm looking for Vance," he said.

The girl hunched a shoulder. "Never heard of her."

She gave him a cracked smile as he pushed her away. He walked to the bar and a busy bartender set him up. He lifted his glass, thinking this was the way he had found Vance. She was singing on the stage, like this girl was singing now, and when he turned he'd looked into her face. Stars in the night, that's what it had been like. Stars in the soft sky after the hell of a prairie storm.

But this one was rouged, plump, disappointing. She was singing brassily:

You're wild and woolly

*And full of fleas;
Ain't never been curried
Below your knees.*

He turned and stared into the steel-hard eyes of the bartender. He laid a second dollar on the counter.

"I'm looking for Vance."

The bartender's eyes lidded in the way of a watchful man. "Friend of his?"

"Her. She used to sing here. Vance will be glad to see me."

"All right," the bartender grinned. "She left here and went back into the millinery business. She was a milliner before her husband brought her out here. Forty-four Railroad Avenue."

"Thanks."

The bartender scowled. "She'll kill me if you ain't the one she's expectin'."

He went out and got onto his roan. He felt his veins fill with the sweep of fresh blood. Had she left this place because of what lay between them?

He found the number and put his roan to the rack. It was a small shop and he wondered if Vance could make her living here. It was dark in front and he went up the side alley and found a faint light at the back. He paused with his fingers ready to rap.

He had already made his one mistake. This town was a baited trap. But he had let his unruly passion get the better of his judgment. It would have been sensible to put his roan into a livery. Here on the street Gord could easily recognize his horse.

Then he shrugged it off and knocked. She opened the door a few inches. When lamplight brushed his shoulders she flung the door wide. He thought she meant to come into his arms. And then she drifted away. The color left her cheeks.

He put out an arm and drew her in. She came to him and he knew she had waited for this, wanted it. And yet it was somehow not what he planned. There was no warmth to her lips.

Still, she was the same. That glorious softness that had pulsed and sung in his blood through all the long trail. Her red hair had been let down and it lay in a fold against her shoulders. It was her look that stilled him. A nameless dread lay in her eyes and stole their luster.

"Vance," he said, "I been dreaming of

this for a long time. It's been a whole year."

She nodded, but vaguely. Her voice was throaty, sweet, as he remembered. "I want to talk first. There are men in Abilene who say you cheated a man on the trail."

"Gord!"

"He says you pooled herds and then stole four hundred of his cattle."

His voice went flat. "You believe it, Vance?"

"Marshal Hickok thinks so. He'll make you trouble."

"Do you believe it?" he repeated. His eyes were tight, his nostrils flaring and the breath sawed through his lungs.

"I'm ready to listen to you, John. We've been through too much to be careless now. I—I've missed you, and now I've got to know."

Anger pulled him, and the privations of the long trail all came in review to rasp his temper. He snatched his hat from the table. So this was it. She was doubting him—asking him to explain. A dance hall woman!

Her voice broke in, pained and sharp and brittle: "John, please!"

He went on out. He thought again of that shop in front, too small for a girl to make an honest living. He'd dreamed himself into an ugly mess—like a kid with a wild first crush on a girl.

"They'll kill you John!" she sobbed. He knew then she was running beside him in the alley. "This could be a trap to draw you into a fight."

"They don't tempt a Giddings that way."

"How about your hand?"

He wheeled, let his flat palms run out to her shoulders. "What would you mean by that?"

"I know!" she whispered. "Sometimes a man can't draw a gun after his hand is broken. I knew a man once—"

"Did you tell anyone that?" He was shaking her now.

"No! But Rath's still in town. The one you whipped in the dance hall, John."

"You been seeing that one?"

"No. There hasn't been anyone."

"Don't lie to me Vance."

Her breath came in a sudden rush. "Now you're making me mad. I've waited a year—hoping, praying you haven't forgotten. Now you come in like the wrath of God and treat me like—like a cheap woman!"

He stalked on with a dull emptiness filling

his stomach. It was dark under the front gallery and she clung close to his side when he hit the walk. Some dark warning gnawed through his heart. He sensed a tightness gripping across his spine. A man who has earned a reputation with a gun can tell as soon as trouble dogs his tracks.

She was close to him, keeping pace, pleading for him to listen. But fear was driving like a live fire, now. He put his hand against her shoulder and sent her back out of danger. The first shot banged Abilene while he was still shoving her into the alley's dark.

THE first ball spanged past his head and splintered the gallery post. From the corner of his eyes he noted a balcony diagonally across Railroad Avenue, a hotel for rats and drunks and hardrocks. He'd been a fool. Of course they'd watch Vance's place. He knew intuitively Gord already had run into Rath. Did Rath know his fist had been smashed that night? Were they baiting him to fight?

He was conscious of Vance's soft cry behind him. He knew he was starting the toughest fight of his life. He was yanking his gun as his boots hit the street. His pull seemed deliberate, slow. The gun was a long time coming up. Sweat seeped around his forehead and pain etched a white light in front of him. All the while dust was spurring the street in back of him.

He lifted the gun a little above his waist and fired. Four swift shots all grouped around that last muzzle flame.

Now he leaped for the hotel entrance. He went up two steps at a time. He went onto the balcony, gun foremost, and found it empty. He went back into a gray hall and found a table pulled into the passageway at the rear. Above it was an open trap leading to the roof.

He went up expecting a gun's blast at his head. Yet he found the roof empty. He walked the edges, found a gutter where a man might have climbed down. But he doubted this. They had outsmarted him. The table, the trap above it, had been arranged before the ambush, but the bushwhacker had not used either. While he was up here wasting time the killer had returned to the street.

He came down and met Vance on the walk.

He asked sharply, "Who came out?"

"Rath. He hasn't forgotten his beating!"

And then strangely, belatedly, it came to John who had told Rath about his hand. The old doctor that had set the bones had been worse than an old squaw. But Rath had kept it a secret till now, wanting his vengeance in his own way. Now Gord was probably giving him blood money to boot.

He asked quickly, "Which way did Rath walk?"

She didn't reply for a moment. Then, "John, I saw that draw. You can't get a gun out of your holster. They'll kill you."

"Which way, Vance?"

"Let him go. Please, John. Come back with me."

His mouth was a tight, hard line. "I want your love, but a woman can't love a man right when she thinks he'd steal a herd. I guess the man can't respect her if he thinks she'd believe it. I'll find Gord first."

"Can't you see?" she whispered. "It's what they want. You can't shoot. You can't win!"

He shrugged. "At least, I'll make you see about that four hundred head!"

He walked off and entered Texas Street. The stalk of the hunter had come to him. His shoulders were squared, his head erect, ears alert to catch the sound before death caught him first. His hand was swinging close to his holstered Colt. He couldn't get the gun out fast enough to down Gord. But maybe fate was dealing from a clean deck, tonight. There was no fear in him.

He walked into the first saloon. "I'm looking for Gord," he told the bartender. "When you see him tell him Giddings wants him."

He walked on down the long street. There was a saloon in every building along the hell-packed, stinking block. The news of his coming had run far in advance. In the Alamo he stayed a little longer. He saw his buyer, Kirk Goodman, at the counter.

Kirk said quietly, "I expect you've heard. There's a lien against your cattle and Hickok will have to impound them until the brands are read. I'm sorry."

John shrugged, the frown deep in his face. "Tomorrow's still another day."

"But why are they doing it? I know the herd is straight, of course. Hickok will find that out in the morning. What will it gain Gord?"

John Giddings knew. Vance had tried to

warn him. Too late the cold dread gnawed into his soul. Gord had known he wouldn't take this lying down. A Texas man would come up fighting.

After he had a hand that couldn't pull a gun!

Kirk Goodman talked some more. "I heard Gord say something. It might add up and make sense to you. He said when this this was over he was going back to Susan and to hell with John Giddings. It sounded like he wanted to get you out of the way. Does that make sense?"

It did. It made sense to John. He'd never suspected it. But maybe this had been crawling around Gord's brain all the time.

He walked out of the Alamo still watching the shadows. The Bull's head was next. He felt a man bump him. He was tall and straight, with high cheek bones and an aquiline nose. His long hair fell against the shoulders of his long black coat. Two matched Colts rode in an easy grace against his hips.

"I'm Hickok and I'd like a little talk, Texan."

There was no expression on the tight face, no malice, no distrust in his eyes.

John said, finally, "I want you to ride out tomorrow and look my herd over. Count those brands careful, and don't miss anything."

"I'm ridin'," Hickok said. "But that's not what I want tonight. Come in and I'll buy you a drink so we can talk."

They edged up to the bar. Men in the Bull's Head made room for Marshal Hickok. The marshal downed his drink and had John's glass refilled before the liquor could warm their bellies.

He said, "I want your gun if you mean to keep walking down the block."

John said, "I don't give up my gun. Not even to you."

"Nor do I give up a gun." The marshal's eyes had taken on a glint. "But then you don't walk any further. Go back to your herd. I'll buy you a bottle."

John shook his head. "I'm walking, Marshal."

"All right. You'll walk to jail."

He looked at Bill Hickok and knew the marshal was giving it straight. A man did not go against the town-boss of Abilene—especially a man who couldn't shoot. Hickok had bluffed him down.

He said tightly, "You make it hard on a Texan."

Hickok nodded. "I don't want a duel when the streets are crowded. A bullet might hit a drunk. It's my job, Texan. I fill it the best way I can."

John thought a while, his chest a tight, rankling knot. It was not much different than a trail-herd. The trail-boss had his way there, and his word was law.

He said, then, "We'll let it go till morning."

Hickok's drooping mustache lifted a little. "Glad you see it my way. I'll ride out in the morning about that lien. I know how you feel. I wouldn't let any man call me a thief. If you duel in a lot I won't interfere."

He walked out with John and they moved along the walk together. The marshal watched him get atop his roan, watched him ride slowly out of town.

JOHN rode in on his herd and saw the outriders were with their cattle. He hadn't seen a single one of his punchers in Abilene but he knew there would be stiff heads in camp tomorrow.

Old man Beahl was asleep in his blankets and a fire glowed near the wagon. He took his sugans and tossed them the other side of the fire. But first he filled a basin with water and sloshed it over his head and washed his arms, his neck. He still rankled inside, and he was disgruntled. He took off his boots, unbuckled his gunbelt. Then he froze with his hand on the Colt.

A rider was threading uncertainly between the hummocks. He crouched, waiting. The rider came up and called his name. A soft, throaty whisper.

It was Vance.

He ran to her horse and she fell into his arms.

First he held her off, the pale moonlight touching her face.

"We haven't been fair to each other. John, I had to come. I don't give a damn about the cattle!"

His arms pulled her to him and he searched out her lips. Her cheeks were moist and he knew the year had been long on them both.

Vance had been crying.

"Vance," he said, "About what happened on the Red—"

She tried to silence him with her arm tight about his neck. But he wouldn't be stopped.

"Gord brought in whiskey from the trail saloon at the crossing. It don't matter what a trail puncher does when he's in town. But on the trail there's no liquor for the men. The cattle're everything and you don't fool around with them. I ordered him to break his bottles and he got ugly. When he went for his gun I slugged him."

"I knew it would have to be something like that."

"Vance, is it true you been married once?"

Her eyes were on the campfire, avoiding him. "Do you want me to tell about it?"

"I reckon I wouldn't mind listening."

"Stephen wasn't well when we came West and when we got this far he grew worse. We stayed until our money gave out and then Steve died. I—I was still working to pay for his funeral the time you heard me sing in—that place."

"You mean it's true what you said about not having any men around since you opened the shop?"

"Why of course! I've been waiting for spring. For you to come up with another herd!"

Her mouth had that little smile that tugged his heart. Her eyes were stars—like that day on the Gay Lady stage. He watched her a moment longer and then he reached out his arms and pulled her to him.

BEAHL was surly in the morning. He was still grumbling, "Soft spot in every Giddings."

John caught a dust trail stirring the prairie and he called old Swenson beside him.

"It's Hickok," he said. "When he rides up you'll let him have his way. Make sure he sees every brand in our herd."

"You, boss?"

"I'll be heading for town."

He slipped his toe into an oxbow and climbed saddle. Carmody had just roped him a gray horse. It got him to town in a hurry.

Abilene was slumbering the dull sleep of the exhausted. There was no heat in the morning sun, and Texas Street was empty and without dust. He thought to himself *it's not as dead as it looks*. But there would be death soon, here in the slumbering street.

He knew Gord was waiting, watching. It was a trap.

He put his gray to the empty rack at the head of the block and quit saddle. The dead street beckoned him on. He moved down the center of the still dust, glance flicking to each shabby saloon. He could feel the boring, restless eyes.

He got to the end of the block and could look down and see Vance's place. It was closed tight and he was glad she was still asleep. This was nothing a woman should see.

Now he felt the tension mount inside him. His hand sprang closer to his gun butt. The sun's rays sent a man's tapering shadow out across the boards. Then Gord followed it into sight. He was grinning. Grinning because he knew John Giddings couldn't pull a gun.

They were thirty paces apart when John said, "That'll do!"

He waited until Gord's hand slid after his gun and then he reached. Blinding pain shot through his hand, and then he got the big Colt out.

Another shadow was running into the middle of the street. He heard Gord's gun bang and it turned his heart to stone. A woman had run between them, and he saw her sag and go down under Gord's slug. He knew then Vance had been watching Gord.

Then Gord was looking at him, his face starchy and white. He was too stunned to

lift up his gun. John shot him like that. Right between the eyes.

John ran up and stood over Vance. She smiled around her pain. "We could get it done—together!" she murmured.

He bent down and found the slug had torn her shoulder. It was high above her chest. She'd be all right if he got her to a doctor. That fiddlin' old sawbones that talked like a squaw!

But Abilene had taught him how to dress bullet wounds.

He got her into his arms and started down the center of the wagon track toward his horse.

"You can put your gun away," Vance said. "Bill Hickok ran Rath into jail last night for starting another fight. He meant to tell you that this morning."

But he was worried, his thoughts far ahead of her. They could probably sell her millinery store—Vance would know some girl glad for the chance.

He said slowly, "You think you can stand a stage trip after Doc fixes you up? Sue'll take wonderful care of you once we get to Texas."

She was silent a moment. "Will she like me, John?"

"More than that. She'll love you, Vance. Almost as much as me." The arms that held her against his chest, his hungry eyes, told her that wasn't true. Nobody could love her quite as much as he.

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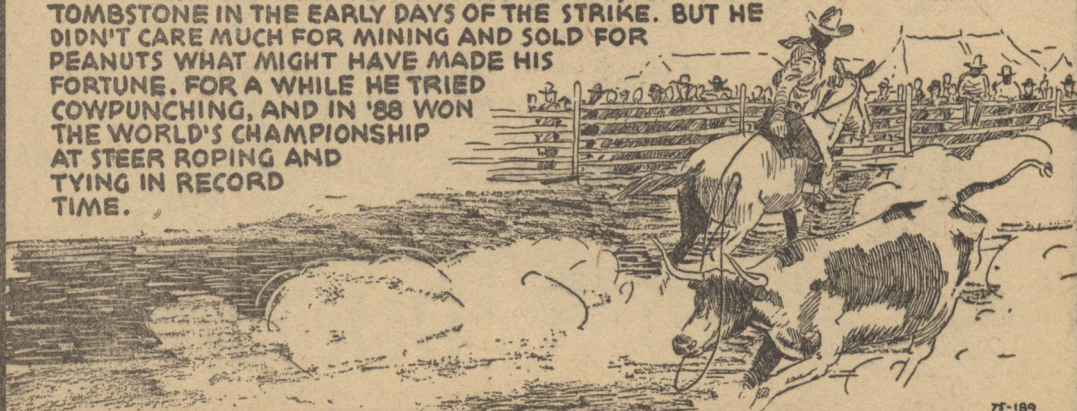
TOM HORN

TOM HORN ALREADY HAD ALL THE MAKINGS OF A FRONTIERSMAN WHEN, SMARTING FROM A "HIDING" BY HIS FATHER, HE RAN AWAY FROM HIS MISSOURI HOME IN 1874 AND HEADED WEST. THOUGH ONLY 14, HE WAS A STRAPPING SIX-FOOTER, AN EXPERT WOODSMAN AND NATURAL LINGUIST, AND HE CAUGHT ON QUICKLY.

AFTER WORKING HIS WAY TO ARIZONA AS A BULLWHACKER AND MULESKINNER—PICKING UP SPANISH AS HE WENT—YOUNG TOM GOT A JOB AS INTERPRETER AT THE APACHE RESERVATION. THERE HE LIVED WITH THE INDIANS AS ONE OF THEM, LEARNED THEIR LANGUAGE AND FINE POINTS OF APACHE TRACKING AND TRAILING.

WHEN AL SIEBER, THE FAMOUS ARMY SCOUT, WAS SENT TO NEGOTIATE WITH GERONIMO, HE TOOK THE BOY ALONG. LATER, AS CHIEF OF SCOUTS HIMSELF, HORN LED THE PURSUIT OF THE WILY APACHE MAVERICK AND EVENTUALLY TALKED HIM INTO A PEACE CONFERENCE.

TAKING TIME OUT FOR A BIT OF PROSPECTING, TOM STAKED A CLAIM NEAR TOMBSTONE IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE STRIKE. BUT HE DIDN'T CARE MUCH FOR MINING AND SOLD FOR PEANUTS WHAT MIGHT HAVE MADE HIS FORTUNE. FOR A WHILE HE TRIED COWPUNCHING, AND IN '88 WON THE WORLD'S CHAMPIONSHIP AT STEER ROPING AND TYING IN RECORD TIME.



OLD WEST



HIS KNOWLEDGE OF TRACKING AND TRAILING WAS INVALUABLE WHEN THE WAVE OF TRAIN ROBBERIES SWEEPED THE SOUTHWEST. AS DEPUTY SHERIFF AND PRIVATE DETECTIVE HE RODE ON LONG CHASES AND WAS USUALLY IN AT THE KILL, GUNS BLAZING. DURING THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR HE WAS MADE A COLONEL AND PUT IN COMMAND OF THE MULE TRAIN THAT CARRIED SUPPLIES TO ROOSEVELT'S ROUGH RIDERS.

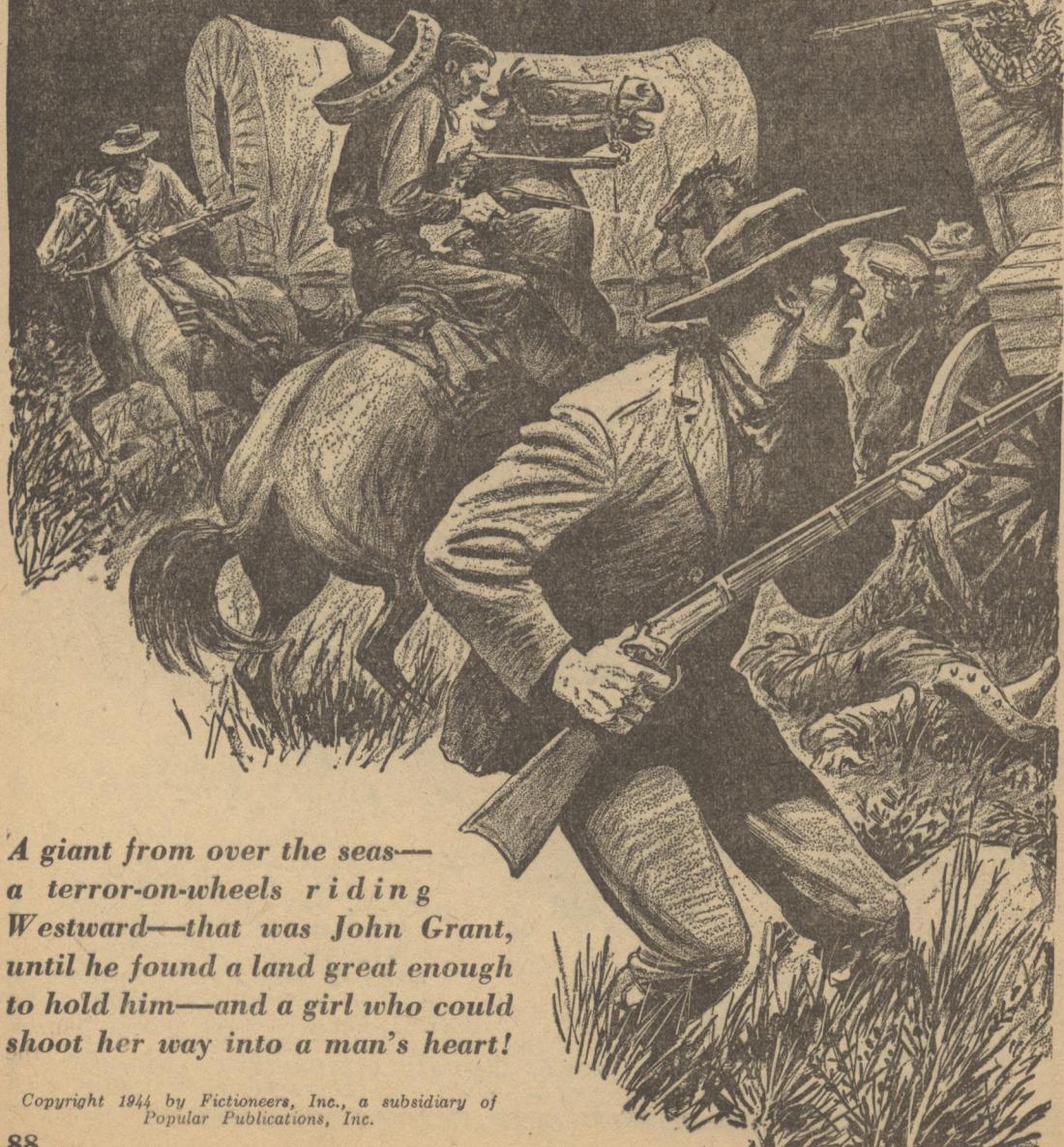
WHEN LAW AND ORDER—AND BARBED WIRE—TOOK OVER THE RANGE, AND THE OLD WILD WEST SLOWED DOWN TO A WALK, THE AGING FIRE-EATER GREW RESTLESS AND IN HIS CUPS TOOK TO BOASTING OF HIS REPUTATION WITH A SIX-GUN.



LOOKING FOR A JOB AS A CATTLE DETECTIVE, HE DRIFTED TO WYOMING AND GOT MIXED UP IN THE CATTLE AND SHEEP WAR. WILLIE NICKELL, YOUNG SON OF A NESTER, WAS AMBUSHED AND SHOT. SOME SAID TOM FREELY ADMITTED THE KILLING, OTHERS THAT HE WAS TRICKED INTO IT. TOM DENIED IT ENTIRELY. NEVERTHELESS HE WAS TRIED AND CONVICTED. AND IN NOVEMBER, 1903, ONE OF THE MOST PICTURESQUE AND DARING FIGURES OF THE OLD WEST WAS IGNOMINIOUSLY HANGED.

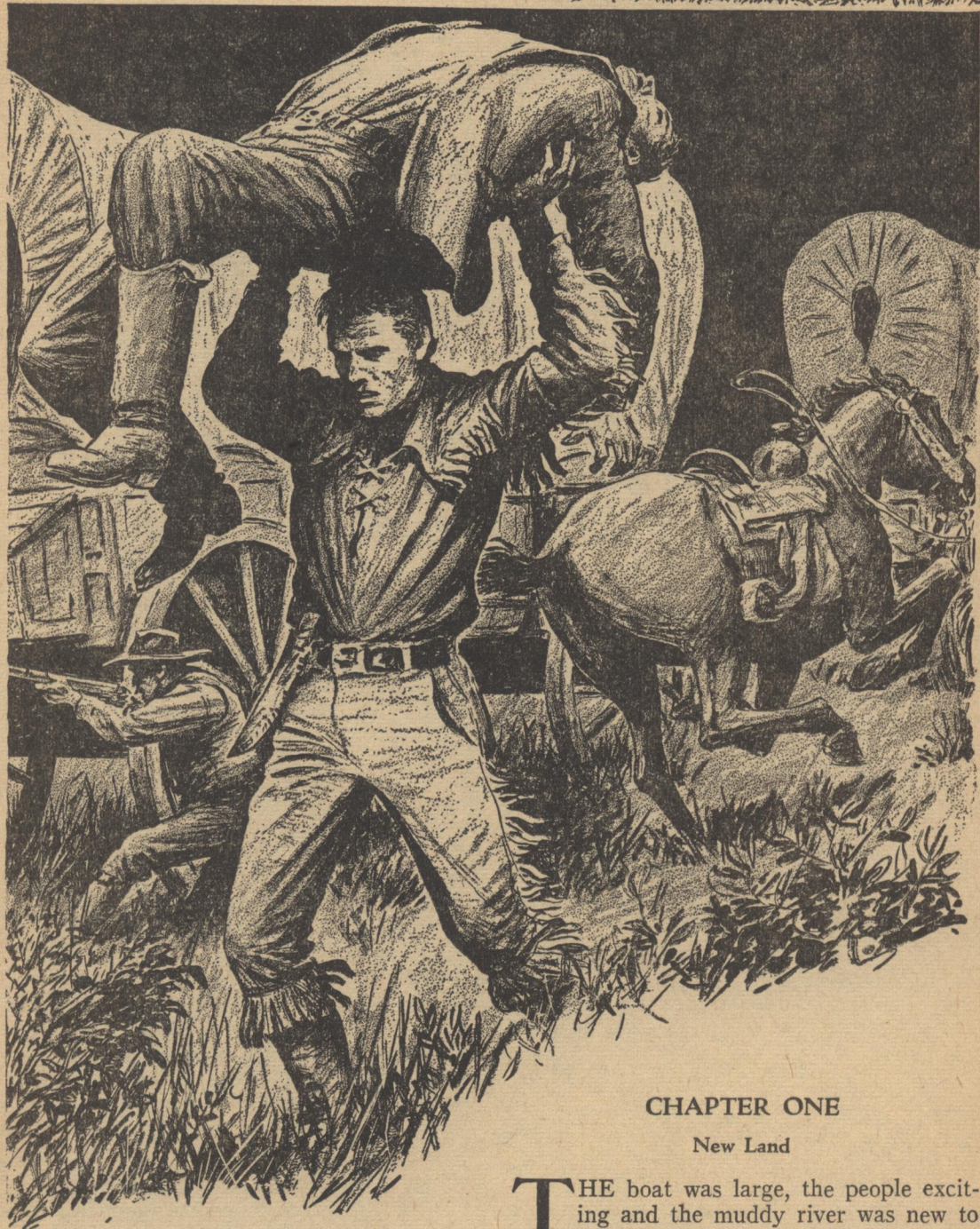
WESTWARD THE FREEDOM

By WILLIAM R. COX



*A giant from over the seas—
a terror-on-wheels riding
Westward—that was John Grant,
until he found a land great enough
to hold him—and a girl who could
shoot her way into a man's heart!*

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He raised the sagging big body
and flung it down upon Deke's
head.

CHAPTER ONE

New Land

THE boat was large, the people exciting and the muddy river was new to the eyes of John Grant. He stayed forward for hours, listening to the chant of the pilot's man, "Mark twain!" and the babble of the people behind him through which, like a ritualistic symbol, ran the

magic syllables which spelled "Oregon!"

John turned at last and went among the crowd of passengers. He was a giant of a youth, almost six and a half feet tall, with bulking shoulders threatening his linsey jacket, with hands still showing traces of Pittsburgh coal dust, and with mild blue eyes and broad, smiling mouth. He was originally from Newcastle-on-Tyne but fresh from the striking mines of Pennsylvania and in him there was a hunger for a freedom which had sent him journeying westward.

There was a handsome, slim lad on deck, dressed in linen of purest white, black broadcloth and shiny boots and John envied the slender, graceful, white hands. This was the son of Congressman Reese of Ohio, John knew, home from an Eastern diplomatic post, wealthy, carefree and happy. Will Reese had never known the pitch-like blackness of the mines, the bone labor, the cave-ins which had killed John's brother and uncles, the bullying of superintendents and foremen. . . .

Yet the dark eyes of the young wastrel flashed above the heads of the sycophants who rallied about him and met the mild blue ones of the British immigrant and paused, examining, sharpening, then smiling. The curly head nodded and John found himself grinning widely at the good looking young man so different from his ungainly, uncouth self.

It was America and he need not doff his cap—this meant so much to John that he moved away, fearful of spoiling the moment. He examined the wagons loaded upon the upper deck for the Santa Fe trade. He went down and looked over the mules and horses of the Morrow family, and these were closer to his desire—being destined for Oregon.

On deck again, he saw the famed Morrows of Kentucky, Cap and Grace and their daughter, Nancy. The mother and father were stalwart people, with heads borne high, and Nancy was a beauty known from the Mississippi to the Atlantic, with deep auburn hair coiled about her small head and hazel eyes which looked through a man rather than at him. She was proud and wilful and not to John's taste—but she stood for all of the beauty that America promised and which John had not yet tasted. He stood, humble, but towering above the others, looking on.

There was a motley crew about Will

Reese. A voice beside John muttered, "Will better be careful of that Juggler Paxton!"

John looked down at grizzled Cap Morrow. The two women stood against the piled baggage, serene, while the planter elbowed and craned and said plaintively, "I can't see 'em all. Is there a fat-faced dandy and a slinky, little man along with Juggler?"

John gravely sorted them out. There were bucks and dudes and the pock-marked big man who was Paxton. He looked at the others and said, "Aye, sir."

"Fancy Dick Doe and Deke Daniel!" spat Morrow. "A trio to cut a throat or sell out a nation. They've been dealin' with the dons and came out on top. Now it'll be Indians, Hudson's Bay Company—anyone who will pay them to prey upon the emigrants."

John said, "Oh?" with rising inflection, watching Will Reese among these men, going toward the ship's saloon.

"And Will Reese'll lose his pocketbook to them at poker!" snapped Morrow. "The country's goin' to the dogs, literally! That's why I'm for the West, young man!" He stared up, a medium-sized bulldog of a man with snapping black eyes.

John said, struggling with his diffidence, "I'm for Oregon myself, sir." He laughed deprecatorily. "Though I've no means for gettin' there."

Cap Morrow's eyes hooded, his lips pursed beneath the mustache. He said abruptly, "Give me your name and call on me at Westport. A man of your brawn can make the trip with me!"

John's heart leaped into his mouth and he could scarcely stammer his name and his thanks, but Cap Morrow only nodded and walked briskly back to his womenfolks. John wandered railward in a daze. He stood, clenching the wood in his great paws, trying to believe that he had been chosen by rich and famous Cap Morrow to make the journey westward.

HE TURNED and drifted to the door of the ship's saloon, his veins humming with excitement. He heard the laughter within and espied the round table at which sat Will Reese. Again the dark eyes sought him, held him almost with command.

But in the next moment Will Reese was laughing on too shrill a note and tossing

coins to the center of the table. There was recklessness in his every motion and he seemed quite drunk.

Juggler Paxton loomed beside Will. Two nondescript river gamblers were in between the pockmarked man and the pair whom Cap Morrow had named. Deke Daniel was like a dangerous mouse, his nose wrinkling, his beady eyes prying about the company. Fancy Dick Doe was dressed in gray; very flashy, quite stout, with the face of a malcontent baby.

There was a pile of money on the table. Will Reese shouted, "I'll raise," and that meant putting in even more coin, John saw. Juggler outdid the Congressman's son, and there was excitement, then a stillness.

Towering above the watchers, John could see it all. Something in this game was wrong, he knew. He had the keenest of intuitions regarding his fellow men, sharpened by his desire to be quitted of the loneliness which rode him, broadened by his harsh existence among the lowly. He moved forward, understanding nothing of poker, but watchful.

The action focused upon Juggler Paxton, he realized. He saw little Deke make a motion with his right hand as Fancy Dick ejaculated, throwing cards about to draw attention.

Juggler exclaimed, "I tap you!"

"Done!" cried Will Reese, pushing forward his remaining money.

John surged forward, brushing aside people who scarcely noted his progress. Juggler was laying down pasteboards. Four of them bore the numeral five in the corner and spectators gasped.

Will Reese laid his cards face down. He said in a voice suddenly cold and hard, "I discarded the five of spades!"

John was at the table. He put his large knuckles upon the board and said clearly, "Is it fair practice for the little man to pass a card beneath the table?"

He kept his eyes upon Juggler, knowing whence would come the danger. Fancy Dick reached within his elegant coat. Juggler's grey eyes went narrow and hard.

Will Reese cried, "Get the captain! I want these men arrested!"

But John's hand brushed backwards, slamming Fancy Dick, knocking him rolling upon the floor, his derringer sliding useless away. Juggler was trying to get loose and

draw a revolver of the new type, with its six cylinders which revolved. John's long arm reached out and clamped down, wresting the gun loose.

Deke Daniel had a knife, the kind made popular by Colonel Bowie, and was going under the table. John kicked hard and the near leg splintered and the money rolled on the floor.

Then there was a mob rushing and the captain, redfaced and choleric, was shouting, "Put them all in irons! Get that disinherited Reese and tie him up!"

Will was wrestling with Juggler upon the floor. John threw a crew member backwards into the rushing mob. He bent and gathered gold coins, stuffing them into his pockets, fending off attackers. He saw Deke trying to stab Will in the back and calmly kicked the little man ten yards away. He took the broken leg of the table in his hand and began methodically thumping heads. A path cleared magically as the captain ran for his blunderbuss.

John reached down and slapped Juggler's head against the floor and Will wrenched loose, papers in his hand. He said quite calmly, "They've bought the captain. Are you with me, friend?"

John picked up more of the money and said, "Aye, sir!"

"Then come on!" cried Will. He dove straight for the door of the saloon. John wielded his club, then threw it and struck the captain loose from his shotgun. Leisurely he strode after Will and none followed. He saw the Morrrows, saw Cap wave frantically at him to stay.

He bawled, "I'll see you at Freeport, sir!"

He saw Will mount the rail, stuffing the papers he had taken from Juggler in an oil-skin packet. There was a gay wave of Will's hand toward the girl who stood beside her dauntless mother, then a graceful spring into the air and the muddy Missouri closed over the curling dark hair. John stepped over the rail and prosaically jumped after.

It was wet and nasty but the current was not too swift at this point. A man ran to the rail with a gun, but Cap Morrow growled, "Stop!" and stood firm with two large old-fashioned pistols.

"Disowned he might be, but he's Congressman Reese's son. And the other works for me!"

The two men swam and after a while

came to shore. They sat upon the bank, wringing themselves out. The young wastrel chuckled and said, "Friend, you've done a good deed."

John thought about this. Then he said, "But I've lost my passage and I must get to Freeport. I've got a job, you see."

Will Reese said, "You shall get there in style. And I am going with you."

They regarded one another and this time Will did not laugh. He extended his hand and its slender grip was amazingly hard and firm.

JOHAN GRANT said regretfully, "I'll miss the Morrows. The big caravan has gone by now." He walked the main street of Westport and men turned to stare at this giant in new buckskins, the revolver he had taken from Juggler Paxton in his belt, a shiny Bowie in his fringed leggin. But the women gazed at his more dashing companion who was dark as an Indian and handsomer.

Will Reese said soothingly, "We'll catch them, John. We'll have a light rig and can make better time than they'll be able to make."

John said doubtfully, "I don't see how we're going to pack enough goods in that wagon. And they say horses can't make the trip to Oregon."

Will said easily, "You've been listening to the oldtimers. You hang around them all the time. Don't you ever have any fun, John?"

The big man sighed. Will was a great one for fun, all right. Every shindig in town saw him kicking his heels to the fiddler's tunes, sparking the girls of the emigrant trains. John had gone out on hunting expeditions with the ancient riflemen who supplied fresh meat to the town. He had learned much and his great body was strung tight and fit as a drum head.

But Will had stayed in the town. There was something in the boy which kept him where things were lively and gay. Yet John knew that Will was for the West, that beneath the surface there were things which Will must accomplish. They had come through St. Joe, they had camped on the trail overland since diving from the river boat, they had been together through too many nights for John to underestimate his companion.

He said, "Fun's for later. There's a big country waitin' for us out yonder. I want to make a start in the world, Will—"

Will said sharply, "Step in here!" His grasp moved John from the rude walk, inside a saloon. They stood, peering over the batwing doors as a cavalcade went by. There were three horsemen, several mules, two big, staunch wagons, loaded so that the springs creaked. John stared at the trio who rode in front.

It was Juggler Paxton and his two cohorts all right. There was no mistaking the pock marked big man with his wide shoulders the dapper, fat Fancy Dick, the small, dangerous Deke Daniel. The mules bore swarthy half-breed trail men, hardened workers and riflemen, part Indian, part Spanish, and some of them with Negro blood. It was a small army.

The two stood in absolute silence, watching the caravan file by. When they were gone toward the west, Will said calmly "Now we can start."

Will did not pause to buy a drink. He led the way back to their cabin. He sat at a table and drew up a map.

He said, "I've got to tell you, John. We're not headed for Oregon, not right now."

John said, "But I want to take up a farm!"

Will said, "You're young—you see here? The Trail is the same as far as Fort Laramie—six miles east of the Fort, to be exact. It is mid-May. . . . It will be the first week in June before the main party reaches Laramie. If after we catch up, you still want to join the Morrows, they will take you along. But first there is a task to perform."

John said slowly, "I know you took papers from Paxton. I know you have some purpose in mind. . . ."

"It is important," said Will. Even now his manner was light, a half smile adorned his features. "It is dangerous. I cannot tell you more. But I need you."

John said, "I had in mind a place with a milk cow and some pigs. I've never plowed. I want dirt under my feet—my own land. For hundreds of years my people have been going down into other folks' mines, Will . . ."

"I know," said his friend. His voice was soft and his dark eyes rested fondly upon John. "You're an American, now, John. Will you make this trip with me?"

John said honestly, "It was your gold

which got me here, outfitted me. And I'm your friend, Will. . . ."

"Good!" said the dark youth. "We will start tonight!"

BY MIDNIGHT they had packed the wagon. It was a high-wheeled, strong, but lightweight vehicle. Their two matched teams, one for a spare, were fit and ready. They rode bay animals with a dark streak down their backs showing mustang strain.

John frowned, "But who will drive the wagon?"

Will said, "We'll take turns until Council Grove."

John shook his head, but mounted the seat. They left in utter darkness and went swiftly over the prairie. The morning came and they slept a while, but Will was in a hurry now, and on they pushed. They passed slower vehicles and at Council Grove they paused.

Will leaped down and was gone, but in a moment he returned, and with him was a tiny, wizened Mexican.

He said, "Feliz Gonzales—our driver, cook and aide-de-camp."

The little man showed white teeth, bobbed his head and leaped onto the wagon. Immediately they were off at breakneck speed. John settled into the saddle of his sturdy bay.

It was hard going, but he did not complain even once.

After the first day out of Council Grove, John lost track. They went so swiftly he scarcely had time to notice the plains, the rivers, the gorges, Pawnee Rock, spots of which the oldtimers had told him tales. Young Will Reese grew thinner every day and the Mexican seemingly dwindled to dwarf-size.

John never complained, scarcely spoke. Past Pawnee Rock, they encamped on the Cimarron Crossing and he fell into a sleep like the dead.

It was past midnight when the alarm came. Will's hand shook him and John came awake. The Mexican, Feliz, was hissing, in Spanish.

John felt for his rifle, belted on his revolver. Will said, "Jugger and some of his men have been following us. We'll have to fight."

John said, "So, then, we shall fight!"

He rolled out of his blankets and from under the wagon. There was no sound or sign of enemy. He thought the Mexican had been alarmed unnecessarily and was about to say so when a turkey gobbled and broke the deep stillness.

It did not sound quite natural to him. He wheeled, crouching, watching. Something moved near the horses. John leveled his rifle and fired.

There was a wild yell, a rush. Will, at the other side of the wagon, began shooting. John ran forward, towards the horses, knowing the danger of losing them. He saw Feliz shoot a tall man. Then, to his horror, he saw a thrown axe strike the little driver in the head, splitting his skull like a cocoanut. John roared, forgetting his guns, plunging forward.

He closed with the big man, felt a knife slice at him. He remembered his Bowie and slid it from his legging as he bent the man backwards. He stabbed viciously, threw the body away. He whirled, but the sound of hoofs told him he was too late. He lunged at shadowy figures. He heard Will's cool voice, "They're running, John! But they've put us afoot!"

There were no more enemies. John grunted, bending over the prone figures. Will came and stood silently by his side, looking down. The dead invaders were strangers, but they were hardened, dark men, such as had ridden with Paxton when he had gone through Westport.

Will said, "Poor Feliz—he was a patriot. We'll bury him where he fell."

John said, "They didn't get our horses, Will. Look!"

Off to one side stood the two saddle animals. Feliz had removed them from the picket line. The dead little driver had known danger before it struck, John thought. Feliz had done his best to save them. John dug the grave deep, threw the shovel aside. There would be no room for any such implements now.

They spent the night selecting jerked beef and flour for their saddle packs, burying what they could of their goods. They backed the wagon under the trees and left a note with their names on it, hoping honest people might refrain from looting it, but expecting little. Then they mounted and went on ahead, in the track of the big caravan of emigrants.

CHAPTER TWO

Pistol-Packin' Gal

CAP MORROW had acted peculiarly from the start. He had flatly refused to accept the position of captain of the wagon train. Miz Morrow was silent, but Nancy was puzzled and said as much.

"Are you ill?" she asked. "You're not the fire eater of old, Father. You're always with your chin on your shoulder."

He said testily, "Go along and spark with that lawyer from New Jersey! Leave me alone."

The lawyer had fascinating sideburns and spoke long involved sentences in which figures of speech rolled about sonorously, but which in the end meant only that he was desirous of putting hands upon the incomparable Nancy Morrow. She listened and held him off with ease.

There were farmer boys who shyly brought her gifts of bacon and eggs and fresh milk, there were longhaired frontier veterans, tanned and hard, who gave amulets and even a dried Sioux scalp. There was a gentle, adoring schoolteacher who just looked. They were all mad about Nancy.

There were delays in the journey. The discipline of the train was bad. Arguments broke out at every crossing of a stream, rash hunters got lost disobeying orders, green-horns were frightened by friendly Indians who wanted only to beg. Yet Cap Morrow seemed happy at delays, his chin ever turned backwards, his squinted eyes surveying the horizon to the east.

And then the others got across the swollen Cimarron. But Cap Morrow deliberately took an extra day. The Jersey lawyer rode his steed back across the stream and begged Cap Morrow to go on, but the Kentuckian said, "Stream's too rugged today. We'll try it tomorra."

That left the Morrrows behind the others. They dallied while Cap fixed a new wagon pole to replace one which was not too badly cracked. He cut his own wood, refusing assistance from the buckskin lads who rode back that day. Then they were alone, and a full day's ride behind and the last straggler had gone. And that was the position they maintained, past the dangerous Ash Hollow, on to Court House Rock and Chimney Rock; taking it easy, never hurrying, always

with Cap Morrow looking behind them.

They camped in a valley, very pleasant, but lonely. It was May and still cool at night. Cap banked his fire, made sure Nancy was well covered and took a stroll beyond the wagons, his rifle on his arm.

He saw the first glow of gunfire to the north, from rocks upon the water's edge, and a bullet sailed by his ear. He gave a great shout and knelt, seeking a target.

There were forms dodging; he could not tell how many. This was a thing he had risked, knowing the danger. He gritted his teeth, handling the long rifle he knew so well, which had brought down squirrels at a hundred paces, back in Kentucky.

There was a whoop to the east and a charge. He held firm to where he had seen the first savages, knowing Indian ways. He was rewarded when two guns boomed from the wagons and Nancy's voice called, "All right, father!"

They were coming down the stream and he let them come. When they were close enough he fired the rifle, catching the tall leader in the throat, stifling the death yell. He drew his two revolvers and began blazing away.

They scattered, howling, and he grimly thought that these Indians had never faced repeating guns before. They had spied out a lone pair of wagons, apparently defenseless, and were making a quick sortie for plunder—a thing they dared not risk against the main body of emigrants. He threw the lead at them, changed his position and reloaded.

Nancy came closer and whispered, "Will they come again?"

"Yes," he said. "They know our weakness."

The girl said, "I've loaded four guns and have my revolver. Mother is handling the others."

HE SAID, "Your mother is a Boone, ye know." He strained his eyes, wondering if they dared make a real charge and how many there were in the band. It must be a war party, sulking because the buffalo had been chased from the hunting grounds. He would hate to die here and now—it was not a time for dying. He thought of harnessing the teams and making a run for it. Fortunately he had the animals placed between the two wagons.

There were too many Arapahoes. They were brave, knowing how few they were up against. Leaping, yelling, their faces painted like heathen idols, they came down the valley, firing their smooth-bore muskets with little aim, seeking only to get close with tomahawk and knife. Cap coolly picked them off, praying only that they would break before his ammunition ran out.

They yelled more loudly and fiercely. They were not going to stop. He called steadily, "Save a bullet for yourselves, girls!"

Nancy said, "We'll hold them!"

But they couldn't, and Cap knew it. He managed to get cartridges in the Colts, and they were coming on. He stood up, going instinctively forward to meet them.

The firing increased, grew to a volume it had not before attained. Cap snapped an empty gun in the face of a grimacing brave, then ducked and sidestepped an axe-sweep and kicked at the buck's kneecap.

Suddenly, past him floundered a great form, plucking the Indian from the ground, slamming him into the ones behind, then taking a good grip on heels, using the hapless savage for a club, clearing a space.

A lean man crouched, snapping two guns. Nancy cried, "Father! Are you all right! It's help, father!"

Cap finished reloading his second revolver and said calmly, "About time, too."

The fire leaped up after awhile and John Grant calmly toted dead Indians down the stream and piled them in a heap. There were several bodies. When he had finished Will was at the fire, talking earnestly to Cap Morrow. They seemed to know each other mighty well, which was a great surprise to John. He politely tried not to overhear and the tall girl with the red hair came and offered him some pan bread and said, "Back home I have seen great wrestlers and men who could leap many yards and giants who threw large stones. But I never saw a man like you."

John said, "Oh?" with his British inflection, embarrassed beyond words. His hands and feet were suddenly too large and he edged out of the light of the campfire so that she would not see how filthy he was. It had been a terrible trip. They had scarcely stopped for food to keep up their strength, tearing up hill and down in their effort to catch the wagon train.

He ate gladly, licking the crumbs. The girl stood silent, watching him. She said, "You have the bluest eyes I ever saw. That's very English, of course."

John said, "Aye, miss," and choked on the bread.

She said, "Will says you are the strongest and bravest man in the world—I've known Will forever, you know. We're both descended from the Boones."

"Dan'l Boone?" said John, wide-eyed.

"He has hundreds of descendants on the frontier," she smiled. "I'm very tired. Could we sit down? It's been lonely away from the others."

John said, "If you will pardon me, Miss. I'm very—er—I'm not clean!"

HE RAN away and went upstream, past the heap of dead Indians. He stripped and lay in the water, swimming, letting the coolness calm his pounding pulses. He found sand at the edge of the rivulet and scrubbed himself. He re-dressed and went cautiously back and was relieved that the women were wrapped quietly in blankets within the wagons. The red-haired girl did strange things to him. He was, truthfully, frightened of the way she looked at him with her hazel eyes.

Cap Morrow was saying, "You got the proof. It wouldn't do to make it public, o' course—not with a high Army man in it. I'm aimin' for Oregon, Will. I want this over with."

John pricked up his ears. He heard Will say, "They'll be along. I want them to think we're defenseless. You've done your part to make it look that way. John will hide in the wagons, then I'll tool them in."

Cap Morrow said, "It's takin' the law into our own hands, but there are no constables in this part of the country. You're sure about the war?"

Will said solemnly, "It can't miss happening. Polk has messed it up. He tried buying, he tried trading. He might have made it but his agents were clumsy. Mexico doesn't dare sell the territory now. It must be war."

"Old Sant' Anna agin," muttered Cap. "Fuss and Feathers and Rough and Ready agin Sant' Anna. We might get a suprise, Will!"

John was getting drowsy. He rolled up in his blanket and heard Will say, "We've got

soldiers down that way, too. Colonel Jeff Davis and Colonel R. E. Lee—West Point men. They're young and have brains. Scott and Taylor will win despite themselves—but we've got to stop the uprising here."

It was not wholly clear to John. The United States was going to war with Mexico over the land north and west of Texas—including California. That made sense. Any Englishman knew what it meant to fight for empire. . . .

But what had that to do with Will Reese, castoff son of a congressman? John sat bolt upright and stared at the two men hunkered down beside the fire. Why, Cap Morrow wouldn't be fraternizing with a black sheep member of a good family, not with such complete agreement and on such familiar terms. This was something deep and mysterious, more so than John had dreamed.

He shook his head and lay down again. It was too much to think about tonight, when he was so sleepy; there had been so much behind him, from the day on the boat when he had met the dark, merry eyes of his friend, that he would have to spend a day adding it all up.

Meantime—there was sleep.

LYING on top of the stores within the wagon driven by Nancy, John complained, "But this is not the Santa Fe Trail."

"We are going into Fort Bernard," she said patiently. "That is where the New Mexico traders come north to do business with the emigrants. The Santa Fe Trail is guarded by United States troops. Paxton wouldn't dare show himself there, so he will come this way and meet his men at Bernard."

"You mean he is pretending to be going to Oregon?" asked John.

The sun beat down on the Conestoga and he wiped sweat from his brow. He hated riding inside the wagon, but they had insisted, and Nancy had taken it for granted that he would keep her company. She had tried to explain things, but all she knew was that Paxton was some kind of traitor, that he was engaged in drumming up strife among the New Mexicans and that Will was determined to stop him.

"Yes, and he knows Will stole his papers on the boat," said Nancy. "He knows Will is the only one who has real knowledge of

his plans. He will attack us and try to kill Will before he goes through with it."

John said, "His wagons must be loaded with weapons and ammunition, then, for the insurgents." He pondered a moment, then said triumphantly, "And if we stayed with the big wagon train, Paxton would skulk around and miss us and get to the Spaniards. We've got to flush him like a partridge in order to stop him!"

Nancy said, "You do catch on after awhile. I always said the British were not so dumb!" He looked so stiffly crestfallen that she laughed and added gently, "We shall see many British and Scots in Oregon, and live with them, too. They are fine people, I know."

But John was silent, thinking about the impending conflict. It was strange that Will and Cap should use the women for bait and expose them to such danger. He could not yet get used to the hardihood of these frontier women. He worried about Nancy, reckoning the strength of Paxton's small army. That had been a bitter, sullen crew, and only an advance guard of them had killed Feliz and driven off the horses and almost put Will and John afoot and at the mercy of the main body which was coming up.

He saw a lot of things now. He knew why Will had played in the bars of Westport, seeking information about Paxton; why, on the boat, Will had deliberately played cards, hoping to catch Paxton cheating and kill him out of hand.

John realized dimly that he had been the unwitting force which had checked Paxton so far. He had saved the saddle animals by his stand at the camp when poor Feliz was killed. He had helped chase off the Indians and preserve this seemingly defenseless pair of wagons for the expected attack. He had been very fortunate, he thought humbly, to have had a part in these stirring and far-reaching events.

NANCY laughed again and said, "You look like a big, unhappy bear!"

He growled in his throat. She was a strange girl, mocking him one moment, the next upsetting him with sudden flashes of feeling in her hazel eyes. Once her hand had touched his when they both reached for something, and the shock which assailed his senses had been like lightning in suddenness and in force. She too was aware of it, and

her sunburned skin had paled slightly as he swayed upon the rocking seat of the wagon.

Yet now she giggled at him.

He said, "I wish they'd come. I wish somethin' would happen to get me outa this wagon!"

"Ah!" she said, affecting great sadness. "Am I such bad company? Am I so unattractive?"

He was unable to play the game. He disdained to answer and pretended to be asleep, envying with all his heart the two men who rode outside, keeping continual watch behind, deliberately loitering. He knew better than to think seriously of this daughter of what practically amounted to American royalty—she was of the blood of Boone, and John knew all about the great Dan'l.

The trail left the river; Scott's Bluff loomed ahead, but the wagons turned through smooth Marshall's Pass in the rear of the Bluff and ascended the ridge until it met a small spring. The animals stopped and John drank icy water from a canteen Will brought him.

Will said, "Neither Bernard nor Laramie are Army forts, you know. Bernard is a couple of shacks and Laramie is a trading post. We'll camp near here, on the ridge. I'm looking for a Spanish party—they should not be coming too near Bernard."

"Can I get down and look?" asked John eagerly.

Will grinned at him and said to Nancy, "Your wiles, dear cousin, are without potency."

To John's amazement she said stiffly, "Mind your own business, smarty. He only wants to help."

Will said, "Stay under cover. They've got to see me and think you're lost. Have you the guns ready?"

They had been joggling John's ribs all day. They were all loaded to the brim and he had been uneasy lest one go off by accident and kill Nancy. He hauled at his revolver belt and said, "I wish it would start."

"Patience," said Will. He did not look gay any longer. There were lines about his mouth, John saw with a shock, and his lips were pinched in. A pulse beat steadily in his temple, where the hat brim had shaded his brow from the sun.

"Anything you say, Will. You're the boss."

Will nodded. "You're a good friend. Without you I would never have made it.

Just be patient . . . I must search out the Spaniards."

He rode away. In a little while they made camp on the ridge, but John stayed within the wagon. They brought him food and the sun went low, and beyond, in the far distance, they could see the peaks of the Rockies. Over there lay Oregon. There was land to be had for the taking, and a house to build and planting to be done. A man's own home, tax free for the time it took to set things to rights. When this adventure of Will's was over, he would "take his foot in his hand and go"—as the trappers back in Westport used to say.

It grew dark on the ridge and Will had not returned. Cap Morrow stirred about, and his wife said soothingly, "Will can take care of himself."

NANCY sat close to John outside the light of the fire and talked of Kentucky and the balls and routs and country square dances and all the parties she had ever attended. But it was talk to cover her nervousness, he knew—and after a while he said to her, "I'll look around. He wouldn't mean for me to be hiding if he was in any danger."

"You're no frontiersman," she fretted. "You can't track or scout. What can he be doing so late?"

John said shrewdly. "Don't worry your heart, Nancy lass. Your handsome cousin will return." He grinned to see her flush. He had been thinking for days that she flirted with him to annoy Will. He did not repine, because, he told himself, he asked nothing. Oregon was in his mind.

He took his rifle and revolver and stalked past Cap Morrow, saying only, "I've got to look." The grizzled veteran did not try to stop him. In a moment or two the night unfolded him and an animal screamed loudly in the hills beyond and then there was the sound of a horse.

He flung himself down, unwilling to be caught out of camp by Will. He breathed a sigh of relief and waited.

Then he saw the rider in the starlight and his eyes, grown accustomed to the dark, made out the enormous cantle of a Spanish saddle. The man rode warily and slowly, and he bore a stick upon which was fastened a white rag.

John flattened himself and lay very quiet

until the man had called out in a piercing, liquor voice. Cap Morrow answered, "Come in with your hands up, stranger!"

JOHN began crawling. Soon he saw the dark-visaged man in short jacket and slashed bell-bottomed trousers standing very stiffly beside the fire upon which Nancy had thrown a fresh branch. He heard Cap say, "I don't know what yer talkin' about."

"There are certain papers," said the man in precise English. "Will Reese bade me fetch them. I must inform you that Reese is a prisoner of the Independent Spanish Army. He was captured while spying and faces death. The passing of these documents will save his life."

Cap said, "Will never told me about documents."

The tall stranger turned and reached inside his saddlebag. He said impassively, "Perhaps this will refresh your mind."

He opened a handkerchief. John heard Nancy's cry, saw Cap Morrow pale and stiffen. Miz Morrow said harshly, "You've hurt him! You're hurt Will!"

"He protested against removing the ring," said the Spaniard impassively. "The surgeon was forced to remove his finger. I assure you that he has had full attention and is well—minus the ring finger, of course. But next, if the papers are not produced, there may come the necessity of removing—shall we say—one ear?"

More than ever Cap Morrow resembled a bulldog now. He crouched and his hand was on the pistol at his belt. He growled deep in his throat, "Ye came under a white flag. But ye've violated every law of decency. I could kill you where ye stand, but I want ye to go back. I want ye to tell Jugler Paxton and yer cutthroat army that never a one of you'll see home again. Tell 'em for me—for Cap Morrow! Tell 'em Will Reese knows how to die! And Cap Morrow will avenge him!"

The Spaniard looked significantly at the two women, bowed low and said, "As you say, sir. I will return, in force, since you threaten, and display Reese's next—contribution—to your cause!"

He turned deliberately and mounted the black horse. He looked down at Nancy, wheeled and rode out of camp. Cap Morrow's hand tightened, then loosed his gun handle. He was trembling and beads of

sweat were upon his face. "Torture!" he said. "Their only way of getting things done. Paxton's gone around us and made his contact with them. Poor Will . . ."

John did not go back to argue with them. He was no plainsman, as Nancy had said. But the starlight was good and he could run, doubling over his huge body, his legs tireless, his big feet padding, lion-like. He could lope across this flat country and never lose the conical hat of the Spaniard against the blue horizon of the deep night.

They had amputated Will's finger! They had dared to torture him, to regain the papers taken from Paxton aboard the river boat! Those slender, brown, capable hands of Will's, to be marred by these cattle from the south—John's ears burned and the hair at the back of his neck stood up. Like a giant mastiff he plodded along in the early night.

CHAPTER THREE

Miner's Fight

SOUTH of Bernard the country was hilly, but there were level plains and the camp of the Spaniards was well chosen. John Grant walked in the stream edging ever closer. There were a score of tents, and one larger than the others, exactly in the middle of the square. There must be sentries, of course.

He had one advantage to which he clung in his simple but direct mind. They did not, because of Will's insistence, know that he was alive. They probably thought he had fallen in the engagement at the camp when Will's mules had been stampeded, or had abandoned the party enroute. He knew there must be a sentry about, but they would not be expecting attack.

He saw the man at last, walking to and fro with fixed bayonet—a scrawny Mexican soldier. There was a cottonwood tree convenient to rest a rifle against and the man stopped to roll a cornhusk cigarette.

John came from the stream, dripping and careful and silent. A taper flamed and John came around the tree with one great fish poised. The man went down without a sound. With hardly conscious thought, John picked the long bayonet loose from the musket, which he threw in the water. The bayonet felt good in his hand.

He bent his long body and began slipping among the tents, wishing for once that he were smaller, so that he might go unnoticed. There was light beyond the canvas of the biggest marquee and he edged close, haunching in a shadow, listening.

A smooth voice concluded, "I do not think these people will give in. I suggest an attack upon them."

Paxton's husky accents said, "Kill this man and jump the Morrows. The girl's a prize in herself!"

The smooth voice said, "The Morrows are important people. The Americans are not here in force—but they might send an army to avenge the Morrows. We are four hundred miles from Santa Fe."

"If we don't get money and arms to Santa Fe you won't have a base there," said Paxton energetically. "Kearney's got troops and is on his way."

Deke Daniel spoke in his squeaky mouse voice, "If we bring in the gal, Reese will talk. A hot iron at her eyes and he'll give up the papers."

There was a small pause. Then Paxton said, "Deke's dead right."

"Yes," said the smooth-voiced Spaniard. "I am inclined to agree."

John stretched his limbs, considering. He was curiously calm. He had to plan, now, and his mind worked clearly. He could not prevent a cavalry troop, however ragged, from attacking the Morrows. He could not, singlehanded, wipe out this encampment.

Paxton said, "Yank the gag from him. . . . Reese, you heard the plan. Are you gonna give us those papers or have yer gal carved up and burnt?"

Will's voice was deeper than John remembered.

"Go to hell."

Paxton said, "I got a notion to cut off an ear just for the fun of it!"

"No!" said the Spaniard. "Such things are only for a purpose. You indulge yourself, *señor*! Come, we must attack tonight. Call the bugler!"

THERE was movement inside. John hastily moved to the rear of the tent. He heard the guard placed, he heard the bugle's uncertain note. This was an irregular army, hastily gathered to escort the big wagons and the American traitors to Santa Fe.

The horse troop moved out. Inside the tent Fancy Dick Doe faunted, "The gal will look good with her eyes burnt out! You're a fool, Reese! You're gaining nothing."

Will said, "You—"

There was the sound of a curse, a blow. John moved back, to the front. There were two guards. He grew angry on the sudden and came at them without deception. His size against the starry sky must have stunned them; they stood with opened mouths for a split instant.

John stabbed with the bayonet, leaving it skewered through the body of the first man. The second he caught in his great hands, tearing him from his weapon, scragging him as he would a sheep.

He bent and slipped within the tent. The light was good and he could see Fancy Dick in the act of tilting a bottle to his lips. It was a long-necked brown bottle and John, moving like a panther, was on the fat man before he could lower it. One hand went behind Fancy Dick's neck. The other tapped the bottle home, ramming it down the thick gullet. Fancy Dick choked once, turned purple and sagged to the earth.

John whirled. Will said, "As neat a way to kill a man as I ever saw, friend."

John said, "Get your guns. Can you handle them left-handed, Will?"

"Not so well." Will stumbled a little, clutching at John's arm. "They've—done me in a bit. But we've got to go, eh, friend?"

John said, "The horses!" He was running among the tents. A sleepy man got in his way and he slammed home his fist, sending him back into the tent from which he had come. He got to the big wagons which Paxton had brought across the country and rummaged about. He dug through boxes of black powder and brass cartridges, strewing the stuff recklessly until he found what he wanted. He made a bundle and ran back to where Will was somehow managing a pair of horses.

He tightened the cinches and placed his bundle in a capacious saddle bag he found alongside a tent. They mounted and rode into the night.

Will said faintly, "I'll not be much good—if they get those documents, it will go bad for the people in Santa Fe. There's an American colonel involved. It will undermine the confidence of the mountain men. The war is probably begun by now. . . ."

John said, "Ride, Will. Nancy. . . ."

They rode hard. The sudden drumming of gunfire ahead told them that Cap Morrow had not been taken by surprise, that Nancy and her mother were again at the guns. The Boone women. . . . John choked, thinking of them. This was America—far from Newcastle-on-Tyne. . .

THEY came down, deploying by mutual consent. Will rode around them, going north of the camp. John sent his horse eastward, then dismounted, bearing the saddlebag.

He crept over a knoll and stared. The flashes of gunfire below were like fireworks exploding in the night.

He went along, seeking his prey. He saw a man circling on horseback, firing. He leveled his rifle and chanced a long shot. To his gratification the man fell from his horse.

But there were too many of them for sniping. He moved in and saw them gathering for the charge.

He heard Will shout something and open fire with his guns. The Morrrows were still firing. The leading Spaniard rose in his stirrups and called something and Paxton started forward, little Deke beside him, crying Will's name.

John stood, outlined against the stars, calling, "Aye, you fools! You asked for it!"

His arm went back, then out. A slender stick soared through the air, innocently turning, lazy in its flight. It landed among the startled horsemen. There was a crushing, resounding detonation and the earth split asunder.

The miner's fingers were attaching another cap, the long arm swung again. The second stick of dynamite seemed to lift horses and men and send them apart. The third stick was almost drowned by the screams, the blood, the prayers. The tall Spaniard was gone, vanished from the earth.

John was running, carrying his sack, his rifle, his bayonet. Paxton and Deke were swerving, their hats gone, their faces livid with fear. John called, "Here's for you, bully boys!" and chucked a stick which fell short.

The explosion made the horses insane with fear, sent them rearing. First Paxton, then Deke were bucked off. They bounced on the ground, seeking their weapons.

He caught Paxton as the pockmarked man

raised his revolver. John's hand clamped down and the falling hammer lacerated his flesh. But he plucked Paxton from the ground and wheeled him about in a circle.

Deke, crawling along, aimed a rifle. The shot rang out and John lifted Paxton in a purely defensive gesture. His arms felt the shock of the bullet and Paxton groaned, "He's killed me!"

"Then do you kill him!" said John reassuringly. He raised the sagging, big body and flung it down upon Deke's head. The little man crumpled and John made sure by lifting him by the hair. Deke Daniel's neck was unhinged in satisfactory fashion.

Will was already in the camp. The few remnants of the Independent Army were flying for their lives. Miz Morrow, blackened by powder, was bandaging Cap Morrow's shoulder where a ball had grazed it.

There was no sign of Nancy and John stammered, "Did they—is she all right?"

Will was leaning against a wagon wheel and in his hand was a packet of oilskin. He said wonderingly, "She had them on her. She was going to give them to Paxton if he got her and try to make a deal for me. . ."

Will said in his strained voice, "It was dynamite, eh, you old miner?"

John said, "The papers—she saved them."

"These papers," said Will slowly, "will go to Kearny, so that he will know whom he can trust. It's war, John. Dad pretended to kick me out to get the goods on this colonel. Do you understand? I've got to join Kearny. But you go on to Oregon."

"Without you?" asked John gravely.

"It must be that way," said Will.

He chuckled and added, "Nancy's up by the water. . ."

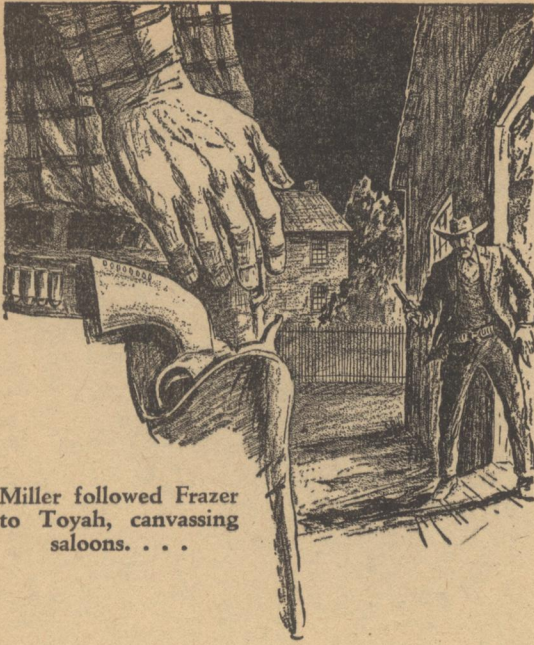
John choked, "But you—Nancy. . ."

"We're of the Boone blood," nodded Will. "Cousins. Die for each other and all that. Go along, you big ox!"

John went, stumbling, aware of Miz Morrow's steady, approving smile, of Cap's grinning nod. He was, now that he came awake at last, an American upon the frontier of the new land. Only seventy years ago there had been a Declaration by the Congress which said he could be free. . .

He met the girl and her face was still cool, and fresh from the water, soft between his great palms.

She said simply, "Right from the start, John, on the boat. . . ."



Miller followed Frazer
to Toyah, canvassing
saloons. . . .

By
HAROLD PREECE

BORN TO KILL

*All that is left of Jim Miller today is a trail
of corpses and a collar button—which didn't
fit the necktie Jim wore to eternity!*

TWO straight-out breeds shot it out in the Old West. They were the lawmen and the lawless. Each knew the other for what it was. So that the fight was generally a straight-out one on both sides.

But there was a third breed. It was that breed of the in-betweens whose lead spittin' sons o' guns rode with first one side, then the other, depending where the chips lay. One day, an in-between buckie might be wearing a star. Next day, he might be tearing the wind away from a posse of star-wearers.

To that breed belonged Jim Miller of the deacon's tongue and the devil's trigger. He headed posses and he dodged posses. He was short on brag and long on lead like his famous cousin by marriage, John Wesley Hardin. He was smarter and deadlier than Billy the Kid with only twenty-one murdered men to account for. Killin' Miller had exactly doubled that score long before he arranged the bushwhack slaying of ex-sheriff Pat Garrett, who'd brought the Kid to a no good end.

Jim Miller was "the meanest outlaw in West Texas or New Mexico." That was the considered judgment of old Dee Harkey,

the first officer who ever got a drop on him. And that veteran lawman spent a lifetime swapping shots with every big gang of hell-riders from the Ketchums to the Daltons.

"But he was the mildest-lookin' feller you ever seen," said my old cousin, Pecos Will Rice, an early Texas officer of a straight-out breed. "Fact is, strangers generally took him for a preacher."

Nobody ever heard Jim Miller cuss a man or a bronc. No sack of makin's ever bulged from his shirt pocket. None of the tongue-blistering stump juice that our folks distill in those Texas canyons ever, went scalding down his gullet. Old-timers, raised with him, swear that, to the day of his death, he never thumbed a deck of cards.

Only one thing gave him away—his pair of blue eyes as cold as steel. When somebody made him mad, those eyes flared up like smoldering fire prodded by a poker.

At eighteen, he'd got his full growth of five feet ten. He celebrated by killing his first man. And that man happened to be his own uncle.

Right after his birthday, he saddled up his bronc, telling his parents that he was going to an evening prayer meeting. He

rode silently along till he reached the home of his mother's brother, who always went to bed early. He lit down and crept silently into the dark yard. The uncle, a queer character, hated dogs only a little less than he hated his nephew. He'd let neither dogs nor nephew enter his house. So that there was nothing to challenge the boy with the big shotgun.

Jim Miller heard the elderly rancher snoring in his cot on the huge front porch. When he made out the gray head on the pillow, he aimed his gun and fired.

The bullet cut short a snore. The old man let out one sleepy, wheezing gasp. He died without ever waking up.

A jury gave Jim the rope. A higher court untied the noose by ordering a second trial for the tight-faced young slayer. That was the end of the matter. The big Miller connection decided it was easier to wipe out the stain of family blood than the shame of family disgrace if one of the clan swung for plugging another.

They got the case wiped off the books.

That was the first time Jim Miller had cheated justice. It wouldn't be the last. For no court ever finally convicted him of anything. He'd learned how easy it was to kill a man in Texas and get away with it. He'd also found that shedding other men's blood comes naturally once you've spilled the blood of your own.

He hired out to a group of cattlemen to shoot up sheepmen. Each side was paying fancy wages to men who could shoot fancy in the bitter fight for the high, rolling pastures of the Texas hills. Jim Miller topped his wages with a bonus, the first month on the job.

Six sheepmen died, that month, in the stretch patrolled by Jim and a hard-bit puncher who'd lost his own ranch when the woolies came baaing in to cut up the grass and slobber up the waterholes. The rest of the sheep fraternity went before the grand jury, demanding that it indict Jim Miller and his pardner for six killings. But the cowmen ran the courts. And Jim kept running sheepmen out of the country when he wasn't drilling them for wanting to stay.

It was during those gory 70's, the bloodiest era ever seen in the West, that they started calling him Killin' Miller. Men began speaking of him in the same breath with Billy the Kid who had blasted his way

to everlasting and dubious glory in another blazing war of the range.

Killin' Miller frowned at the comparison. He was too much of a Puritan to go for the Kid's free and easy ways—a Puritan who could make a gun talk death as easy as his tongue talked, "Thou shalt not kill."

He scorned the light-talking, light-loving ladies who drifted from town to town in the range country. Jim Miller met his bride in the Sunday school which he attended earnestly and regularly every Sunday. By coincidence, the girl was a blood cousin of John Wesley Hardin. By coincidence, the young killer's model was the Methodist preacher's son who'd started out in the plugging profession by shooting five men as if they'd been five jackrabbits.

Moreover, Hardin had been a conspicuous success in Jim Miller's chosen business till the Texas Rangers put him in the pen. He'd headed a big syndicate of killers for hire, operating from the law-proof wilderness of Devil's River.

IT WAS a proud day for Killin' Miller when the girl and the preacher they stood before made him kinfolks to John Hardin. In raw, roaring San Saba he set up in Hardin's kind of business. He gathered around himself a gang of never-miss trigger artists which included the three swaggering Renfro brothers and a buckie too handy with the branding iron named Bill White.

An occasional member of the Miller outfit was Dick Duncan. Duncan was a first cousin of Blackjack Tom Ketchum, the outlaw with the romantic turn who made all his henchmen wear gold rings in honor of his sweetheart over in Old Mexico. Through their kinsman, Jim Miller soon became acquainted with Tom Ketchum and his practical brother, Sam, who'd rather steal hosses than steal kisses.

San Saba had seen a lot of trigger men come and go from the time it had started as a trading post for buffalo hunters. At least fifty of its citizens had died from overdoses of lead in a bitter factional war that ended only when the Rangers rode in and threatened to hang the ringleaders on both sides.

It had planted under the pecan trees many a hard-talkin', hard-drinkin' hombre who'd drifted in from one of the million

counties of hell. That kind it understood. That kind it didn't fear. It had no way of understanding the quiet-talking teetotaller who made his headquarters, oddly enough, in the town's toughest saloon. San Saba feared Jim Miller. And the citizen who feared him the most was the county sheriff.

The sheriff was a noted officer. His life and his reputation were ruined when he let Jim Miller scare him. But there were two who dared look John Hardin's kinsman in the eye.

They were a gaunt rancher, Joe Harkey, and his sixteen-year old brother, Dee. The citizens turned the sheriff out of office and elected Joe Harkey in his place. Joe pinned a deputy's star on his kid brother who'd just started to shave. The two of them swore to rid San Saba County of the Miller gang.

On a spring night in 1882, the Harkey brothers marched toward the saloon. They were out to arrest Bill White who had assaulted a juror for voting to find him guilty of stealing a cow.

The Harkeys stole noiselessly to the lattice door of the cedar board building and peeped through. They saw Miller and White in one corner of the place. The Renfro brothers were playing pool in another corner.

"It's them or us," Joe Harkey whispered to the kid. "Might as well drill the main two and git it over with. You'll kill Jim Miller. I'll blast Bill White. We'll let the jury measure the rope fer the Renfros if we take 'em alive."

The two cocked their guns and lunged through the door shooting. The stripling made straight for Killin' Miller. He jabbed his Colt in the gunman's face. But Miller's agile mind saved Miller's slippery carcass.

The triggerman threw up his hands. "My God, kid, don't kill me!," he shouted.

It was the youngster's first arrest. The plea for mercy flustered him, and he dropped his gun. Dee Harkey had disarmed Bill White; all five of the gang walked meekly to jail.

They were soon free through the connivance of the district attorney, a sworn enemy of the Harkeys. But Jim Miller's prestige was gone in San Saba after a boy, just out of knee breeches, had hauled him in.

He drifted out of the county and out of sight for several years. Some believe he

purposely laid low to act as a spotter for his friends, the Ketchums. Old frontiersmen swear that Miller, posing as a wandering cattle buyer, "cased" the banks and express offices that the Ketchums later honored with professional calls.

In the early 90's, the Ketchums established their base in a deep thicket on Toyah Creek, not far from the Texas-New Mexico border. Not long afterward, Jim Miller showed up in the little town of Pecos, a few miles from the creek. Then over the protests of Pecos Will and others like him, the outlaw was made a lawman. Sheriff Bud Frazer, who had more guts than sense, swore him in as deputy sheriff of Reeves County.

Killin' Miller hadn't been a deputy more than three months before he started carving more notches on his Colt. Reeves County had no jail so that its prisoners had to be boarded in the calaboose at Fort Stockton in adjoining Pecos County.

Sheriff Frazer ordered Deputy Miller to take a man, accused of a minor offense, to Fort Stockton. Deputy and prisoner started out on horseback.

A few hours later, the deputy rode back into town leading the prisoner's horse with its empty saddle. "The accused tried to escape and I had to shoot him," Killin' Miller explained to his boss. Bud Frazer's mouth tightened when he heard that. A little later, the sheriff was stopping his ears against the storm of criticism sweeping the Pecos Valley.

Bud Frazer's own reputation was at stake. He declined to fire his deputy. Then Pecos Will turned in his star, refusing to ride in the same posse with Jim Miller.

But the veteran man-tracker noted that many of the old Hardin gang were turning up in Pecos and attaching themselves to the cousin of their one-time chief. Hardin, himself, had been pardoned after serving sixteen years for the killing of a West Texas deputy. Now, that man of the in-between breed was pretending to practice law in El Paso.

Jim Miller started staying away from his wife and his job for weeks at a time. Gossip had it that he "visited" frequently with his Cousin John in El Paso. Simultaneously, Valley ranchers began losing herds. Simultaneously, men, known to have been close to Hardin or the Ketchums, always

took unexplained "trips" out of the county whenever Jim Miller left it.

Sheriff Frazer followed steer prints to the county line. He found that they led toward Old Mexico—and toward El Paso, headquarters of the big international rustling rings whose legal adviser was supposedly John Wesley Hardin.

When Jim Miller got back, the sheriff demanded his star.

The gunman quietly took off the badge and quietly laid it on the sheriff's desk. "Here 'tis, Bud," he drawled as gently as if he were saying a Sunday school text. "Now we face each other clean. Keep your gun clean so we can shoot it out clean."

Then he walked out of the office to announce that one of his friends was a candidate for sheriff and that he, himself, was running for town marshal.

DURING the bitter election campaign that followed, a man as lean and silent as Jim Miller rode into Pecos. He was Captain John Hughes of the border command of the Texas Rangers. He brought a prisoner with him. The captive signed a confession that he'd plotted with Jim Miller to assassinate Frazer before election day.

Miller and a sidekick submitted quietly to arrest by the Ranger captain on charges of conspiracy to murder. They knew they were as good as freed when they were arraigned for trial in rustler-dominated El Paso. And so it turned out, to the disgust of both John Hughes and Pecos Will.

After their acquittal, Jim Miller and his pardner took a leisurely ride to wind up some unfinished business on the New Mexico side of the Pecos Valley. One evening at sundown, they overtook the informer who'd betrayed the plot against Bud Frazer.

The man was carrying water for coffee at his campfire. The pair had dismounted and were covering him with Colts when he looked up and saw them.

"Give me a fightin' chance, boys," he pleaded.

"You got no chance, comin', Ike," Killin' Miller answered dryly. The guns of both slayers spat lead.

Killin' Miller marked the fourteenth notch on his gun. He determined that the fifteenth one would stand for Bud Frazer. The Frazer-Miller episode is still one of the

highly celebrated gun feuds of the Old West.

They met for the third and last time in the first one was fought a few days before election when the sheriff beat his ex-deputy to the draw in a lightning second. A bullet seared Miller's right arm. The gun in his hand, dropped to the ground, exploding harmlessly.

Bud Frazer won the battle, but Jim Miller won the ballots. Dozens of gunmen from other West Texas counties swarmed in on election day and stopped long enough to vote as the ex-deputy directed. Miller went in as town marshal and his cohort as sheriff. The killer was now running the county, but Bud Frazer refused to head out of the Pecos Valley.

Frazer was carrying a rifle, Jim Miller a double-barreled shotgun when the two enemies met for the second time.

"You fired me outa my job, Bud," Miller said cuttingly. "But the folks here give me a better one. How does it feel to be outa one yourself?"

"It feels this way, Jim," Bud Frazer answered calmly. His gun barked. And again he'd beaten his ex-deputy to the draw. Frazer's shot pinked Miller in the arm. Then the former sheriff found himself staring into the gun of his successor who was arresting him for "assault with intent to kill."

The case was tried at Colorado City, hundreds of miles away, with John Hughes making partisans of both men check their guns before the judge rapped the gavel. There was a stir in the courtroom when a somber man in black broadcloth rose to announce himself—

"Attorney John Wesley Hardin, retained by my cousin, James B. Miller, as special prosecutor in this case."

The jury of law-abiding plainsmen remained unmoved by the soaring eloquence of the one-time stagecoach robber turned lawyer. They returned a quick verdict finding Bud Frazer not guilty.

Killin' Miller wasn't satisfied with the verdict. Only Bud Frazer's death would satisfy him.

They met for the third and last time in the little town of Toyah, except that Frazer was never conscious of the meeting.

Miller followed Frazer to Toyah where the ex-sheriff could most often be found

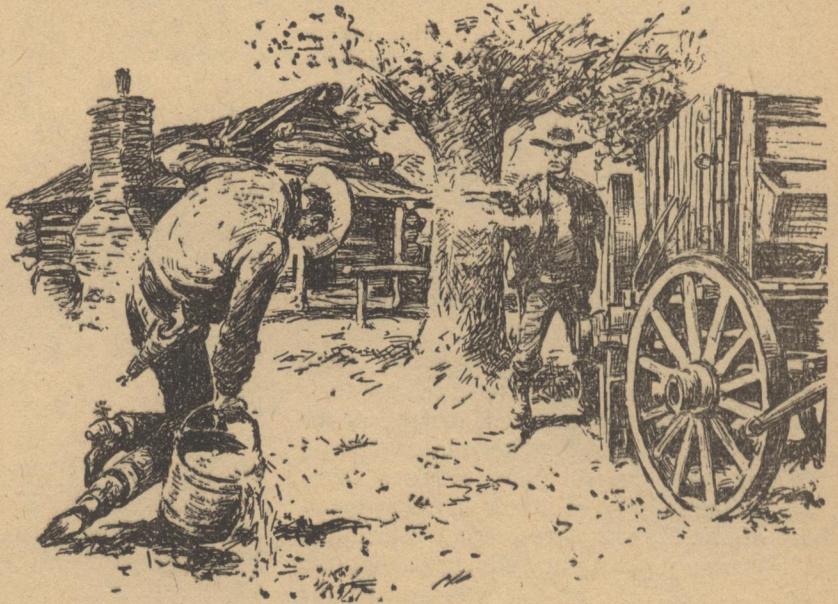
playing pitch in a local saloon. The trigger man rented a room whose window enabled him to see inside the dream joint. He waited till he saw Frazer seat himself at the card table, back to the door. Then Miller quietly opened the door. He cocked his shotgun and blew off Frazer's head with a behind shot.

But he blasted away his chance to be the supreme boss of the big Pecos Valley

better than Jim Miller and, instead, hung the jury. Miller went scot free on the second trial.

He needed money now because—legal—expenses had shrunk his roll. A reward of \$10,000 had been offered by the state for the slayer of a wealthy Texan. Miller and a crony, Joe Earp, thereupon swore that an innocent man named Joe Beasley was the killer. But before Beasley's trial date,

"You got no chance comin', Ike," Killin' Miller answered dryly.



when he blasted off Bud Frazer's head. Life might be a gamble anywhere in the West. But shooting a man from behind was a play that was forbidden everywhere.

His authority crumbled in Reeves County. The town council held a sudden session and fired him as marshal. A Reeves County grand jury indicted him for murder. He was headed toward the gallows when Hardin got him a change of venue to Eastland, a long way from Pecos.

While he was still in the Eastland jail, Miller joined a local church. After he'd been released on bond, and while awaiting trial, he held public prayer meetings with the preacher. "Shotgun salvation," so I've heard Pecos Will call it. But my old cousin didn't know his man when he said that. Jesse James was a devout churchman, too.

Again a hair's inch of luck saved the neck of Killin' Miller. Eleven jurors voted at his first trial to hang him. The twelfth maintained that Bud Frazer had been no

Earp confessed the whole plot to District Attorney Stanley.

Stanley released Beasley and put Miller on trial for subornation of perjury. The trigger man was convicted and sentenced to the pen. Once more, a higher court thwarted justice. It reversed sentence on Miller's plea that the indictment had been faulty. Miller stepped out of jail determined to kill two more men—Joe Earp and Prosecutor Stanley.

EARP dropped dead on a mountain road in Central Texas when a bullet whizzed out of a cedar brake and punctured his heart. Prosecutor Stanley died of poison.

The cook at the time was an old friend of Killin' Miller's. The town doctor found arsenic in the food served Stanley. The cook had drifted out, but Miller was still hanging around. Whereupon, the scared doctor wrote down the cause of death as peritonitis.

Miller then went to Fort Worth, followed a Texan named Frank Fore into a hotel lavatory, and brought him down with a single shot in the back. For the third time, a jury acquitted the gunman on a murder charge. Two of his men, Tom Coggins and Jinx Clark, claimed to be eyewitnesses and swore their chief had shot in "self-defense."

The killer went back to Eastland and bought on credit a half-interest in a saloon. While he was pretending to be out of town "on business," his wife began taking buggy rides down Main Street with his partner. One of the killer's henchmen told the partner that Miller was coming back to shoot him. The trigger man's associate left town between suns. Now, Miller had a flourishing business without any investment.

The church turned him out when he started saloon-keeping. It hurt Killin' Miller, but not deep enough to make him taste one sip of his merchandise.

Then the citizens of Memphis were amazed when Jim Miller returned to their town, wearing the honored badge of the Texas Rangers. He shot down in cold blood the one man who told him to arrest himself for the murder of Stanley. Other members of the Ranger force didn't relish him as a comrade. But the talk went that the killer had got his commission through the influence of a politician who owed him a big bill for whiskey.

Miller took under his wing a saturnine young desperado who bore the unlikely name of Lawrence Angel. The two of them shot an old man who'd been sounding off about Killin' Miller wearing a Ranger's star. Angel swore that he alone had done the shooting. Miller testified that his partner had fired when the victim "resisted arrest." Angel came clear, but John Hughes saw that Miller was drummed out of the great force of frontier lawmen.

I've talked to many old-timers who believe that Killin' Miller laid his plans to get Pat Garrett during his brief service with the Rangers.

Pat Garrett was now an old man who'd laid aside his star to settle down on a ranch near Las Cruces, New Mexico. But many a man he'd put the fear of God in was willing to underwrite his death. And Jim Miller's gun was always for hire.

My old neighbor, John Hughes, always believed that Jim Miller bushwhacked Pat

Garrett from a mesquite clump or was mighty close by when Pat tasted that last dose of lead. So did Dee Harkey and Joe Beasley, who'd become Pat's neighbors in New Mexico. So do Pecos Will and other veteran lawmen still living.

One of Pat's tenants claimed that he killed the old sheriff in argument over some goats. The tenant was afterwards acquitted on a plea of self-defense. But John Hughes always insisted stubbornly that no ornery goat herder could beat Pat Garrett to the draw. And Jim Miller was one of the few men who could shoot as fast as Pat.

Garrett was on his way to discuss a live-stock deal with Miller, who was stopping in Las Cruces, when he was shot. Did Miller use the "deal" as a lure?

On the morning before the shooting, Miller showed up at Dee Harkey's ranch and borrowed a horse from Harkey's top-hand, Joe Beasley. The horse was ridden so hard that it died immediately after Miller returned it. The triggerman admitted the killing of Garrett to Beasley.

"If I'm ever indicted for it," he said, "I can prove that I was at your ranch."

By this time, Miller had become a killing machine whose only function was—to kill. He admitted casually to New Mexico Judge Charles R. Brice, the murder of eleven men. Which was typical of his modesty. For he didn't bother to count on his notch stick the many inoffensive Mexican vaqueros and sheepherders whom he killed for sport.

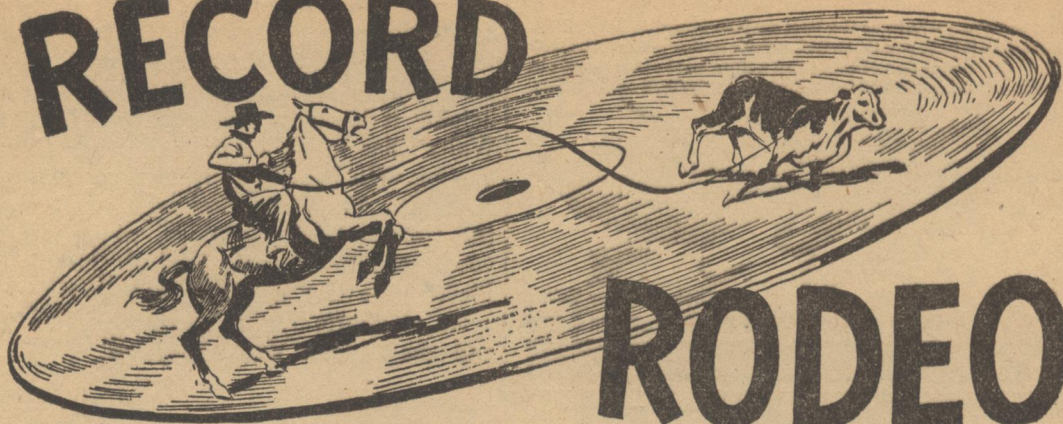
But Killin' Miller was due to die not long after his most celebrated slaying. Three Texas cowmen hired him to kill their neighbor, A. A. Babbitt, on the Oklahoma side of the Panhandle. Miller shot Babbitt from his wagon. But the killer's abandoned horse led to his identification and his extradition to the Oklahoma town of Ada.

The three cowmen were arrested as accomplices when they came to Ada to make his bond. That night, members of Babbitt's fraternal order stormed the jail. They marched the four to a clump of trees.

The cowmen begged for their lives when the ropes were twined around their neck. But Jim Miller calmly took off his collar button and cuff links, asking that they be sent to his wife.

As a Texan, I'm against lynch law any time or any place. I'll just allow with Pecos Will that if you live bad, you die bad.

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.

THE LIGHTS have been burning overtime of late in the studios and factories of Western record makers.

They have turned out a bumper crop of recordings with a Western twang, and have added some new names to the talented artists list . . . all of which seems to indicate a countrywide awakening of interest in music of the West. It's not easy to stretch out a freckled finger and point to a few as "best." So we have merely selected at random from the current releases, and hope that among the platters reviewed, you'll find several to your liking.

THERE'S BEEN A CHANGE IN ME TIE ME TO YOUR APRON STRINGS AGAIN

**EDDY ARNOLD, THE TENNESSEE
PLOWBOY, AND HIS GUITAR
(RCA Victor)**

On the top side, Eddy Arnold, at his masterful mountaineer best when he's singing about his way with women, recounts the transformation that occurred to him. On this one Eddy started out as a bashful boy, went to his first party and had his first experience with "women" via a kissing game, following which he proceeded to make up for lost time in a big way. The coupling RCA Victor side

is a standard which the Tennessee Plowboy sings and strums affectingly in his best "To Mother" style.

LITTLE WHITE CROSS AMERICA FOREVER SONS OF THE PIONEERS (RCA Victor)

The Sons of the Pioneers take full advantage on their new RCA Victor coupling of two strong trends in popular music: the patriotic and the religious. The religious is represented by "Little White Cross," an invocation to the marking of a soldier's grave which is given added pathos by a silvery soprano voice. The patriotic selection is "America Forever" which the popular Western sextette, currently contributing musically to the John Ford Western epic, "Rio Grande," now making the theatre rounds, gives a heart-stirring performance.

TENNESSEE WALTZ HELEGGED HILEGGED PEE WEE KING AND HIS GOLDEN WEST COWBOYS (RCA Victor)

Pee Wee King is out with his own "Tennessee Waltz," just as he was with his hit

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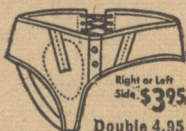
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

composition, "Bonaparte's Retreat," and just as his RCA Victor cutting of "Bonaparte's Retreat" started the song off to the heights it has now reached, his "Tennessee Waltz" has made the hit columns. Collaborating with Pee Wee on penning this graceful waltz was Redd Stewart, vocalist with the Golden West Cowboys, who sings the vocal refrain on both sides of this platter. Plattermate is a nonsense novelty which is a lot of alfalfa fun as played by Pee Wee and the Golden West Cowboys.

DRY BREAD WONTCHA BE MY BABY MERLE TRAVIS (Capitol)

The first side is an old composition, followed by Merle at moderate tempo and in a suggestive style; Merle himself is composer. He ignites reverse with a solid, fast beat, and another Travis tune on which he collaborated with Hensley.

THE GREAT AMERICAN EAGLE FATAL LETTER LEON PAYNE (Capitol)

Topside is an unusually touching Payne production, with narration by Tex Ritter, in a patriotic vein. Payne starts it out and then introduces Tex's tribute. The two manage an effective mood throughout the three minutes. Second side features the sensitive voice of Payne, who is the writer of the tune.

MY HEART CRIES FOR YOU MUSIC BY THE ANGELS JIMMY WAKELY (Capitol)

Wakely effortlessly delivers an enchanting "Goodnight Irene" type song, straying away from his usual western field. The tune will undoubtedly crack into hit classification; and with this haunting opus Wakely bows into the pop field, though he retains his "folk" quality in an appealing manner. The other side seems to be heading for stardom; Wakely treats it with good spirit. Les Baxter arranged and conducted the orchestra and chorus, in excellent taste.

RECORD RODEO

IT IS NO SECRET FLYING EAGLE POLKA HANK "SUGARFOOT" GARLAND (Decca)

Hank "Sugarfoot" Garland is a triple-threat star on this fine Decca record. He sings, plays guitar and leads the Sugar Footers. The reverse side is a march polka featuring a hot guitar played by Hank.

THE TEXAS SONG OKLAHOMA HILLS BOB EATON AND HIS LONE STAR BOYS (Decca)

This brand new song, saluting the state of Texas, serves as the third record release for Bob Eaton, Decca's fast-rising country singer who's featured on his own show over WSM, Nashville, Tenn. In his relaxed tones, Bob sings the praises of the Lone Star state to the accompaniment of a fine string band. Eaton's string band plays in a style similar to that of the late Milton Brown, former Decca artist who directed the first big string band in the South. On the other side, Bob Eaton and the Lone Star Boys come up with a top-rate version of a famous standard. Bob's excellent delivery adds to the winning of this all-star performance.

THERE GOES THE BRIDE ME, TOO GENE MCGHEE (MGM)

Gene McGhee, a promising new Folk star with quite a following in Tennessee, joins the MGM Records artists roster with a fine release. Gene, a former member of Pee Wee King's band, has a light, pleasant voice and shows it off to advantage on both of his debut sides. His first tune is called "There Goes the Bride" and, as one hearer around the MGM office said, it's one of the loveliest country tunes of the decade. Gene sings with plenty of heart here, his sincerity adding a touching quality to the song. On the coupling side, the boy changes the pace as he offers a nice, relaxed version of a promising tune called "Me, Too." We like it, and we hope you'll be echoing the words of the title in your reaction!

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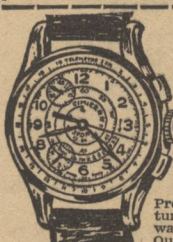
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

THE HAUNTED HOUSE BOOGIE MISTER BIG HAPPY WILSON (MGM)

Another Folk artist of excellence, one Happy Wilson (who hails from the Alabama-Tennessee country), joins the MGM artists roster with this release. Happy's nickname is an apt one; there's a vocal quality to his singing that shows he's enjoying himself when he's warbling a tune. The quality is especially noticeable in his "The Haunted House Boogie," a fast and funny boogie ditty with plenty that's catchy in both melody and lyric. There's a nice balance to the side, with the music-making split quite evenly between Happy's vocal and a grand instrumental backing. In the latter, we'd suggest that you listen for some good ghostly effects on the guitar.

THEY'LL NEVER TAKE HER LOVE FROM ME WHY SHOULD WE TRY ANYMORE HANK WILLIAMS AND HIS DRIFTING COWBOYS (MGM)

Hank Williams shows once again with his latest record why many people have come to think of him as the greatest hillbilly voice of our time. Both of his performances here can rank easily with the best of his past recordings. His first tune is a dramatic blues number. He sings it with plenty of fervor. The coupler is one of Hank's own songs, a blues ballad with a more relaxed quality.

CONVERSATION WITH A MULE MANDOLIN BOOGIE ARTHUR (Guitar Boogie) SMITH AND HIS CRACKERJACKS (MGM)

Looks like Arthur Smith has another *Guitar Boogie* on "B" side of his latest MGM release! This new hit candidate features a terrific mandolin solo by Art, neatly backed by banjo, guitar and bass. The tempo moves at a zinging pace here and fingers fly to produce a lowdown, rhythm-happy instrumental that's great listening. On "A" side, Art displays his vocal talents in a hilarious country talkfest.



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DEATH TRAILS CALLING

(Continued from Page 14)

through the mountains, defying snow and winter—he came to the Great American Desert, and figured it for a highway.

It was a thirsty explorer who finally made rendezvous with his partners in the valley of Bear Lake. But he had made it, alive.

Ten days later, he had reorganized, and was heading west again. There were some stones unturned behind him.

He started with another eighteen men. He lost more than half of them, while crossing the Colorado River. The Mohave Indians had decided, since Smith's last visit, that they liked the old names of things familiar—the result was a massacre. Smith escaped, once more out of supplies, with only six companions.

Soon in California, the governor was informed that Smith had returned. He didn't ask which Smith. He knew.

Perhaps there was more prescience in the obscure Mexican official than he realized himself. Perhaps he foresaw the day when Smiths by the thousand would come pouring through the eastward gap in the mountains. . . .

He made Smith sign a bond for thirty thousand dollars to stay out of the province, gave him traveling supplies, and wished him again to the wilderness.

Smith didn't go home. There still was a land he hadn't seen—Oregon.

He trapped on the way, following the worst trails, carrying his classics with him, telling himself he was merely hunting a fortune. But he made his fortune in pelts, and lost it in short order to marauding Indians.

Now the Northwest was challenging him. He had to answer it. He had to have the last word.

And it was as a pauper prince of all he surveyed, that at last he reached Fort Vancouver, and the headquarters of those who should have been his bitterest rivals—the British-controlled Hudson Bay Company.

John McLoughlin, the Vancouver factor, took one look at the American named Smith, and knew, better than Smith did himself, that the man's heart was not altogether in the fur trade.

It was a turning-point in the explorer's fortunes. He gave to them, freely, of his hard-won knowledge of the trails he had

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

passed, trails no white man and few red men ever had seen before.

In the spring of '29, Smith set out for the Rockies again, to rendezvous with his old partners. They warned him he never could make the trip . . . no one had ever gone straight southeast, from Vancouver to Bear Lake. There was no such trail. So Smith made one.

Behind him lay memories, and the bleaching bones of too many comrades. But now he knew answers. He knew more about the wilderness than any one man ever had known before. In his absence, his partners had merely acquired wealth. They were honest men. Smith learned, at the end of his last successful trail, that he too, at last, was a rich man.

The trio sold out their interests, and settled down to enjoy life.

It took Smith almost a year to find out that peace and security were not quite what he had been looking for.

He was thirty-three when he took on the new route, from St. Louis to Santa Fe. It was the oldest of the trade routes, and should have been the safest . . . would have been, had the caravan, under Smith, stayed to the trail. But there was a question mark on the map thereabouts, a place that some day would be named Oklahoma, and Smith had to see it. He led his company across the driest plains of the southwest. Within three days, the stock and the men both were in a condition that should have been familiar to the trail-blazer.

Riding a little ahead of his dazed companions, Smith came alone to the Cimarron River. He dismounted.

A band of Comanches found him there, kneeling by the bank. Like the Mexican governor, they recognized him for the first of many. For two of them, Smith had an answer that was final enough. But there were too many of them . . . and he was still the only Smith present.

His estate, in dollars, was unreasonably small, considering the pains of his career. Almost no place that he discovered still bears the name that he gave it.

But to all the Smiths after him, he left the answers he had found in the wilderness, the half million square miles that never had belonged to them before. And they named his new land the West.

FOR SALE—ONE BULLET

(Continued from page 66)

Luke had made no move at all. "You get a better than even shake from me, Sbarbo. Isn't that what you've always heard?"

Sbarbo seemed to fall apart. Terror etched his face. He sagged backward, hands suddenly lifted to shoulder level. He cried brokenly, "Don't shoot! I'll go now. Don't kill me!"

There was silence now, broken only by Sbarbo's shuffling steps. He edged toward the door, face turned in dreadful fascination. Luke watched him, seeing in his mind the bright look of pride on Emmett's face. Sbarbo's hand pushed the door open; he swung quickly to run outside.

And then Luke's hand was a blur of motion. The gun came up and spoke, and the bullet caught Sbarbo squarely in the back. Sbarbo lifted both hands high and pitched through the doorway and then was gone, tumbling loosely down the steps to the ground.

Gunsmoke eddied around the smoking lamps. A long sigh echoed through the bunkhouse. Then the men filed slowly and silently past and out into the darkness.

Luke turned. There was shock on Emmett's face; and Luke saw the last of pride crumble and melt away. In a sudden frenzy Emmett began throwing things into his war-bag. Luke kept watching his kid brother, but in his mind he could see a small ranch and a wife and some shirt-tailed young 'uns.

In five minutes Emmett too was gone.

Only Shadrack Kelly was left. Shadrack Kelly slid out of his bunk and sat on the edge.

"You can put the gun away now, Luke," he said.

"Emmett had to be shown."

Shadrack Kelly nodded. "A legend dies hard. You know what's happened to your rep now?"

"I know."

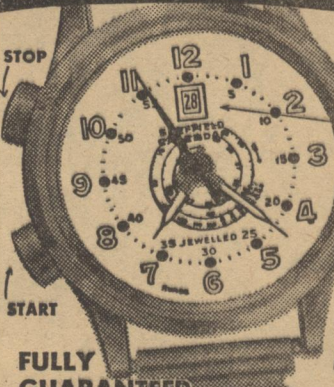
"Did you think Sbarbo would turn and run?"

"Yes."

Shadrack Kelly touched his arm. "You tossed everything away, Luke. Your own pride. The pride and respect of your brother. These things were all you had in the world. Was it worth it?"

Luke nodded. "Reckon I better start riding home tonight."

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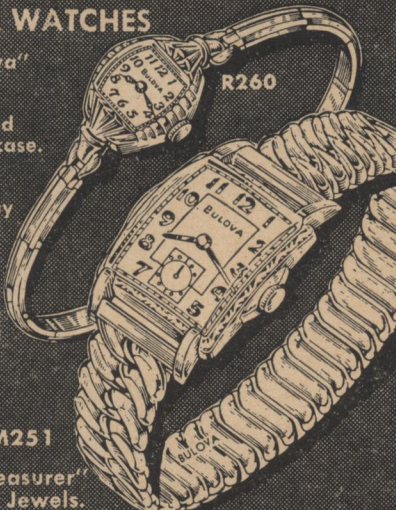
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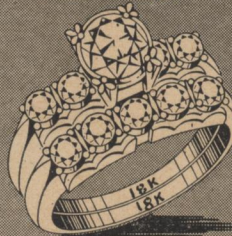


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